



World Food
Programme



PROSPECTS FOR RESILIENCE AMID FRAGILITY:

CONFLICT
ANALYSIS OF
AL-QURNA
AND AL-DAIR
DISTRICTS
IN BASRA
GOVERNORATE



BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Al-Qurna district and the recently separated Al-Dair district¹ comprise the rural northwest corner of Basra governorate in Southern Iraq. The Basra governorate itself, bordered by both Iran and Kuwait, is the second most populous in the country, with a predominantly Shia Arab and tribally configured society. It also has a wealth of natural resources including oil, marshlands, and the country's only point of maritime access. Given this, the area is of significant strategic importance. However, its population and land faced repression, collective punishment, and neglect by the Saddam Hussein regime.² This included severe environmental damage to rural areas when marshlands were drained as punishment for tribal rebellions against the regime.

The post-2003 period for Basra governorate as a whole, in the aftermath of the fall of the regime and in the midst of the Iraq War, was marked by significant violence, often resulting from intra-Shia fighting between different religious, tribal, and political factions for power and control.³

Out of this morass sprang various internally and externally backed militias and criminal networks and resultant organized crime. These actors were able to perpetuate and proliferate given the absence of formal state control over security forces at the time and complicity of political actors in this instability.⁴

This ongoing legacy of upheaval played itself out across a number of domains not just in the governorate as a whole, but in Al-Qurna and Al-Dair districts specifically as well (Table 1).⁵ The fragility found in both Al-Qurna and Al-Dair during the post-2003 period particularly related to relatively high rates of youth under-employment, mistrust among residents, and increasing corruption. Of note in Al-Qurna specifically was the relatively high level of insecurity people felt – the proportion of people unsatisfied with the level of local security in the district was nearly quadruple the governorate average and double the national average overall.



Table 1. Snapshot of fragility in 2012

	Al-Qurna	Al-Dair	Basra	Iraq
% of households below the Iraqi national poverty line	22%	26%	16%	20%
% of male population between age 16-29 that is unemployed or underemployment, but searching for work	57%	56%	77%	26%
% of people born between 1960 and 1990 with no education certificate	18%	25%	25%	30%
Ratio of individuals working on public services (education, health, waste collection) per 100 inhabitants	2%	1%	2%	2%
% of heads of households, or wives/husbands, that were born in a different Iraqi governorate or country	3%	2%	10%	11%
% of respondents that agree or strongly agree that corruption is more extensive now than two years ago (district level only)	32%	32%	39%	53%
% of adult individuals that express being unsatisfied or not at all satisfied with the level of local security	21%	1%	6%	10%
% of adult individuals that expressed being unsatisfied or not at all satisfied with the trust/acceptance felt in the community/neighbourhood	22%	15%	11%	10%
% of respondents that had either contacted a politician, attended a political discussion or attended a demonstration (or would have done it), as opposed to those that would never do such action	33%	33%	41%	48%
Confidence score (from 0 = no confidence to 10 = full confidence) given to the Government of Iraq, to local government village/town, and to tribal leaders (average of the three) (district level only)	6.4	6.5	6.4	6.5

As the ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) conflict swept through northern and central Iraq in 2014, security configurations in and from Basra were deployed to the northern combat zones. Furthermore, many young men, including from rural areas of Basra governorate, joined various armed groups (eventually labelled Popular Mobilization Units, PMUs) to support this fight, responding to a fatwa issued by the Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani to defend Iraq and its citizens from the dangers posed by ISIL. The movement of all of these forces out of the governorate was a contributing factor to the increasing violence and criminality by remaining militias and criminal gangs,⁶ including drug trafficking and smuggling networks from Iran.⁷ Rising crime and drug use, poor water and electricity provision, poverty, corruption, foreign intervention, and neglect, among others, culminated in Basra residents and activists protesting in 2015,⁸ again in the summer of 2018⁹ and then subsequently joining wider anti-government demonstrations that began in October 2019. These protests were met with continuing violence by both state and non-state actors which has continued until now.¹⁰

In the background of all of this, but growing in urgency in rural areas of the governorate in particular, are the intertwined impacts of climate change, gaps in regional water governance, and unbridled demand for water, all affecting the population.¹¹ These issues have **spurred slow-onset displacement and abandonment of agriculture as well as tribal conflicts over limited water resources.**¹²

Given the fluidity of the current situation in Basra governorate, particularly in Al-Qurna and Al-Dair, and the growing interplay between past, current, and emerging dynamics, it is critical to gain an understanding of how citizens in these rural areas perceive their current situation, and how governorate-level authorities view these dynamics ahead of designing and implementing programming in vulnerable and food insecure communities, to ensure such endeavours do not have any unintended negative consequences and contribute to more peaceful communities and social cohesion wherever possible and appropriate.

Therefore, the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) worked with Social Inquiry to carry out a qualitative analysis of rural communities in Al-Qurna and Al-Dair to better understand current group relations, structural violence, and conflict causes, drivers, and triggers related to access to (natural) resources, (lack of) livelihoods, climate change, and food insecurity.

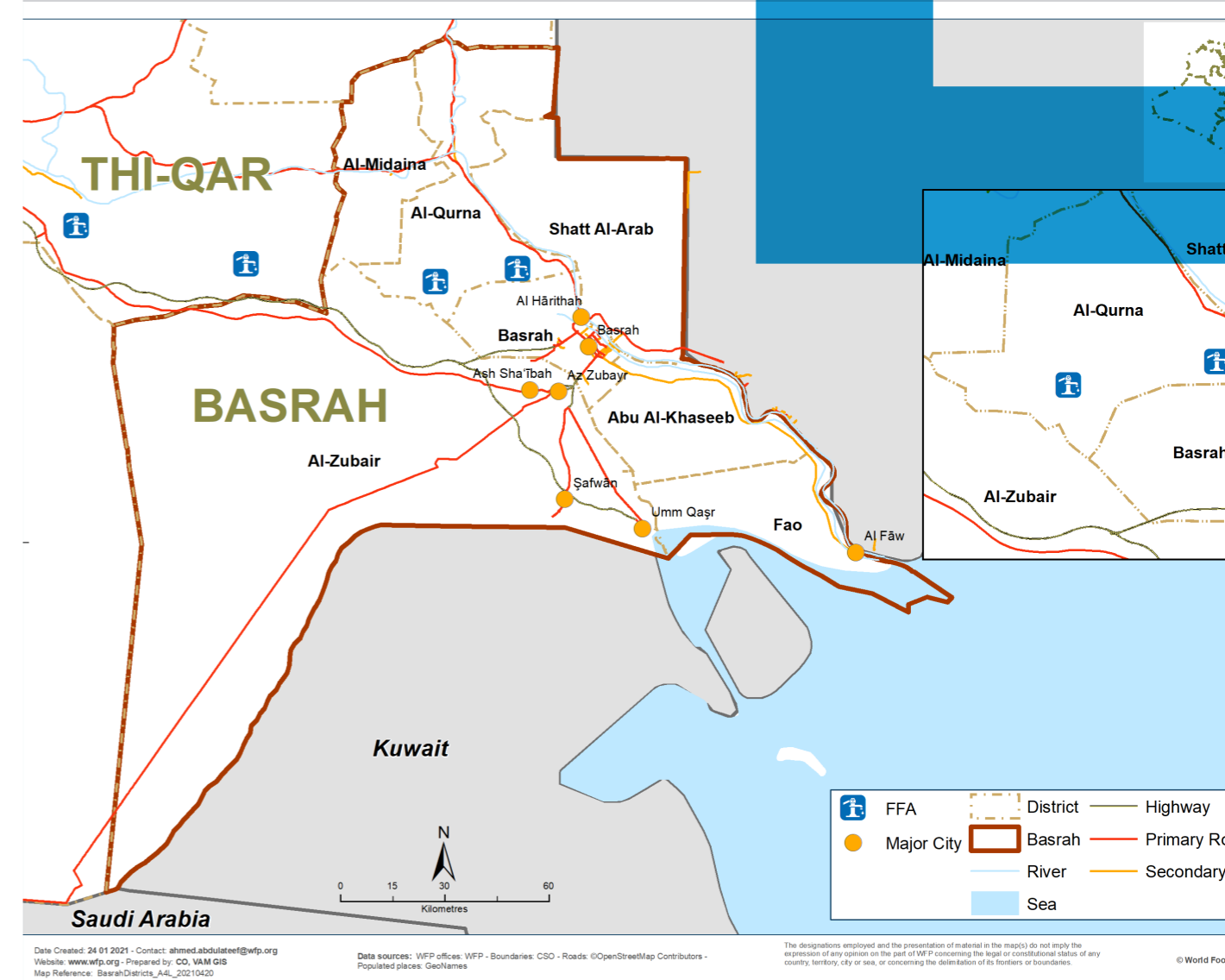
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was taken for the research, based on a series of semi-structured interviews with residents across rural communities of Al-Qurna and Al-Dair. This method was used to capture more nuanced views of local dynamics and perspectives on a number of structural factors that impact the daily lives of people in these often-overlooked locations. It also enables people to be able to speak in a less constrained way in their own words on issues that may be too sensitive to ask directly about in a close-ended fashion. Similarly, this method was also applied for governorate level officials to gain more insights into broader dynamics and policy responses. Thus, two specific semi-structured questionnaires were developed for this analysis, covering the following topics for community members as well as governorate level authorities:

- **Overall local dynamics:** location characteristics, general socioeconomic situation and common occupations, tribal diversity, migration patterns, overall safety and security, public health concerns, social interactions, movement and accessibility across districts and governorate, and any major changes noted among these dynamics in the last five years.
- **Social dynamics:** major social concerns facing the community including their emergence and evolution, authorities' responses to these concerns, major social tensions in the community and the parties involved, the most vulnerable in the community, and whether or not rural dynamics connect with cities in the governorate.
- **Governance and security:** main concerns relating to governance and service provision, presence of the state in the area and other actors people rely on, independence of local civil administration, main safety and security concerns in the area, origins of threats, and current security configuration and effectiveness in providing safety and protection.
- **Environmental conditions:** main environmental changes the area faces and how these are evolving, the impact of these changes on livelihoods, social interactions, and security, causes of these changes and authorities' response, and equality of access to natural resources at present.
- **Economic dynamics:** main economic challenges the area faces and how they have impacted the community, adaptations people have made in this regard, authorities' response to these challenges and participation in agriculture and small business.
- **Dispute and conflict resolution:** dispute and conflict resolution mechanisms, their peacefulness and effectiveness, and preference for formal or customary mechanisms for resolving such issues.
- **ISIL conflict impact and return of soldiers:** level of returning soldiers still in security forces and those who have returned to civilian life, ability of former soldiers to reintegrate back into civilian life, and any support they have received.

These questions were discussed and refined by WFP and Social Inquiry. The prioritised locations for the analysis were based on areas where WFP and its partners have planned or have ongoing programming (Figure 1). A total of 32 interviews were conducted: 12 in Al-Qurna district, 12 in Al-Dair district, and 8 with governorate authorities. Sampling of residents took into account social segments such as age (below or above 35 years old), occupation (member of security forces, farmer, fisher, housewife, civil servant, business owner, skilled or unskilled daily wage earner, unemployed, student, retired), education, and gender. The sample covers a wide span of ages (18 and over), occupations, and education levels found in these communities. Its gender balance is 70-30, with 17 men and 7 women interviewed.¹³ With regard to authorities, most interviews took place with officials from different departments, with 7 men and 1 woman interviewed.

Figure 1. Basrah Districts



Data collection took place in winter 2021 by an experienced team of local field researchers trained by Social Inquiry in Basra. The team was comprised of three members, one lead interviewer and two note-takers who rotated their time in the field to transcribe their notes since audio-recording of interviews was not deemed safe or appropriate. All members were residents of Basra Governorate. The team had deliberate overrepresentation of women (two to one man) including as lead interviewer to better ensure women's participation in the study. These considerations did not fully mitigate the fact that certain topics covered within the analysis were deemed sensitive by residents and authorities alike and so obtaining specific details was not always possible. In such instances, interview data was supplemented with external sources, where relevant.

Finally, of note, interviews took place in accordance with public health regulations after COVID-19 restrictions in Basra had already eased. For their own safety and that of study participants, the field team used personal protective equipment (masks and hand sanitizer), and where possible, they conducted interviews outdoors or in well-ventilated spaces (e.g., respondents' yards, farms, along rivers and streams, markets, rooms with open windows, etc).

GENERAL DESCRIPTION OF THE DISTRICTS AT PRESENT

This section provides a description of the population and current situation of Al-Qurna and Al-Dair, respectively, based on insights gathered from the interviews conducted in each. These are brief snapshots which will be further developed in subsequent sections.



AL-QURNA DISTRICT

Bisected by the Tigris River as it converges with Euphrates River to form the Shatt Al-Arab River, Al-Qurna district (circa 176,100 inhabitants) is described by its residents as **a relatively conservative society steeped in customary (and religious) traditions with medium to low socioeconomic conditions.** While there is considerable tribal diversity in the district, areas are generally enclaved by tribe with members of the same group living together in the same villages and parts of town.¹⁴ This configuration reportedly makes many residents feel safe in their immediate vicinities, **but a sense of insecurity and instability pervades the surrounding environment given the numerous tribes in the district and the propensity for conflict among them.** A distinction however is found among residents from the centre of the district and those in the periphery in this regard;



In the centre of the district there is peace and safety because the government authorities are in control and it has an effective role to decrease tribal conflict . . . as compared to other areas the ratio of security and peace is very good.

(Man, civil servant, 47, Al-Qurna)

In terms of occupations, the **main sources of employment are found primarily within the agriculture, livestock, and fishing sectors** which includes producing and selling derivatives from these (e.g., dairy products) and providing supplies (e.g., fertilizer) as well as within the security forces. There is also some level of public sector employment and skilled and unskilled daily labour including construction, carpentry, and blacksmithing. However, **rampant unemployment, including among young people, was also reported** as were more illicit activities such as drugs and weapons trading. At present there is little movement into the district, but there **is growing migration out toward Basra Centre given the limited options for education and employment, ongoing instability, and restrictive tribal customs,** specifically dictating where people can live in Al-Qurna. There is freedom of movement throughout the district and governorate as a whole even if roads within the district are not paved and prone to flooding – and it is reported that traveling from the district to Basra Centre is relatively straightforward. This level of movement is however predicated on the “absence of an outbreak of tribe problems” (Man, deputy police officer, 48, Al-Qurna), in which roads and access may be blocked and travel becomes unsafe.

Finally, residents by and large reported **significant physical changes to the landscape of the district** with respect to residential, religious, customary, and commercial construction on agricultural land (not always legally). This is seen in a mixed light, with both concerns over the changing landscape and culture of the area and also a recognition of its necessity given the current socio-economic, political, and environmental constraints in the district.

AL-DAIR DISTRICT

Situated along the Shatt Al-Arab River, Al-Dair district (circa 132,800 inhabitants) until very recently was itself a southern subdistrict of Al-Qurna. As such, their general characteristics tend to be similar. **The society of Al-Dair is also tribally configured¹⁵ and relatively poor, with a general sense of insecurity and instability due to tribal conflicts and resultant violence.** Employment also tends to centre on agriculture, fishing, livestock and their derivatives, and the security forces. Of note, there seems to be significantly less opportunity for public employment in Al-Dair. All of these conditions combined have also led to growing migration out of the area toward Basra Centre. Here too, agricultural and historical sites have been cleared to make way for more housing and commercial construction. This reportedly includes arms warehouses.

CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

What follows below are themes that emerged from the interview data that are either relatively common to all prioritised areas or are understood when comparing different narratives, including based on age and gender. Findings from interviews are supplemented with additional reporting and analysis, where relevant.

PERVASIVE VIOLENCE, CRIMINALITY, AND CORRUPTION

Violence in the community and at home

Open, armed violence seems to be a hallmark of daily life in both Al-Qurna and Al-Dair – and Basra Governorate as a whole. A recent survey of security perceptions in Basra Governorate paints a bleak picture, with the majority of residents across the governorate reporting feeling unsafe due to violence or crime and over half of Al-Qurna residents sampled indicating that they are likely to be victims of violence.¹⁶ The proliferation of weapons in the streets has reportedly contributed to their worsening feelings of personal security.¹⁷ Videos of rocket attacks and shoot-outs with heavy weaponry in and around Al-Qurna, closing roads and injuring residents, appear frequently on social media¹⁸ further underscoring these views.

Interviewed residents of both Al-Qurna and Al-Dair **attribute much of this violence to tribal conflicts and disputes** and the resultant social concerns that emanate from them including: honour crimes, underage marriage, domestic violence, suicide, crime in general (murder, theft, and fraud), weapons trading, and drug trafficking and use, among others. These three latter concerns are important to note because they highlight the fact, also corroborated by governorate authorities, that **tribal engagement in the drug trade and smuggling through ports and border crossings are seen as major contributors to disputes and the current eruptions of violence in Basra; even as tribes themselves tend to cite social disputes as the main sources of conflict.**¹⁹ In identifying both criminal and social elements of violence, residents recognize that threats are felt “inside and outside the family.” (Woman, farmer, 20, Al-Qurna), **that they are inter-linked, and that they stem from a number of institutional failures and evolving social norms** which particularly impact young men and women, as will be described in the subsequent sections.



Tribes unchecked in the absence of justice and jobs

For many residents and authorities alike, the main drivers of the social disorder being experienced date back to the fall of the previous regime and its monopoly on the rule of law in general and with respect to tribes in particular, as well as the influx of weapons into society at large that occurred primarily after 2003:



Tribal conflict has existed since ancient times, but it was controlled by law. In the past, the law had authority and arms were limited to the Iraqi Army only, but after the fall of the former regime, weapons became widespread in civilian society, which led to tribal conflict, fighting and survival of the fittest.

(Man, governorate official)



These concerns exist because of the weakness in the legal authority that is applied by the government, there is no weight to the state's authority, and there are no deterrent laws to hold criminals to account. Crime increased after 2003 after the fall of the previous regime and the government's loss of its prestige.

(Man, 30, Al-Dair)



Before 2003, [social disorder] was in a limited and narrow context, and the state was able to control such problems due to the existence of a strong authority that applied the law. However, after 2003 and especially after 2006, these problems began to spread until they reached city centres.

(Man, governorate official)



These conflicts exist because of economic weakness, the weakness of the law, the control of political parties over the financial resources in the country, the wide spread of weapons, and the breakdown of law and order . . . that appeared shortly after the fall of the previous regime in 2003.

(Man, civil servant, 47, Al-Qurna)

This latter point helps further put these pieces together, as **the absence of any kind of formal rule of law and transparent governance coupled with lack of meaningful economic opportunity has fuelled the near complete tribal dominance of these districts and the general turn toward criminality**, including controlling border crossings²⁰ and various drug and weapons trafficking. While both residents and authorities indicate that certain tribes are involved in such activities more prominently than others, they also report that political and security actors contribute to this as well. Furthermore, residents note continuous instigation of disputes for financial gain by tribes. This economic dimension may link to overt criminality as noted above with respect to controlling borders and smuggling, corruption in the form of tribal demands for payment or employment on private and/or public projects in the governorate or starting a dispute with another tribe in order to receive compensation or blood money as part of its resolution. Tribes often initiate action on disputes (dakah) by having their members march upon an accused's home, attack the property with firearms or grenades, and issue a demand to resolve the dispute or prepare to fight.²¹

In an effort to curb such violence, Iraq’s Supreme Judicial Council in 2018, citing Article 2 of the country’s Counter-Terrorism Law, deemed this practice to be akin to a terrorist act and that its perpetrators be held to account.²² Despite this, sources indicate that security actors tend not to intervene in such actions for fear of reprisals. **This has contributed to general feelings of insecurity because there is no reported recourse from the state to keep individual or communal violence at bay as conflicts emerge, further underscoring to all concerned that the state has limited authority over tribes.**



Concerns revolve around tribal gangs and it is not easy to deal with. Mostly the government succumbs to the tribes.

(Woman, governorate official)



There is no reaction from authorities. They don’t even mention it because they’re afraid of tribes as we all know. The authority of the tribes in the area or district in general is higher than the authority of the government and that was more apparent in recent conflicts.

(Man, daily wage earner, 32, Al-Qurna)



Due to the fact of tribal power and state weakness, there is no safety in being within the police force.”

(Man, deputy officer, 48, Al-Qurna)

Indeed, **many residents report feeling that they are on their own**, “Every tribe is responsible for protecting itself,” (Woman, housewife, 25, Al-Dair). These sentiments exist in the wake of the launch of “Operation Truthful Promise,” begun in September 2020 by joint Iraqi Security Forces, including the Basra Operations Command and associated units,²³ to seize illegal weapons, arrest key suspects in drug trafficking and kidnapping rings, and resolve tribal disputes, among others.²⁴ To date, authorities claim to have resolved 42 tribal disputes, arrested 16,000 suspects wanted for various criminal activities and disputes, and seized a number of light and medium weapons.²⁵ However, this seems to have had little influence on communities’ views of the state, as is described below. If anything, such a punitive approach enacted without any accompanying structural reforms and public services has further contributed to their mistrust of institutions in general.

Political fragmentation and competition

While some tribes have enjoyed close ties with political parties and armed actors in the governorate since 2003, the current state of affairs is not only a tribal issue. It comes from **ongoing, entrenched political competition over resources and wealth in Basra governorate, which makes good governance difficult if not impossible.** Within the governorate, no single party or political actor²⁶ is pre-eminent and as such, they operate on a relatively flat political playing field, vying for control of Basra’s strategic assets.²⁷ Under populist rhetoric and demands for development, political parties and their affiliated employees stake out control over oil fields, border crossings, ports, gas fields, and government departments and contracts for the purpose of directing public resources to strengthen local and national patronage networks.²⁸

In Basra’s post-2003 political, economic, and security landscape, **political parties’ capture of state institutions and numerous commercial firms placed the sources of the governorate’s wealth in their hands.**²⁹ As the oil-driven economic boom progressed, so too did demands from the public to share in the wealth. This led to numerous protests in 2009, 2011, 2015, 2018, and 2019 where **demands for services and jobs at the outset gave way to calls for an end to party-dominated hiring and broader structural reforms to governance.**³⁰ These latter protests, while violently put down, forced the federal government into a devolution of budgetary powers to the governorate, and specifically the governor, to improve state responsiveness. This increase in localized power over financial, administrative, and social matters has **only furthered inter-party competition to ultimately control the governorship of Basra.** In the midst of this jockeying for power, greater efficiency and transparency in implementing public works is not especially possible as **the root causes of corruption, diversion, and weak governance generally have not been addressed.** Specifically, no single authority has jurisdiction over the entirety of an implementation chain and this enables different actors to halt projects in exchange for money or political concessions.³¹ As a result, projects have repeatedly failed, furthering citizens’ anger and calls for change.³²

Mistrust in institutions

None of this political manoeuvring is lost on the residents of Al-Qurna and Al-Dair.

There is general consensus among residents that the presence of the state is very weak in their communities with respect to any sort of provision or response felt, “We have no relationship with state institutions, whether they are civilian or military,” (Woman, fish seller, 42, Al-Dair). All interlocutors agree that this situation is extremely problematic and that the role of the government is to provide rule of law and institute policies and interventions that provide the setting for equal opportunity; however, there is little confidence that the current state (at either the national, provincial, or local level) can or will do anything to help – and instead can cause harm, from violently suppressing protests to carrying out raids and mass arrests to offering promises of aid and support that do not materialize.





The authorities do not care about youth or people in general and they don't care about wasted potential. When youth riot and rebel for their own rights, they kill them.

(Woman, dairy product seller, 55, Al-Dair)



We don't trust the government, most of the time they try to put our people in jail for silly reasons or kill our people when they participated in the demonstrations.

(Woman, farmer, 20, Al-Qurna)



The government] offer temporary and insufficient solutions, the aim of which are to keep the anger of the public and the citizen silent, but it is escalating.

(Man, PMU member, 19, Al-Dair)

This anger and lack of trust stems from the perception that the state in its functioning is “all about political parties and militias,” (Man, civil servant, 21, Al-Qurna). **The widespread view is one of corruption and undue influence of parties, armed actors, clerics, and tribal elders on the civilian administration and its functioning.**



There is strong influence on security in these areas by parties, clerics, and sheikhs.

(Man, deputy officer, 48, Al-Qurna)



Sometimes the influence of tribes or tribal elders is exploited by matters that serve their own individual interests, such as intervening and providing jobs for their friends or improving a street near their home and neglecting the rest of the area.

(Man, unemployed, 29, Al-Qurna)



Each government department belongs to a particular side and provides its services only to the people who belong to it. For example, the Electricity Department of the Sadrist Movement provides its services (maintenance, establishment of new networks) only to the Sadrist Movement areas and this applies to all departments and is the same for the judiciary.

(Man, unemployed, 45, Al-Dair)

Further compounding this is the threat people report of foreign influence on these actors to implement external plans “inside Iraq by Iraqis,” (Man, PMU member, 19, Al-Dair). For many, the ongoing corruption has created leaders “without national affiliation and sense of patriotism,” (Man, hunter, 62, Al-Qurna). This sentiment is echoed in how people view the coming year, particularly bearing in mind that elections are planned for later in 2021. **By and large, residents are pessimistic about all prospects**, unless it is possible to elect the right person, one who cares about the country and helping its children. This said, there is also concern that the campaign process, should elections go forward as planned, may stoke further divisions, violence, and false promises.

Mixed picture on conflict resolution

Given the wide tribal networks and configurations of Al-Qurna and Al-Dair, and the relative absence of rule of law, it is perhaps not surprising that roughly half of residents interviewed indicate that **disputes and conflicts are resolved through customary mechanisms and that this is the preferred system**, with the peacefulness of the process dependent on the issue at hand. At the same time, the other half of residents note that more formal mechanisms would be preferable to solve disputes and conflicts, if they existed for people to benefit from and if they were as relatively efficient as customary ones. More to the point, **many feel that it is ultimately the state's responsibility to ensure these matters are peacefully resolved**. These views span age and gender of residents. Here again, there seems to be a shift in attitudes and norms on what could improve stability and wellbeing given the fluid contexts of Al-Qurna and Al-Dair. This may not be a renunciation of one system over another per se, but an opening to better connect the two to prevent further cycles of violence, if conducted in a manner in which people felt their underlying needs were being met.

SOCIAL DYNAMICS

Fraying social fabric

The dynamics described above have in turn impacted the ways in which people within these communities relate to one another, both in and outside the home and their immediate surroundings. There seems to be a growing sense that overall trust between and among residents is eroding, "It isn't like the old days before the fall of the regime. Social relationships are starting to disintegrate . . . There isn't enough trust among the residents of the area," (Man, hunter, 62, Al-Dair). Within public spheres, the risk of violence or becoming ensnared in conflict, particularly as unemployed youth have little to occupy their time, has changed how people interact across groups, tightening social circles and networks and where people are willing to travel within the districts.



The residents of the area cooperate and are close to each other, especially youth of similar ages, but with other areas there are no relations or overlap between families. I trust the people I know to a high extent, but I don't trust strangers. The fear of strangers comes out especially when young people disagree on the simplest things. Perhaps after the disagreement, the tribe of one guy kills the other. Most of these fights happen because of youth unemployment and gatherings that extend for long periods of the day. Therefore, some people have to minimize their social circle and distrust friends to attempt personal protection.

(Man, unemployed, 29, Al-Qurna)



I live in a state of anticipation and caution because of the many who are personally stalking me and my tribe.

(Man, deputy police officer, 48, Al-Qurna)



People did not change how they act with each other, but they try as hard as possible to stay away from areas where those tribes that start conflicts reside. Even young people in the area stopped associating with strangers or with other young people from these tribes that start conflicts.

(Woman, dairy product seller, 55, Al-Dair)

Further social ruptures come from the "anxiety and tension" (Man, daily wage earner, 32, Al-Qurna) linked to growing poverty and increasing migration out of these districts to urban centres. In particular, there is concern over rural areas' "lack of identity" (Man, primary school teacher, 39, Al-Dair) now given this movement of people out due to the lack of job opportunities and basic services and increasing levels of crime and weapons circulation. This in turn gives rise to a fear that agricultural traditions are "going to fade one day" (Man, government employee and dairy product seller, 38, Al-Dair).

These **accelerating changes and stresses are reportedly having a profound impact on home-life and traditional family structures** as well – from less interest among young people in marriage, the break-up of existing unions, seeking relationships outside of family networks, and increasing violence. Among the most affected are reportedly young people and returning fighters of the ISIL conflict who either left the PMU or were demobilized.



Youth become more aggressive due to stressful life pressures which create conflicts and even fights in the home. This increases domestic violence issues and many young people are rejecting marriage.

(Woman, dairy product seller, 55, Al-Dair)



One of the most important problems that has spread is the phenomenon of divorce or desertion of the husband to his wife and leaving her without questioning her needs in addition to the disintegration of the family.

(Man, PMU member, 19, Al-Dair)



Perhaps it is a negative effect that young people have suffered violence and conflict. They now treat their families badly, like hitting their children and hurting their women.

(Man, unemployed, 29, Al-Qurna)



The involvement of youth, especially teenagers in the ranks of the PMU is a big reason for the increase in violence among young people and the breakdown of the concept of marriage and the disintegration of the family.

(Man, government employee and dairy product seller, 38, Al-Dair)



Some of the young people adopted the principle of emigration to the governorate centre or the city and to marry outside of the family, breaking custom and tradition, in search of government employment or work within private sectors.

(Man, governorate official)

At the same time, these breakdowns seem to also be perpetuating underage marriage, honour crimes, and the tribal practice of resolving disputes through the handing over of women and girls as noted by residents. Young women interviewed for this analysis themselves reported these experiences.



A lot of minors get married, I got married when I was 13.

(Woman, farmer, 20, Al-Qurna)



I got married at an early age due to tribe disputes which made my family submit to the decision of the tribe and where I was presented as a gift to the other tribe.

(Woman, housewife, 35, Al-Dair)

It is against all of this that young people, both men and women, in these rural communities are pushing away from in search of better lives, freedoms and economic opportunities. The fact that it is extremely difficult and dangerous if not seemingly impossible to do so alone or collectively is taking its toll.

Youth in crisis

Strongly resonating from the interviews with residents and authorities is **concern for young people and their feelings of anger and despair**. Young men and women seem to want to break free of the constraints they are under, to feel agency to make their own decisions and to be able to live lives of opportunity. They feel upset when they cannot, due to the limited options for economic and social advancement where they live. Women interviewed made more direct reference to this in their own lives while men spoke more abstractly or about others.



Us girls are like puppets, adult men and women control us. They control our marriage, our children, and our education. I am sick of the way I live. After my husband died, I fell in love with a boy from another tribe and my family did not let me marry him because of that and they promised to kill me or him if he came to ask me to marry him again . . . I need someone to protect me and to support me to complete my studies as I wish to become an educated woman. I do not like my life in this village.

(Woman, farmer, 20, Al-Qurna)



Violence and fear come from] unemployment and the negative consequences of this among young people, especially young people returning from the PMU and the amount of emotional stress they carry after returning from the war with ISIL . . . Children are the major victims in these situations. Society creates out of children a powerful tool or timebomb that is likely to explode at any moment. Our children have become psychologically disturbed, able to kill, steal, lie, deceive, and all of this because of the parts of society that feed into their minds. Probably improving education and opening lands or spaces to them will reduce stress and psychological violence.

(Man, unemployed, 29, Al-Qurna)

Furthermore, seemingly **significant levels of psychosocial harm are taking place** in the shadows as these dynamics continue unabated – much of it is taboo but is slowly starting to be spoken about, including rising suicide rates and drug use.



I have attempted suicide many times. Who will help us?

(Woman, farmer, 20, Al-Qurna)



Many [fighters in the ISIL conflict] left the security forces. Their integration is not an easy thing as their suicide rate is high as is their level of violence and divorce because of the difficulty of dealing with their families after their return from war. They are in dire need of psychological support and rehabilitation.

(Man, governorate official)



Because of my son's poor middle school performance and his misdeeds inside the house, I discovered that he is using drugs . . . I discovered that a group of friends in his school are promoting drugs and encouraging young people to participate which compelled me to take him out of school and send him to another area with my relatives temporarily to keep him away from bad friends until he is treated . . . Furthermore, women, especially teenage girls who have no opinion in choosing their lives, they are either married at a young age or forced to leave school, this has led many of them to commit suicide or escape from their homes.

(Man, government employee and dairy product seller, 38, Al-Dair)

These outcomes in relation to youth may not be solely a by-product of bad governance but rather may be occurring to some extent by design. As noted, the most recent protests in Basra have become increasingly and more overtly political, focused on reform and dismantling the status quo. The response of the ruling elite in quashing these demands is to violently target individuals who are more educated, middle class, employed, and often women; those who have the ability and positioning to steer a political movement and who are less connected to tribal networks who could protect them.³³ Youth in rural communities, on the other hand, are seen as economically desperate and easier to buy off with promises of jobs or money and to manipulate into committing acts of violence, thus making them less threatening to the political system.³⁴

Furthermore, these youth are more connected to tribal networks and different PMUs or armed groups, making them more difficult to overtly target with impunity. **As such it seems to benefit the existing political order to perpetuate more structural forms of pressure against rural youth, to keep them from connecting to broader political change movements and bringing their networks with them.** This was explicitly stated:



Tension in rural areas has two sources: either external pressures directly or indirectly affecting the rural community or individuals and groups intentionally creating tensions within the countryside to control the region. In both cases, the goal is the same: to drown the youth in these areas with problems and pressures and to keep them out of the scene . . . There is fear of youth in rural areas rising up against the government and the outbreak of major demonstrations. If armed tribes join these demonstrations, the consequences will be pernicious.

(Man, governorate official)

CLIMATE, ECONOMY, AND WELLBEING

Abandonment of agricultural livelihoods and rural depopulation

Across interviews with both residents and authorities, there is agreement that **drought, desertification, decreasing water levels, salinity of water and soil, and increasing pollution have combined to negatively impact the agriculture, livestock, and fisheries sectors on which the majority of people rely for income and livelihoods.** These environmental impacts have been further exacerbated by the **inequality of access both natural resources and lack of access to appropriate equipment** to use these resources, the access of which is linked to tribal and political affiliations, contributing to conflicts and strife.



There is no equality in the division of water resources . . . and that is because of the power of some of the tribes who own the lands near the rivers. Some tribes own over 2,500 meters of land close to the rivers which makes them dominate the largest share of resources. And because they have the many more members and weapons than others, they impose control in those areas over weaker tribes.

(Woman, fish seller, 42, Al-Dair)



There is no equal access to natural resources here. Those with influence and power with political parties or the government dominate access. It generates conflicts and tensions in society.

(Man, 54, Al-Dair)



There are many clerics or tribal elders who exert their influence in a way that fits their personal interests in terms of obtaining pumps, fertilizers, and investing in agricultural lands.

(Man, carpenter, 25, Al-Qurna)



Many young people have abandoned schools and many of them have joined the PMU.

(Woman, dairy product seller, 55, Al-Dair)



Most men have joined the PMU and a few work as teachers in schools.

(Woman, farmer, 20, Al-Qurna)



Only old men are involved in agriculture. As for youth, they work in professional crafts or in the ranks of the PMU or the security forces.

(Woman, dairy product seller, 55, Al-Dair)

As a result of these combined factors, residents and particularly young people have **adapted primarily by abandoning such livelihoods in the absence of any environmental or economic interventions** from the state. Authorities note that many are switching the uses of their lands or selling off assets for other income generating activities.



Farmers were forced to leave the agricultural profession and sell their agricultural land properties due to the state's lack of interest in agriculture and lack of support from governmental agricultural institutions. Many families also converted their agricultural lands into residential homes that they rent to benefit from that monthly payment.

(Man, governorate official)



People have adapted by] converting agricultural lands into houses or garages for cars or building medical complexes or cafeterias . . . others are selling livestock and buying taxis to make use of them for income.

(Man, governorate official)

Residents themselves indicate that for many, the solution is to migrate out of Al-Qurna and Al-Dair altogether and head for cities, "There is a large number of residents who had to migrate to other areas and to the city due to work and livelihood. They did not adopt any new practices but preferred to take refuge in the city and engage in other work," (Man, fertilizer and pesticides worker, 38, Al-Qurna). Furthermore, particularly since the onset of the ISIL conflict in 2014, more and more young men have turned to employment within the security sector.



Such jobs tend to pay significantly better than agricultural ones and often also require recruits to be away from home and stationed across Iraq – creating another mechanism for rural depopulation.

For those that remain, particularly the young including those who have returned from fighting and are no longer in the PMUs thus ending their salaries, there is **little in the way of viable employment opportunities with steady salaries either in the private or public sector.**

Indeed, seeking public sector employment is also an unequal process where "sons of the people who have connections within the government," (Woman, daily product seller, 55, Al-Dair) benefit over others. This has led to a growing turn toward crime and illicit sources of income including weapons trading and drug dealing, "Making a living by trade in contraband is another problem and leads to the spread of crime and violence among the members of the same community," (Man, PMU member, 19, Al-Dair).

Economic anxiety and pervasive neglect

While these changes drive fears, particularly that “the situation will remain the same if authorities remain silent,” (Man, unemployed, 29, Al-Qurna), **people are also growing worried about the prospect for greater instability and economic shocks** linked to geopolitics that may further exacerbate the growing poverty they face.



There is fear of the outbreak of war between Iran and the United States on Iraqi territories in which the country's economy as well as security and livelihoods will be affected.

(Man, primary school teacher, 39, Al-Dair)



Fear of war between America and Iran in the territories of Iraq is the most important issue that an individual is worried about because it implies great impact on the country's economy.

(Man, deputy officer, 48, Al-Qurna)

Residents have also raised concerns over the devaluation of currency and the level of foreign workers in the governorate (particularly in the centre) taking jobs of residents. While residents voiced **complaints over the lack of infrastructure to properly bring agricultural products to market, none were concerned about lack of food supply** considering the level of imports coming into the governorate. **Rather, food insecurity in this context relates to affordability**, “Food security relies on livelihoods and income because consumption depends on income,” (Man, civil servant, 21, Al-Qurna). Some people note that residents do help each other out in this regard and so too do non-profit organisations on occasion though they did not specify whether these are local or international nor that they play a particularly large role. **More to the point for them however is that, again, there is insufficient government support for those in need.**

Linked to this latter sentiment, residents and authorities all overwhelmingly note the **woefully inadequate public service provision and neglected infrastructure across all sectors in the districts, from electricity supply, water supply, sewage and sanitation, education, to public health**. Healthcare was reported as a particular need. This is in light of COVID-19, where many interviewed either contracted it or knew people who had, and authorities cited concern about its continuing spread and the public's mistrust of vaccination against it. Concerns regarding public health provision also went beyond this to worry over the growing spread of other communicable diseases such as HIV and the lack of women doctors working in rural areas as well. Furthermore, care for psychosocial needs as well as treatment for drug addiction are not readily available despite increasing need.

CONCLUSION AND KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Given their histories and dynamics to-date, **Al-Qurna and Al-Dair districts are fragile by any definition of the term** – from relations between people, and groups, groups and the state to their environment and economic conditions. These are all by-products of decades of upheaval and neglect and likewise will take time to fully redress and rectify, particularly as **state responses so far remain punitive at best and unwilling or unable to undertake systemic and structural reforms toward good governance**. Residents in these communities thus face intertwined challenges related to corruption, migration, unemployment, environmental degradation, violence, crime, and lack of security and rule of law, among others. **The material and psychological toll of these issues both individually and collectively are high and necessary to understand when engaging in programming to help enhance resilience in rural communities of Basra.**

As such, the following considerations should be taken into account to help any interventions contribute to social cohesion and more peaceful societies as part of resilience programming:



Formal and customary/tribal structures exist in Al-Qurna and Al-Dair districts and as such, it is likely any implementation of programming will need consultations, coordination and approval from both. Analysis here highlights that tribes have considerably more power and sway on communities in their day to day lives. However, this is not always in positive ways as reported by residents themselves, particularly in relation to tribal conflicts and violence, criminality, and unequal access to natural resources, among others. At the same time, there is also limited trust in formal institutions overall even though people believe they are responsible for supporting communities. Thus, in seeking to gain access to communities, it will be critical to avoid substantially reinforcing existing divides or power differentials either between tribes themselves or between tribes and the state.



Creating some mechanism for engagement and communication between tribes, institutions, and residents on specific programming objectives and geographical prioritisation for implementation may be one starting point for this, again taking care for potential negative impacts and diversion. This includes any politicization that may occur in the lead up to the planned national elections in 2021. Working together with local authorities, tribes, and residents themselves to identify and address more immediate needs may help to lay foundations for improvements in institutional trust and cooperation between stakeholders.



Because there are cross-community tensions with people feeling less comfortable going to some areas, programming may need to be particularly localized and focused more on bonding rather than bridging social capital in the immediate-term. The emphasis on a more localized approach is also borne out by recent analysis in Iraq, where positive collective social environments (e.g., social cohesion, institutional trust, and public participation) at the neighbourhood level are shown to have protective effects on individual residents' psychosocial wellbeing. In other words, incrementally improving the social cohesion of an individual's immediate surroundings has the capacity to help bolster their wellbeing, particularly in neighbourhoods (or villages) where relations between residents is particularly poor. Thus, geographical prioritisation across districts should focus on those neighbourhoods or villages most in need, including in relation to social cohesion, centring efforts on incrementally improving physical and social conditions therein first, before assessing whether connecting communities is appropriate. This would enable more prioritised programming across wider areas while also being in line with COVID-19 public health precautions as well.



The establishment of community centres or spaces and civic groups in conjunction, for example, may be a step in helping improve cohesion, offering space for residents to connect with one another, volunteer their time, and engage with community and tribal leaders and authorities, among others. Such spaces may enable people to work together to find their collective agency, understand their common interests and combined skills to resolve some issues they face. Interventions in this regard then should be goal-oriented, serve a purpose that is agreed upon by residents, and carried out together by all residents. This means framing civic engagement and shared rights in more concrete terms that build a sense of commonality around real life issues residents face and designing programming to help build community capacity to contribute to the wellbeing and problem solving of these issues in a tangible way.



Such spaces may also serve as platforms for psychosocial support and, as noted, improving social cohesion collectively helps further bolster psychosocial wellbeing. This may be a useful first step in beginning to broach more sensitive issues linked, for example, to mental health, domestic violence, and drug use, among others that residents have raised directly or indirectly as major social concerns. This could include efforts to de-stigmatize discussion of such issues and seeking care for them. It should be noted however that given the sensitivity and complexity of these issues and the very limited existing public health infrastructure and provision in these districts, very careful consideration should be given as to how best to approach any interventions in this regard. Specific subject matter and context expertise in such implementation is necessary to ensure no harm and sustainability of any support.



Evidence suggests that civilians may reduce their engagement in illicit activities or violence when economic opportunities and incentives create higher returns to peaceful activities.³⁵ Resilience programming that contributes to these opportunities and incentives then have the potential to contribute to peacebuilding aims, particularly when skills development is paired with economic incentives, such as capital inputs or cash transfers.³⁶ A critical aspect to bear in mind however is the sustainability of such initiatives given environmental constraints and potential for diversion, particularly after programming ends. This is especially crucial in areas where young people may be disinclined at the outset from engaging in efforts linked to the agricultural sector in part because of unaddressed structural issues linked to climate change and poor natural resources governance, as is seen in Al-Qurna and Al-Dair.



Linked to this, programming should seek to prioritise those at highest-risk as this may better yield further reductions in violence in the community. While young women and women-headed households are particularly vulnerable in this context, based on the analysis above, so too are young men. In this context, and in other fragile settings, poor and unemployed young men are often viewed to be at highest risk of engaging in criminal activities, joining extremist groups, or otherwise participating in violence and being victims of it as well.³⁷ As such, they should also be included and specifically prioritised in any resilience activities.



Since men and women both describe and experience social dynamics differently, gender analysis and a gender-transformative approach should be central to resilience programming that also seeks to contribute to social cohesion, peace, and wellbeing. One aspect of this should involve better understanding how women and men prefer to participate in their neighbourhoods or villages to further support them in these efforts. It may also be helpful to have some gender-segregated spaces for programming to enable people to access support for as long as they need to build the trust necessary for deeper civic engagement and other forms of care.



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WFP Iraq Country Office

For further information, please contact:

Sharon Beijer

sharon.beijer@wfp.org

Ally Raza Qureshi

WFP Iraq Representative

ally-raza.qureshi@wfp.org