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NONVIOLENT PEACEFORCE

Youth of Sinjar: From Navigating Conflict Legacies to Leading in Peace and Social Cohesion



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Context

Across Iraq, young people continue to experience the cumulative effects of conflict and protracted instability, constrained economic opportunities, and gaps in public services and local governance. These national dynamics are particularly pronounced in Ninewa, where recovery remains uneven across districts and sub-districts and where social trust has been shaped by displacement, localised grievances, and varying access to basic services.

Within this context, youth in Ninewa, despite being affected by these challenging conditions, are increasingly contributing to locally grounded solutions. Community-driven youth initiatives are strengthening peaceful coexistence, responding to service-related concerns, and supporting renewed engagement between communities and relevant duty bearers. In Sinjar and surrounding areas, youth-led efforts demonstrate practical peacebuilding through everyday actions. These efforts include organising community campaigns that respond to locally identified needs, such as access to electricity and community safety, while also facilitating dialogue, and advocating for dignified public life. As one Community Peace Team (CPTs) member in Sinjar noted, "*The role of youth in our areas is leading in the community to address concerns, advocate for services and improved conditions of living, we recently led advocacy to rehabilitate a main road in our town.*" Another youth peace actor observed, "*The role of youth… is active… because they represent the majority… and they are actively engaged and recognised by their community.*" Together, these experiences demonstrate how youth-driven action contributes to resilience and locally grounded violence prevention in post-conflict settings.

Recognising these realities is essential for advancing the Youth, Peace, and Security agenda in Ninewa in ways that are responsive to local priorities and constraints. This brief outlines key challenges that shape youth participation, highlights locally led responses, and proposes practical steps for policymakers, civil society organisations, and donors to strengthen youth leadership in peace and social cohesion.

Challenges

Despite youth initiative and leadership, structural barriers continue to constrain sustained participation and the scale of community-led action in Ninewa. Key challenges include:

1. Limited access to basic services and slow institutional responsiveness

Youth engagement frequently emerges in response to service gaps in electricity, health, sanitation, roads, and education, particularly where communities experience delays or limited institutional responsiveness. Even when advocacy efforts generate attention, implementation can remain slow, which risks weakening confidence in institutions and reducing momentum for continued engagement. When supported effectively, these advocacy efforts can help maintain public attention on service needs, encourage incremental progress, and contribute to stronger relationships between communities and institutions.

2. Lack of safe and accessible physical spaces for youth engagement

Across locations, youth access to safe, accessible, and socially inclusive spaces for engagement varies considerably. In some areas, such as subdistricts and remote locations, there are no dedicated youth centers or suitable public venues available for young people to meet, plan, or implement community activities. In other locations, spaces do exist, but their use may be constrained by poor rehabilitation, limited functionality, insufficient resources, or restrictions on regular access. These differences shape the scale and continuity of youth initiatives, often affecting how frequently activities can be organised, how inclusive they are, and whether participation can extend beyond smaller existing networks to the wider community.

3. Economic pressure and unemployment limiting voluntary action

High unemployment rates and limited livelihood pathways constrain youth capacity to sustain voluntary service over time. Motivation for sustained engagement can decline when initiatives are not financially supported and when daily economic pressures remain acute. This challenge does not reflect a lack of commitment, but rather insufficient enabling conditions and resources necessary for sustained civic participation.

4. Social sensitivities and community-level resistance to coexistence efforts

Post-conflict dynamics remain socially sensitive, and peace initiatives can face hesitation or rejection from segments of the community, particularly when activities involve engagement across community lines. A youth representative reflected that some community members continue to struggle with re-engagement, yet youth persist, emphasising that coexistence remains essential to long-term community stability.

5. Governance and administrative gaps affecting service delivery and community confidence

In some areas, administrative constraints and unclear local governance arrangements complicate advocacy and service improvements. When responsibilities are fragmented or decision-making processes are non-transparent, community confidence in local institutions is weakened, particularly among youth and marginalised groups who experience delays, inconsistency, or lack of follow-through. Where coordination is limited or local leadership is inconsistent, youth-led initiatives may attempt to fill gaps that would ordinarily require structured institutional response, placing additional burdens on voluntary community actors and reinforcing perception that formal systems are unresponsive.

6. Digital harms and hate speech affecting social relations

Communities increasingly face challenges associated with the digital environment, including online extortion and harmful speech that can heighten social tensions. Youth groups have proactively responded through concrete action to prevent and respond to it. However, they require stronger support, and clearer coordination arrangement with relevant actors to ensure cases can be reported and addressed safely and consistently.

Locally led responses enhancing youth's positive role

Since NP started working in Ninewa, investment in local peace infrastructure, including CPTs and youth-led structures, has demonstrated the contribution of youth to community stability through practical action, inclusive engagement, and local problem-solving. Across different locations, youth-led initiatives have contributed to:

- **Community recovery actions that improve shared public life.** Youth and CPT members have supported community recovery through a combination of practical action and inclusive engagement processes. In addition to organizing cleaning campaigns and contributing to the rehabilitation of public facilities, these initiatives have placed emphasis on engaging communities, particularly in the most vulnerable and heavily damaged areas to assess priorities, gauge readiness, and agree on appropriate forms of action. For example, in Krovy, CPT members identified the closure of the village's only health clinic as a priority concern during community consultations, given the long distance to Sinjar district centre for even basic care. They subsequently cleaned the facility, advocated with the Baaj Health Sector to rehabilitate it, and supported a community cleaning campaign to prepare the clinic for re-opening and service delivery**.** CPTs facilitate dialogue, sustain engagement, and help build trust by accompanying communities through recovery processes rather than prescribing solutions. This approach strengthens community agency, reinforces collective responsibility, and supports social recovery by restoring confidence in local action and shared public life.

- **Service advocacy that responds to community priorities.** Youth have advocated for improved services and living conditions.

- **Infrastructure improvements shaped by local ownership**. Youth initiatives have included rehabilitation of key community infrastructure, such as roads, small but visible actions that strengthen community confidence in collective responsibility, action, and local problem-solving. Education-related advocacy and protection of learning spaces. In some areas, youth successfully advocated for the return of school facilities to educational use after they had been temporarily used by security and police actors, helping to restore learning environments and reinforce community priorities around access to education. In Tal Ezair, for example, youth engaged in sustained advocacy with relevant actors to enable the evacuation of a school that had been used for non-educational purposes, allowing it to reopen for students. Additionally, this outcome enabled continued youth engagement with schools as spaces for dialogue, awareness-raising, and further community advocacy around education.



Locally led responses enhancing youth's positive role

- **Social cohesion initiatives and youth exchange.** Youth have facilitated dialogue and social cohesion discussions and initiated exchanges through sports activities and school engagement across different areas (e.g., Sinjar, Qahtaniya, and Baaj). Youth have also explored creative community messaging approaches around schools to promote values of peaceful coexistence. As one of the CPTs members noted, " *We also started engaging with Talafar, trying to coordinate for graffiti-based awareness around schools promoting messages of peaceful coexistence values*."

- **Proactive community engagement and community learning on pressing social issues**. Youth-led sessions have been used to widen community understanding of sensitive issues and to create safer entry points for discussion, particularly for women and girls. One youth leader noted, "*I led an awareness session on violence against women… attended by 40 women… they expressed that it was helpful and knowledgeable.*"

Collectively, these initiatives indicate that youth engagement in Ninewa is practice-oriented and locally led, contributing to strengthened social cohesion within and between communities through trustbuilding, improved community cooperation, and more responsive local action where formal mechanisms are limited.

Way Forward

Strengthening and sustaining youth-led social cohesion and peacebuilding efforts require the following:

1. Establish safe, accessible youth spaces in priority locations with the greatest barriers to youth participation, underserved, conflict-affected, and remote communities where safe public venues are limited, to serve as safe and inclusive venues to be used for planning, dialogue, and activities, with inclusion measures for young women and remote areas.

2. Provide light operational support for youth-led initiatives, transport, materials, and venue costs to sustain voluntary engagement without undermining local ownership.

3. Formalise feedback loops with duty bearers, regular coordination with relevant directorates, and written follow-up on youth advocacy requests.

4. Link capacity strenghtening to implementation, train-and-do model with small community projects, school initiatives, and youth-led engagement with relevant directorates to address specific service gaps and track follow-through.

5. Expand outreach to underserved areas and prioritise locally identified needs and capacities, especially heavily affected and under-served communities.

6. Strengthen safe digital capacities of youth and enhance cooperation with relevant actors to prevent and respond to online extortion and harmful speech.