



Dylan O'Driscoll

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## The opportunity for local peacebuilding interventions: The case of Kirkuk, Iraq

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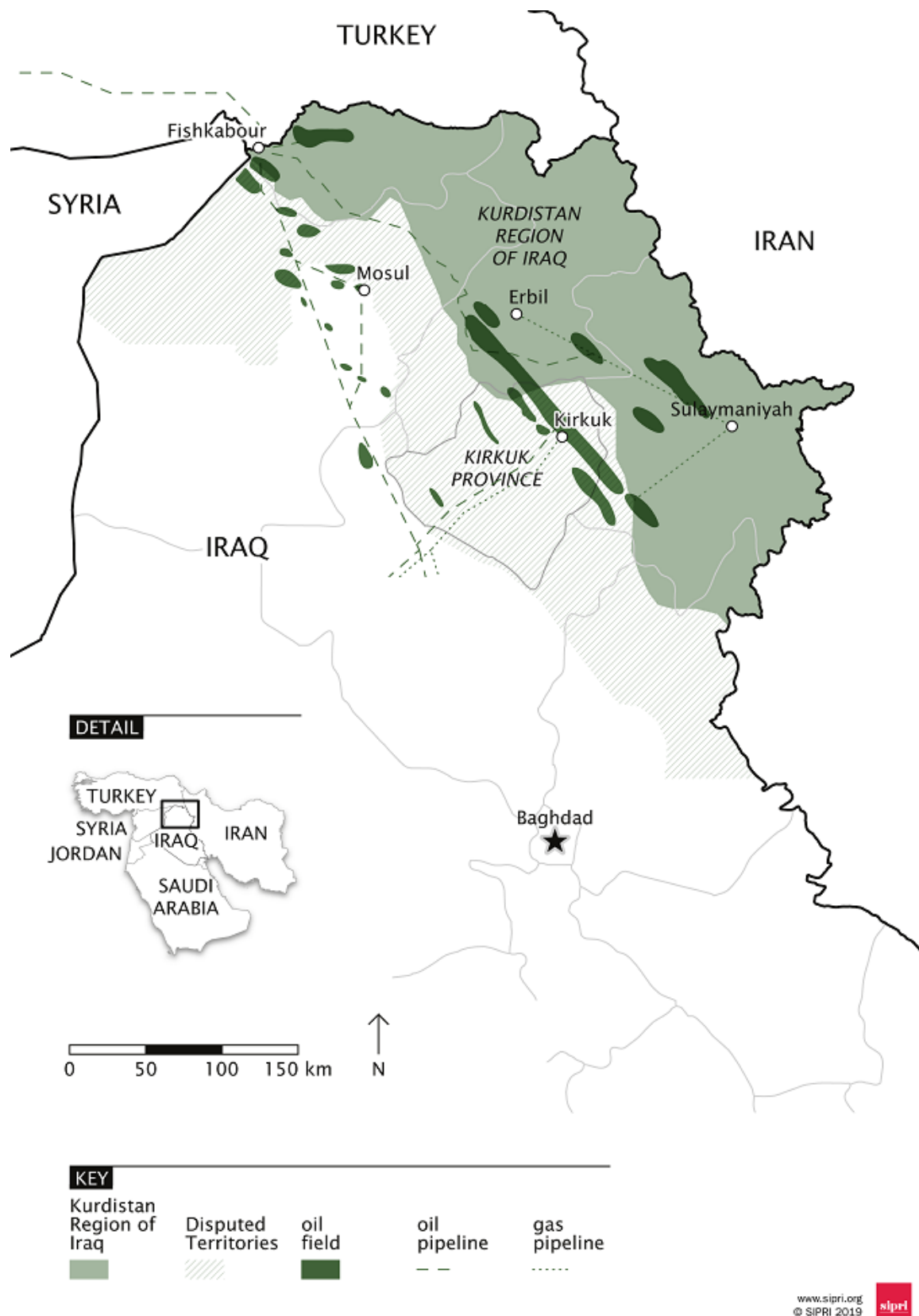
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Bazaar in Kirkuk's city center by Levi Clancy [CC BY-SA 4.0]

Since the end of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of Iraq, conflict has emerged in Kirkuk over political and physical control of the territory, which has only intensified since the 2003 United States-led invasion of Iraq (see figure 1). As a result, Kurd, Arab and Turkmen politicians have been competing for power, with little sign of compromise. Despite the failure of elites to demonstrate a willingness to reach an agreement, considerable attention from peacebuilders and donors has focused on elite negotiations while the local side of peacebuilding has been ignored. Utilising survey research with 511 shopkeepers and customers in the main Kirkuk bazaar, my latest policy paper '[Building Everyday Peace in Kirkuk, Iraq: The Potential of Locally Focused Interventions](#)' provides an understanding of how, when and by whom acts of peace and conflict are carried out at the everyday level, and gives policy recommendations for interventions that would address 'what works?' for the local side of peacebuilding. This article highlights some core areas where there is an opportunity for peacebuilding interventions to affect real change in the everyday lives of Kirkukis. The importance lies in the fact that local peacebuilding can provide a better basis for a high-level political settlement and, as Kirkuk is seen as a '[mini Iraq](#)', peacebuilding in Kirkuk can feed into peacebuilding in the wider country.

*Figure 1: The geopolitical position of Kirkuk, hydrocarbon reserves, and pipelines.*

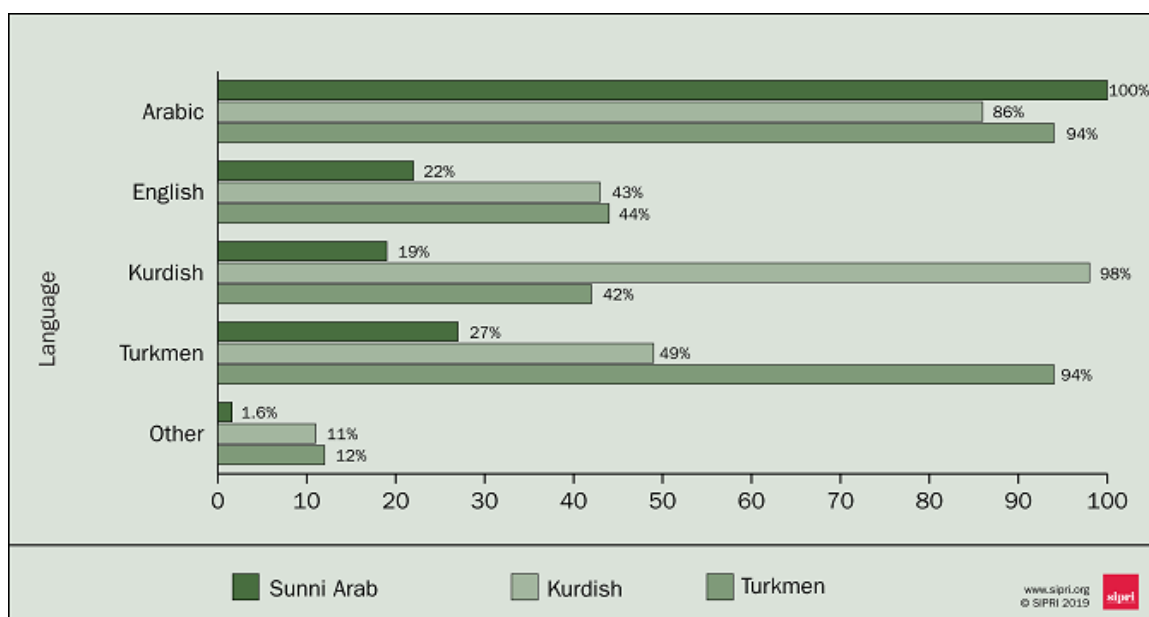


## Investing in local language training

One key aspect of the local dynamics in Kirkuk is the languages used in everyday interactions. Language plays a central role in intercommunity interactions and, with three distinct languages (Arabic, Kurdish and Turkmen), multilingual proficiency is an important factor in Kirkuk (see

figure 2). [The Kirkuk bazaar study](#) shows that there is a direct correlation between being able to speak the languages of other ethnosectarian groups and increased social interaction across the groups. Although the majority of Kurds and Turkmen can speak at least one other Kirkuki language, language proficiency in all three—necessary for improved community relations—is lacking. The majority of Sunni Arabs can only speak Arabic, which is a significant factor in their isolation and lesser privilege in the way they can occupy space in the bazaar. Moreover, there is an additional dimension to this situation whereby Sunni Arab women are the most isolated group in Kirkuk across a number of markers, such as interaction with other groups and socialising in the bazaar.

*Figure 2: The languages spoken by customers. Note: Participants could provide more than one response.*



Since an ability to speak the various local languages is important for interaction between groups, there is the potential for interventions to focus on community language learning programmes and services—similar programmes [exist in Kosovo for Albanian and Serbian](#). Extra attention should be given to Sunni Arabs, particularly Sunni Arab women, as their limited proficiency in the other local languages isolates them on a number of levels within society. Due to the importance of

building the language capabilities of the youth of Kirkuk, interventions can also focus on the development of a new multilingual curriculum in schools, similar to the one that [exists in Brčko, Bosnia and Herzegovina](#). Teaching in all three languages would enable students to communicate better with other ethnosectarian groups from an early age and give an understanding of different cultures, with the result of limiting conflict and building social trust.

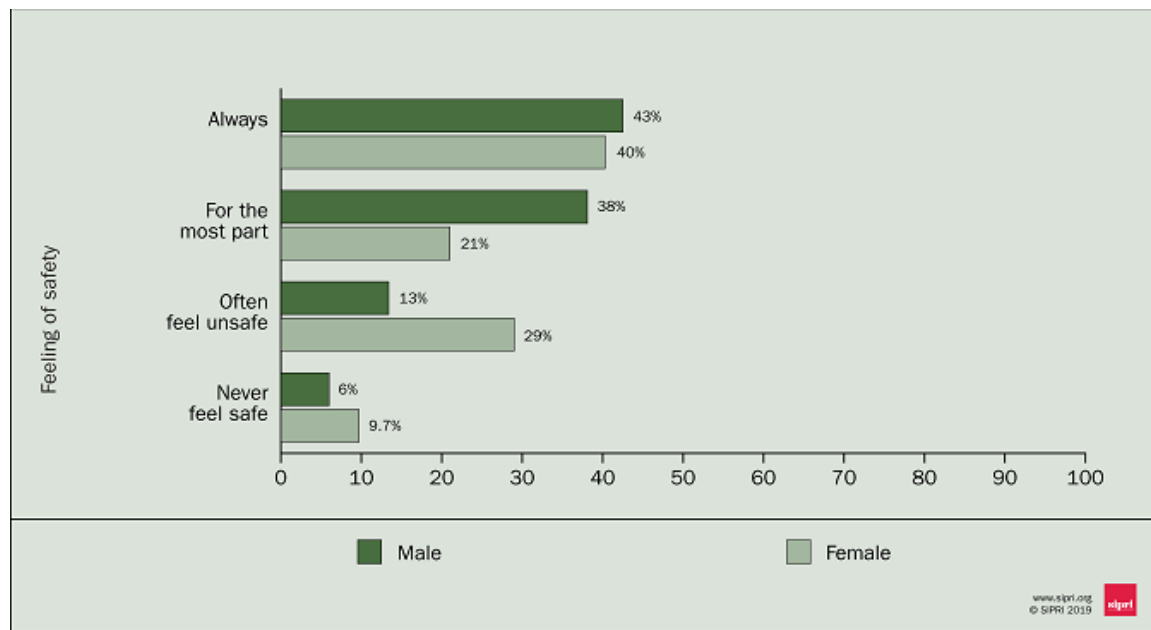
### **Creating and improving social spaces for interaction**

[This research](#) shows that ethnosectarian identity barely factors in either customers' selection of shops or shopkeepers' negotiations on price, meaning that there is real room for intercommunal interactions in the bazaar. The relatively unrestricted interactions between the different ethnosectarian groups demonstrates that the bazaar is a good site through which to focus attention on building relationships between communities and working towards social cohesion. However, with the establishment of more homogeneous ethnosectarian neighbourhood bazaars and large malls in Kirkuk, attention to improving the central bazaar—both physically and as a place of social interaction across the ethnosectarian division lines—is necessary in order to maintain its historic, multi-ethnosectarian roots and improve it as a site for potential everyday peace. The bazaar is one of the few places in Kirkuk where all communities interact, and it is important it remains such a space. The bazaar needs investment from international actors to repair and modernise it, while making it a more user-friendly and a pleasing place to be. In order to ensure the bazaar remains a site of interaction, it is vital that social spaces are improved and increased.

However, the results of the surveys demonstrated that women socialise less in the bazaar and, despite the majority feeling comfortable walking around the bazaar, only a minority feel comfortable socialising there. Moreover, more than one third of women feel unsafe in the bazaar (see figure 3) and the majority feel they are treated unequally. This

demonstrates the gendered aspect of space and indicates that there is room for improvement in how women feel in utilising the space in the bazaar in order to take advantage of it for intercommunity interaction; a factor also relevant for other marginalised groups.

*Figure 3: Male and female customers' perceived feeling of safety in the bazaar.*



### Focusing on gender equality education

Creating social spaces solely for women can help to encourage interaction between women from the various ethnosectarian groups who currently socialise far less in the bazaar than men. As women do not feel they are treated equally in the bazaar—and this has a direct impact on how they can utilise the space—it is important that there is a focus on gender equality education both in the bazaar and in wider Kirkuki society. Since women are particularly limited in how free they feel to occupy space and how safe they feel within it, encouraging more women to take on the role of shopkeeper and providing assistance to help women set up businesses can offer spaces that feel more gender equal. However, it is important that this happens in conjunction with gender equality education in the bazaar so that women shopkeepers do not face abuse. In order to improve the safety (and perception of safety)

of women, gender equality, and how women can occupy the space, it is important that actors involved in the [gender training of police and programmes to increase the number of women police officers in Iraq](#) focus on Kirkuk. This can only happen with the support of the Kirkuk Provincial Council, which could also look into developing new gender-sensitive protocols for the police and wider justice system, with real repercussions for failing to follow them.

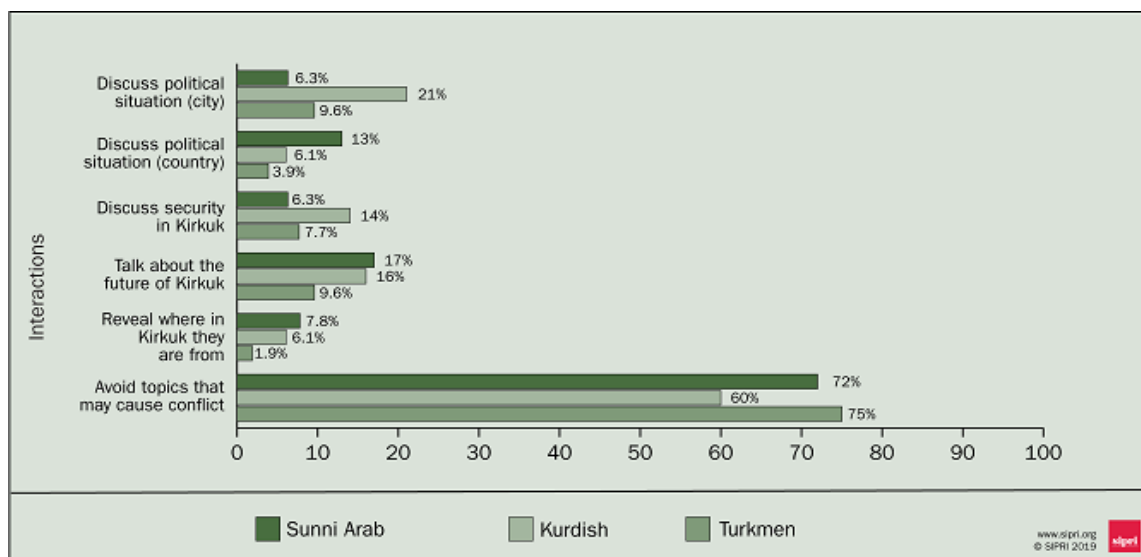
### **Understanding privilege in societal dynamics**

Despite the drastic changes in Kirkuk since October 2017, [when the central government took control of the governorship and security from the Kurds](#), Kurds are still seen to have the most influence in both the bazaar and in wider society by participants in the survey. It is important to note that privilege does change over time and although Kurdish privilege is slowly waning, factors like [the imminent election of a Kurdish governor](#) and the [potential return of the Kurdish forces](#) will once again increase Kurdish advantage. Privilege is significant in a place like Kirkuk where *wasta*—using connections to get things done—plays an important role in society. Moreover, this has a direct impact on how Kurds utilise the space, specifically with regards to acts of everyday conflict. Participants in this research highlighted that identity signifiers have a notable impact on increased tensions at the everyday level, particularly when they occur in conjunction with other factors such as increased nationalist behaviour on national holidays. Kurds are the most likely to wear identity signifiers during national holidays and are the most likely to celebrate these holidays in public. For this reason, community tensions are seen to increase in the bazaar on holidays linked directly to the Kurds, such as [Kurdish Clothing Day](#) or [Nawroz](#) (Kurdish new year). This is not to say that identity signifiers and national holidays are inherently negative, rather that attention needs to focus on minimising their potential as a driver of conflict. Kurdish privilege, connected to influence, impacts on the dynamics of bazaar interactions

in other ways too. For example, Kurds are the least likely to avoid topics that cause conflict and the most likely to discuss contentious subjects (see figure 4) (discussing the political situation in the city was the riskiest, according to this survey).

Additionally, this research highlighted that Kurds feel freer in how they utilise space in the bazaar and are the most likely to confront someone who is seen to have insulted them. Moreover, although women are less likely to confront someone who insults them, Kurdish women are more likely to than both Sunni Arab and Turkmen men. However, it is important to highlight that the majority of Kurds still carry out acts of conflict avoidance. Nonetheless, the impact that privilege has on how people occupy space and carry out acts of everyday conflict rather than everyday peace is an area that needs attention in Kirkuk.

*Figure 4: Customers' likely conversation choices when speaking with people from other groups.*



## In conclusion

Creating better social spaces, developing a new school curriculum and improving language capabilities would all help to improve interactions between the ethnosectarian groups. Nevertheless, wider dialogue and educational programmes are also needed so that people understand the various cultures that exist in Kirkuk and how their individual actions



may increase tensions. Importantly, this research demonstrates that—for the most part—people do engage in acts of everyday peace, with everyday conflict only increasing at distinct times. Finally, this research highlights that there is real potential for locally focused interventions to play a role in building peace at the local, everyday level in Kirkuk.

*This article was [originally published](#) by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).*

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*Note: The CRP blogs gives the views of the author, not the position of the Conflict Research Programme, the London School of Economics and Political Science, or the UK Government.*

### About the author



**Dylan O'Driscoll**

Dr Dylan O'Driscoll is a Conflict Research Fellow (2018) on the Conflict Research Programme, and a Researcher in the Governance and Society Programme at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). Dr O'Driscoll's research focuses on the competition between everyday nationalism and everyday peace in Kirkuk city, Iraq.

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