

POLITICAL TRUST AND SOCIAL COHESION AT A TIME OF CRISIS

The Impact of COVID-19 on Kurdistan Region-Iraq

POLITICAL SETTLEMENTS RESEARCH PROGRAMME: COVID-19 SERIES

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KEY FINDINGS

COVID-19 has attracted much attention in Kurdish neighbourhoods and has been relayed massively by the media across the KRI. Kurdistanis put their trust mostly in television as the most accessible source of information across the region. Conversely, social media was not considered a reliable source of information during the pandemic.

The results of this survey highlight a strong lack of trust in federal political figures and institutions. At the regional level, Kurdistanis are divided along lines of political affiliation and geography. While respondents from Duhok and Erbil expressed a high level of trust in the KRG, people of Silemani are openly distrustful of the KRI government.

The institutions responsible for mitigating the impact of the pandemic attract the highest level of trust across governorates. This is the case with the KRG Ministry of Health and Ministry of Interior, including the security forces and the police. Conversely, participants expressed strong rejection of both parliaments that sit in Baghdad and Erbil. The legislative body attracted the least trust among the population surveyed.

The COVID-19 pandemic has fostered social cohesion in the KRI. The majority of respondents believed that all Kurdistanis, including both vulnerable and non-vulnerable groups, should be treated equally and should receive the same amount of government support during the pandemic. That being said, a significant number of respondents recognized the importance of caring for those most vulnerable, such as the elderly, Syrian refugees, and International Displaced Persons (IDPs) more broadly. Finally, respondents have been shown to rely mostly on their social circles and family throughout the crisis, rather than regional and federal institutions.

Those surveyed strongly supported the preventive measures in general imposed by the KRG on the three governorates. Yet, answers to the survey reveal that such measures have had an impact on the personal economic circumstances of Kurdistanis, especially among the younger portion of the population, who expected to face financial difficulties in the near future as a direct consequence of the pandemic and its impact.

INTRODUCTION

In light of the global health crisis that erupted in December 2019 following the spread of the virus now known as COVID-19, this research was designed to gather information about the conflict-peace-COVID-19 nexus.

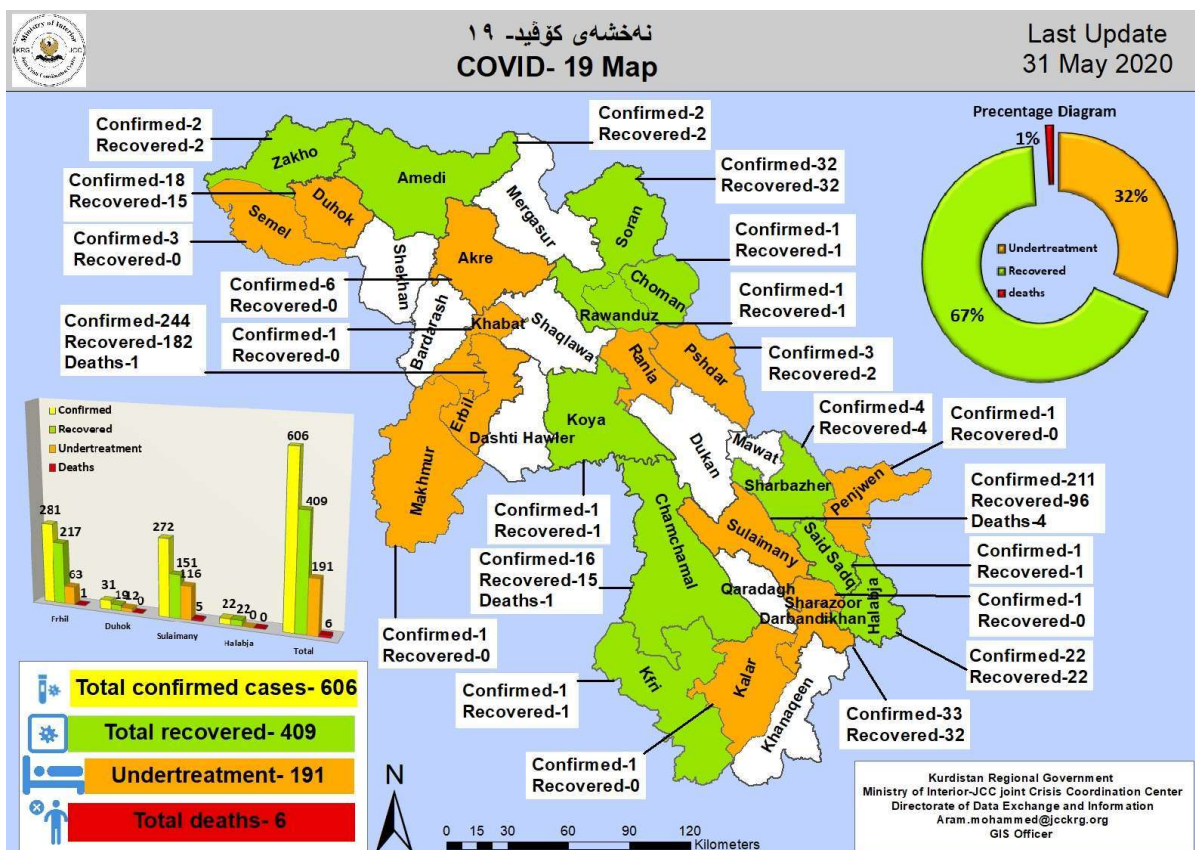
This investigation focuses on Iraq in general and Kurdistan Region-Iraq (KRI) in particular. Iraq adopted a new constitution in 2005. It designed the country as a federal republic, where the Kurdish political leadership gained semi-autonomous control over the northern region for the first time since the establishment of Iraq in 1921. The recognition and empowerment of the KRI gave hope for a strong and united Iraq. Nevertheless, the central state apparatus was unable to foster a common Iraqi identity around citizenship. Seventeen years since the establishment of the second republic, state-society relations remain weak. The end of Saddam Hussein's dictatorial regime in 2003 did not bring an end to authoritarian tendencies, nor did it establish socio-economic and political peace in the country. Ever since the collapse of the central authority in 2003, the country has been gripped by political instability and recurrent conflicts in the form of civil wars and Salafi-jihadi and Shia militias violence. Notably, unfair power-sharing agreements; de-Ba'athification; al-Maliki's monopoly over the executive, judiciary, and military; the recent integration of Iran-backed militias into the state military apparatus; and the federal government's sectarian policies, all worked to strongly alienate Sunni and Kurdish communities. In the KRI, those dynamics further damaged the trust between Kurdistanis and Arab Iraqis on the one hand, and between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the federal government on the other.

In this specific environment, this research begins to assess the socio-political impact of COVID-19 situation in the KRI. It mainly focuses on: (i) examining the level of trust in several political institutions and actors and the media; and (ii) investigating the social cohesion across the region's governorates and communities. In doing so, this research attempts to answer the following questions:

- In which political and media actors do Kurdistanis place their trust in the context of the current COVID-19 situation? Are these at the federal (Baghdad), the regional (Erbil), or the local level (governorate and close circles)?
 - How do Kurdistanis assess the responses of the Kurdish regional institutions at a regional and local level?
 - How has the COVID-19 situation, including governmental policies, impacted the lives of Kurdistanis?
 - How do Kurdistanis view the future?

The COVID-19 virus first hit Iraq in early March 2020. While the number of cases and deaths remained comparatively low – 2,480 cases and 102 deaths were officially confirmed as of 10 May 2020¹ – the Iraqi government was slow in its response to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on its weak health sector. The border with Iran remained opened until 8 March 2020, at the time when the Islamic Republic had the highest number of deaths outside China. Even after the Iraqi central authority decided to lock down the country, there have been conflicting reports on whether the 21 official border crossings between Iraq and Iran had been effectively closed.

At the regional level, in the KRI, the KRG took early preventive measures to contain the spread of the virus. Kurdish borders were fully closed with its neighbours (with Iran on 21 February; Syria on 1 March; Turkey on 29 February 2020) and the rest of Iraq by mid-March. A complete lockdown was imposed on 13 March, with movement restrictions between and inside governorates, and the ban of land and air travel. These early measures were effective, with 606 confirmed cases and only 6 deaths by the end of May (Map 1).



Source: Kurdistan Regional Government, Ministry of Health, 31 May 2020

¹ From mid-May 2020, Iraq witnessed a peak in COVID-19 cases, with more than 6,000 officially confirmed cases and almost 200 deaths. See OCHA (2020), *IRAQ: COVID-19. Situation Report No. 14*, June 1, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20200601_COVID19_SitRep_No.14%20%281%29.pdf.

The federal government and the KRG adopted two different and independent approaches to deal with the impact of the pandemic. As such, it became evident that COVID-19 was yet another example of a trend that has been observed in Iraq during previous crises, such as the Syrian refugee crisis or the military threat posed by the Islamic State organization (IS/Daesh). During those times of uncertainty, no inclusive plan was put in place to face those aforementioned threats. These previous crises were not seen as opportunities to foster cooperation between Baghdad and Erbil. Instead, they further deepened the political and social rift between Iraq and the KRI.

Human beings are tribal species and in times of crisis, the psychology of fear often prevails, building momentum for a sense of groupism. Hence, one could hypothesize that during such times of fear, people pledge allegiance to actors they trust in exchange for protection. Those actors are usually the ones sharing a common identity or similar interests. Consequently, times of crisis are more likely to damage intergroup trust and to reinforce a pre-existing lack of trust in institutions and other (ethnic, religious, social) groups.²

In this conceptual and practical context of mistrust and lack of cooperation between the federal and the regional levels in Iraq, this research fits a wider scope on the nexus between COVID-19, conflict, and peace.³ In other words, it examines whether the pandemic – which does not itself discriminate by ethnicity, religion, or political views – has overcome or exacerbated political divisions and lack of trust between the federal government and the KRI. On the spectrum of political and social relations, does the COVID-19 pandemic put the cursor closer to conflict or peace?

² The nature of a crisis has a differentiated impact on social, intergroup trust. 'Crisis' here is defined in a broad sense from economic recession and political stalemate to armed conflict and security incidents. For a critical discussion on the impact of crises on social trust, see: Ervasti, H., Kouvo, A. and Venetoklis, T. (2018), 'Social and Institutional Trust in Times of Crisis: Greece, 2002–2011', *Social Indicators Research*, 141:1207-31; Rohner, D., Thoenig, M. and Zilibotti, F. (2013), 'Seeds of distrust: Conflict in Uganda', *Journal of Economic Growth*, 18(3): 217-52; Cassar, A., Grosjean, P. and Whitt, S. (2013), 'Legacies of violence: Trust and market development', *Journal of Economic Growth*, 18(3): 285-318; Gidefroidt, A. and Langer A. (2018), 'How Fear Drives Us Apart: Explaining the Relationship between Terrorism and Social Trust', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Newton, K. (2007), 'Social and political trust', in R. J. Dalton & H.-D. Klingemann (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of political behavior*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 342-61.

³ The Political Settlements Research Programme is working on a number of initiatives relating to the impact of COVID-19, and associated response policies, on peace processes and armed conflict. For more information, visit the following webpages: <https://www.politicalsettlements.org/covid-19/covid-19-research/>; <https://www.politicalsettlements.org/covid-19/resources/>; <https://www.politicalsettlements.org/covid-19/>.

METHODOLOGY

This research attempts to answer the above questions by gathering the perceptions of Kurdistanis through an online survey based on random, respondent-driven sampling. Although the research team acknowledges the limitations of such a sampling technique, it was appropriate given movement restriction measures imposed by the KRG to contain the spread of COVID-19, and the associated necessity of avoiding social interactions. In addition, the online survey helped collect a large number of perceptions in a short amount of time, which allowed the team to capture a snapshot of the public opinion in the KRI during the COVID-19 pandemic, where the situation was evolving daily. Finally, the online survey ensured anonymity of participants and lifted ethical and practical constraints related to in-depth face-to-face interviews.

The survey was made available online for 8 days between 15 and 22 April 2020. It was disseminated in the two main Kurdish dialects spoken in the KRI – Sorani and Behdini – through social media platforms, primarily Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter, as well as the wide network of Open Think Tank, which has extensive experience in conducting large opinion polls and surveys in the KRI. The research team also relied on the cultural settings of the KRI for the survey to be further disseminated among social groups. It is important to mention that this report did not set out to collect the perceptions of experts or officials, but instead to survey the perceptions of grassroot communities – Kurdistanis from different ethnic, religious, geographical, and educational backgrounds.

The online survey was answered by a total of 936 participants across the three historical governorates of the KRI: Duhok (or Dohuk), Erbil, and Silemani (or Sulaymaniyah). The governorate of Halabja was merged with that of Silemani to reflect the policy of the federal government, which does not consider it as a separate governorate part of the KRI. The status of Halabja remains contested and the Kurdish parliament officially recognized Halabja as part of the KRI in Law no.1 approved in 2015.

An English translation of the survey questionnaire is appended to this report. For more in-depth inferential analysis, please contact the survey partners directly.

Note on Graphics and Values

All figures have been rounded to the nearest whole number, except in the case of socio-demographic data. Values are automatically adjusted to give readers the best visibility over the viewing period.

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

The online survey was answered by 936 Kurdistanis, of whom half live in Duhok where OTT is based and has the widest network and strongest professional reputation. The two other governorates were almost equally represented with 23.52% of respondents for Silemani and 28.57% for Erbil.

Distribution by Governorate

Duhok	Erbil	Silemani
47.91%	28.57%	23.52%

Male respondents greatly outnumbered female ones. These results cannot account for the fact that men slightly outnumber women in the younger age group (0-29) in the KRI. Rather, they might indicate that men have more access to online devices, are more politically engaged or simply had more time to answer the survey while women were responsible for taking care of children who stopped attending school in late January 2020 due to the pandemic.

Distribution by Gender

Female	Male
32.87%	67.13%

Participants aged between 25 and 44 were overly represented in the survey: they accounted for 63.8% of the respondents. More generally, roughly 90% of respondents were aged between 18 and 44. This age group is thought to consist of those whom are most likely to use the internet daily. Another explanation may lie in the fact that respondents between 25 and 44 years old are employed or are business owners, and have family responsibilities. These groups were potentially the most affected by COVID-19-related measures, and therefore keen to express opinions about governmental performances that directly affect their lives and future. Conversely, less than 1% of those aged 65 and above participated in the survey. One may assume that only a small percentage of this age group is comfortable using such technologies.

Distribution by Age

18-24	25-44	45-64	65 and above
16.96%	63.80%	18.58%	0.64%

More than 50% of the respondents hold a BA degree, which tends to back the assumption that this age group is educated. More importantly, a demographic survey conducted jointly by the Kurdistan Region’s Statistics Office (KRSO), International Organization for Migration (IOM) and United Nation’s Population Fund (UNFPA) published in 2018 found the overall literacy rate in KRI to be between 26% and 45% of those aged 55 years and above (the literacy rate is about 21% of the Kurdistan population of over 5 million). This is a strong factor that would impede participation in an online survey. As a result, this is also a methodical limitation of this research.

Distribution by Education

I can read and write	Primary school	Secondary school license	High school license	Poly-technique	Bachelor degree	Master degree	PhD
0.43%	0.64%	2.04%	9.24%	12.35%	53.06%	14.39%	7.84%

COVID-19 has attracted much attention in Kurdish neighbourhoods and has been relayed massively by the media across the KRI. Results show that almost 90% of respondents followed the news about the pandemic with some or a lot of attention across the three governorates (Figure 1).

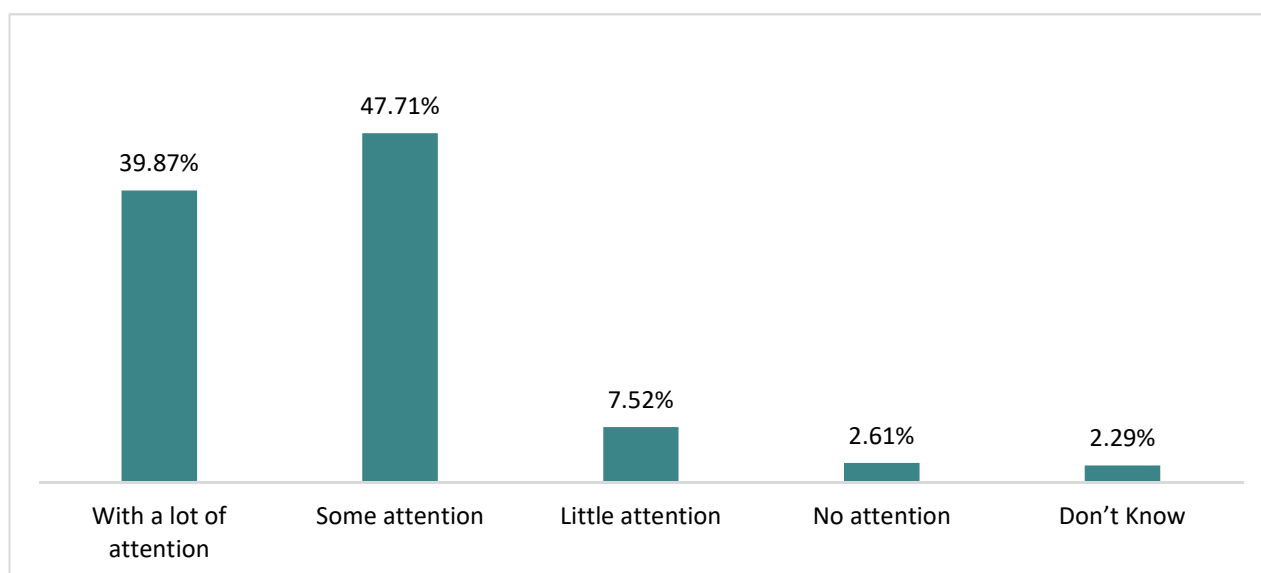


Figure 1: How closely have you followed the news about COVID-19 pandemic?

This high level of attention probably stands for the exceptionalism of the pandemic and its massive coverage by governments and media. Only about 2.61% admitted not having followed the news about the pandemic.

While the evolution of the pandemic inside the KRI has attracted general attention, a majority of Kurdistanis surveyed had not been affected directly by the virus, in the sense that 96.73% of respondents had not been infected or did not know anyone who had been infected by COVID-19 (Figure 2).

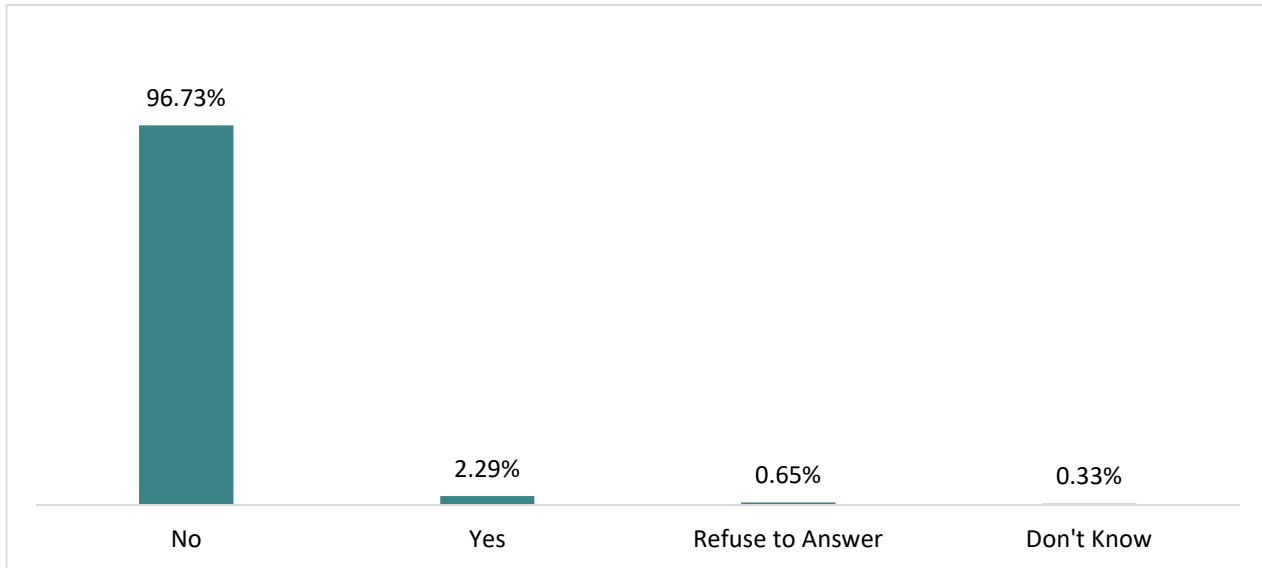


Figure 2: Have you or someone you know personally been infected by COVID-19?

The KRI has been relatively spared by the virus which infected 606 Kurdistanis as of 31 May 2020. This represents a very small fraction of an overall population estimated to reach between 5 and 5.5 million,⁴ including refugees and IDPs but not the inhabitants of the disputed areas. The low rate of contamination is undoubtedly the result of early preventive measures taken by the KRG. During the crisis, the federal government only retained sovereignty over the airports of Erbil and Silemani, which were closed relatively late, on 17 March 2020. Elsewhere in the KRI, mobility between governorates was greatly restricted in mid-March and schools were closed in late January, as were the borders with Turkey and Iran. Restrictions were also applied on commercial, export, and import activities across the borders with Iran, while Kurdistanis were given until 16 March 2020 to leave the Iranian Republic and come back to the KRI. All Newroz (Kurdish New Year) celebrations were cancelled on 21 March 2020, and religious ceremonies and gatherings were forbidden including Eid al-fitra at the end of Ramadhan. The curfew within and between governorates was applied strictly across the KRI with the support of the Peshmerga and the police, and the erection of numerous checkpoints.

⁴ No official census has been conducted in the KRI since the Iraqi census in 1987. In 2018, the Kurdistan Region Statistics Office (KRSO) partnered with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the UN Fund for Populations (UNFPA) to conduct a comprehensive demographic in the KRI. The survey estimated the population of the KRI as 5.1 million, excluding the disputed areas. For more information, see IOM, UNFPA and KRSO (2018), *Demographic Survey. Kurdistan Region of Iraq*, July, <https://iraq.unfpa.org/en/publications/demographic-survey-kurdistan-region-iraq>.

MEDIA TRUST

Sources of information are vital to the conduct of our daily lives, even more in times of crisis. Yet, the high rate of political ownership and affiliation of Kurdish media raises the question of their independence as reliable sources of information.⁵ While the KRI media landscape includes private or independent media, the latter is 'unable to compete' with media groups subsidized by Kurdish parties.⁶ In addition to being the main platforms of political communication, media has recently multiplied – helped by the advent of social media. The constant flow of news might be a source of confusion for audiences, resulting in less effective policies at the government level.

During the pandemic, social distancing measures halted the work of the printed press in the region, in contrast with social media and aired programmes on the TV. Even before the outbreak of COVID-19, newspapers attracted small audiences. The written press was already being superseded by easily accessible, more interactive and frequently updated media. For instance, the most powerful newspaper, *Rudaw*, is published weekly and thus fails to provide updated information on a daily basis during a situation which is evolving and changing rapidly.

The growing attraction of social media in the KRI has pushed key politicians to become active users of Facebook and Twitter to send their message to a wide and diverse audience. The new trend is exemplified by KRG Prime Minister Masrour Barzani and President Nechirvan Barzani, both of whom tweet almost daily in different languages, including English, Arabic and the two main Kurdish dialects spoken in the KRI, Sorani and Behdini.

The results of the survey show that Kurdistanis put their trust in the television more than any other information media (Figure 3), even though the TV attracts less than 12% of 'a lot of trust' compared to over 55% of 'some trust'. The TV, which is overwhelmingly present in households throughout the KRI, speaks to the broadest cross-section of the population, regardless of age, social and educational background. Everyone can listen to the TV and engage with the information it disseminates. According to the results of the survey, respondents placed their trust ('a lot' and 'some') after the television in newspapers and magazines (47%), social media (42%) and friends and family (35%).

⁵ Haksan, N. (2017), 'Lack of Press Independence in Iraqi Kurdistan Undermines Public Dialogue', *Center for International Media Assistance* (CIMA), August 3, <https://www.cima.ned.org/blog/lack-press-independence-iraqi-kurdistan-undermines-public-dialogue/>; Soz, J. (2016), 'Challenges Facing a Developing Kurdish Media', *Atlantic Council*, June 10, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriasource/challenges-facing-a-developing-kurdish-media/>.

⁶ Freedom House (2017), 'Iraq', *Freedom of the Press 2017*, April 27, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/iraq>.

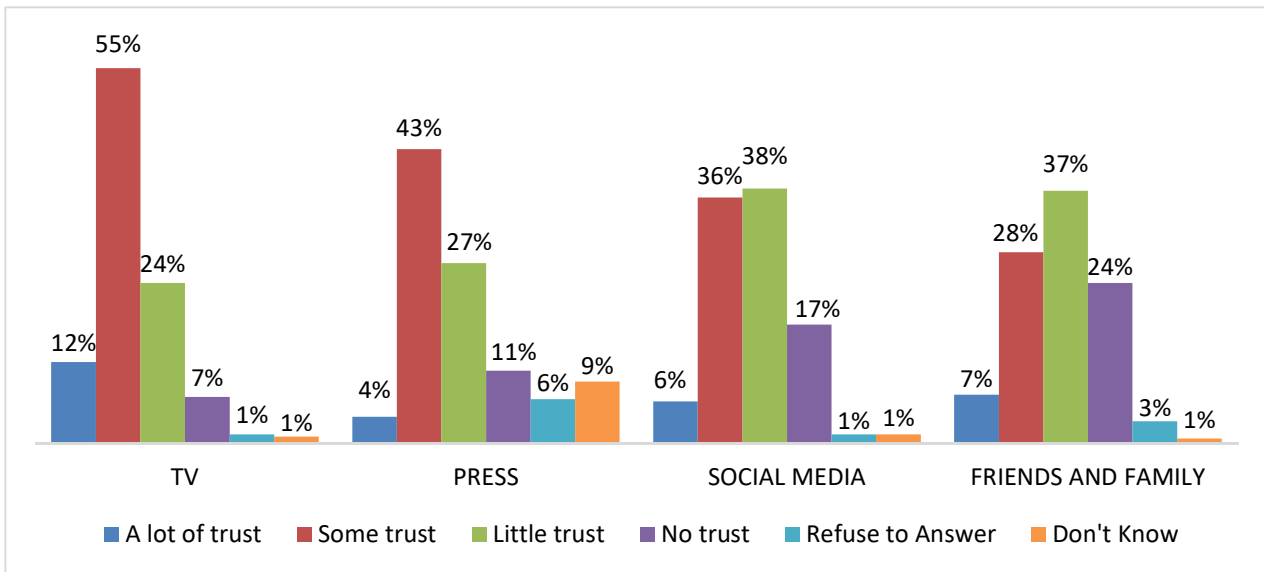


Figure 3: To what extent do you trust the following sources of information?

A closer look at trust in social media reveals very interesting dynamics (Figure 4). While more than 70% of respondents affirmed having 'some' or 'little' trust in social media, almost 22% did not trust it as sources of information. This is a comparatively high percentage in relation to the 7% and 11% of respondents who did not trust television and the press respectively. These are interesting results considering the fact that many Kurdistanis spend an increasing amount of time on their phones as a means of socialization and information. Yet, it appears that social media conveys too much information, including conspiracy theories. Hence, responses suggested that social media in the KRI appears to be more a source of entertainment than a source of trusted information.

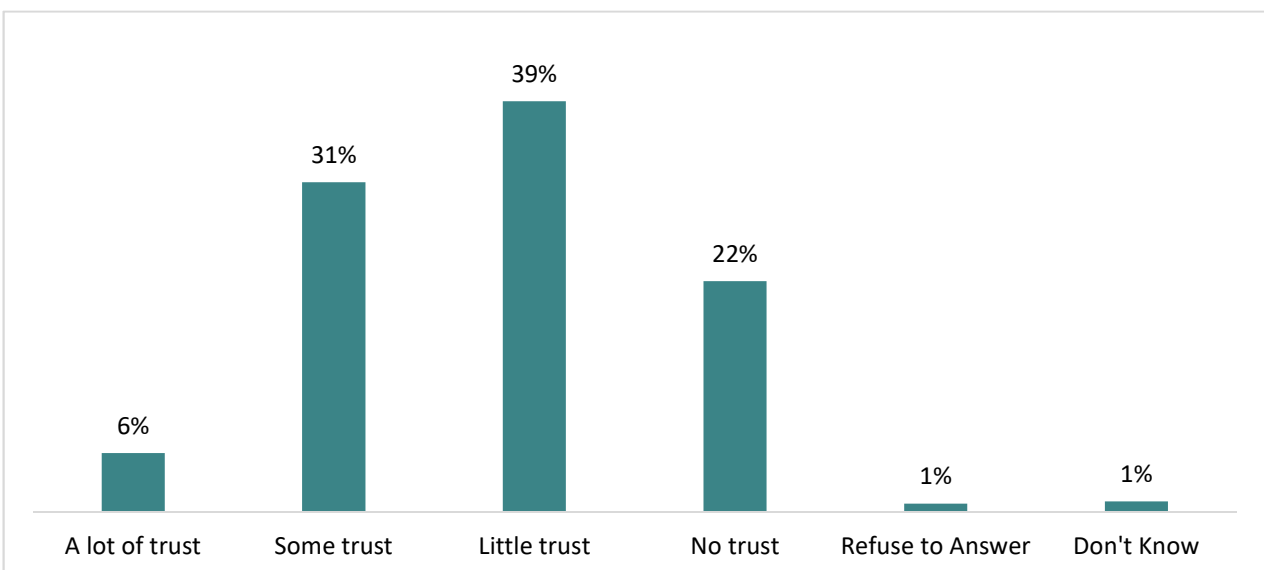


Figure 4: To what extent do you trust social media as sources of information?

Equally interesting, friends and family attracted less trust among Kurdistanis when it comes to information about the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 5). One could have expected a reversed trend in a tribal and family-oriented society such as in the KRI. 66% of respondents put either 'little' or 'no trust' in their close circles and only 5% placed a lot of trust in them. This lack of trust might be explained by the fact that the pandemic is a public health and medical issue, so people tend to trust official, expert information instead. Indeed, most official information about the pandemic has come from the Ministry of Health or Ministry of Interior, which purport to have the credentials to inform the population who do not necessarily have the personal knowledge to understand the epidemic. Therefore, this lack of trust does not account for a lack of social cohesion in the KRI, as it will be shown in the second half of the report.

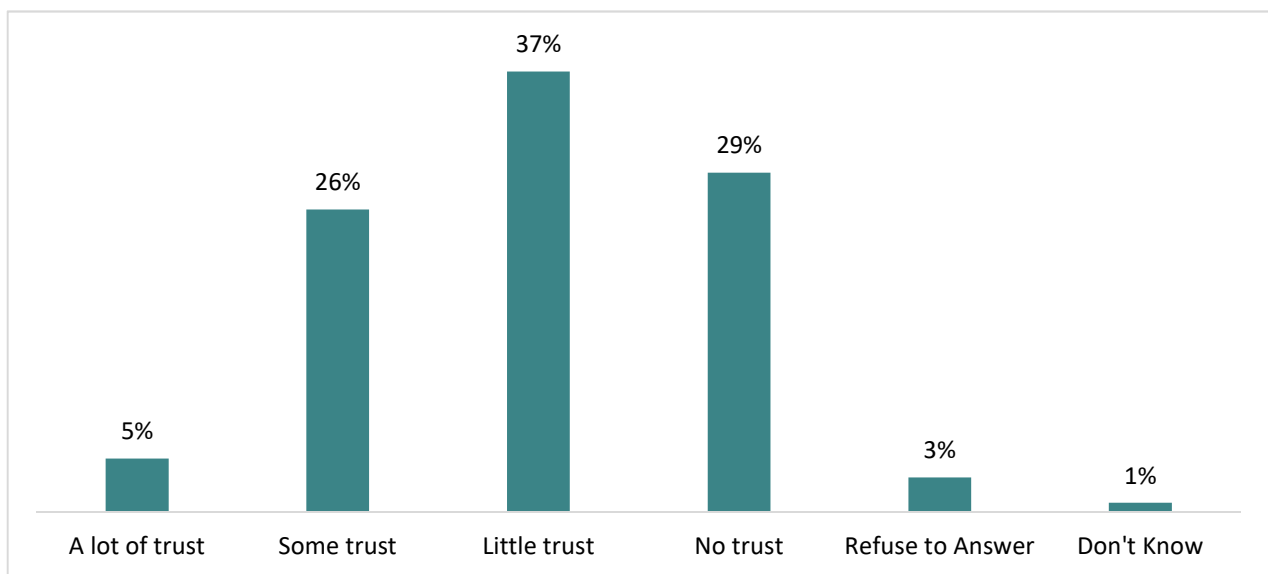


Figure 5: To what extent do you trust your friends and family as sources of information?

This analysis seems to be confirmed by the 53% of respondents who believed that Kurdistanis reacted appropriately to the threat from COVID-19 (Figure 6). Conversely, 31% felt that their peers did not take the pandemic risks seriously enough. A quick look at social dynamics during the lockdown might serve as a useful explanation for this percentage. In Duhok, for instance, the authors of this report witnessed that local markets and roads were crowded, and a majority of passers-by did not wear gloves and masks while the city was officially still under lockdown. Local reports suggest that safety measures were apparently more respected in Erbil and the streets of the capital remained empty for weeks.

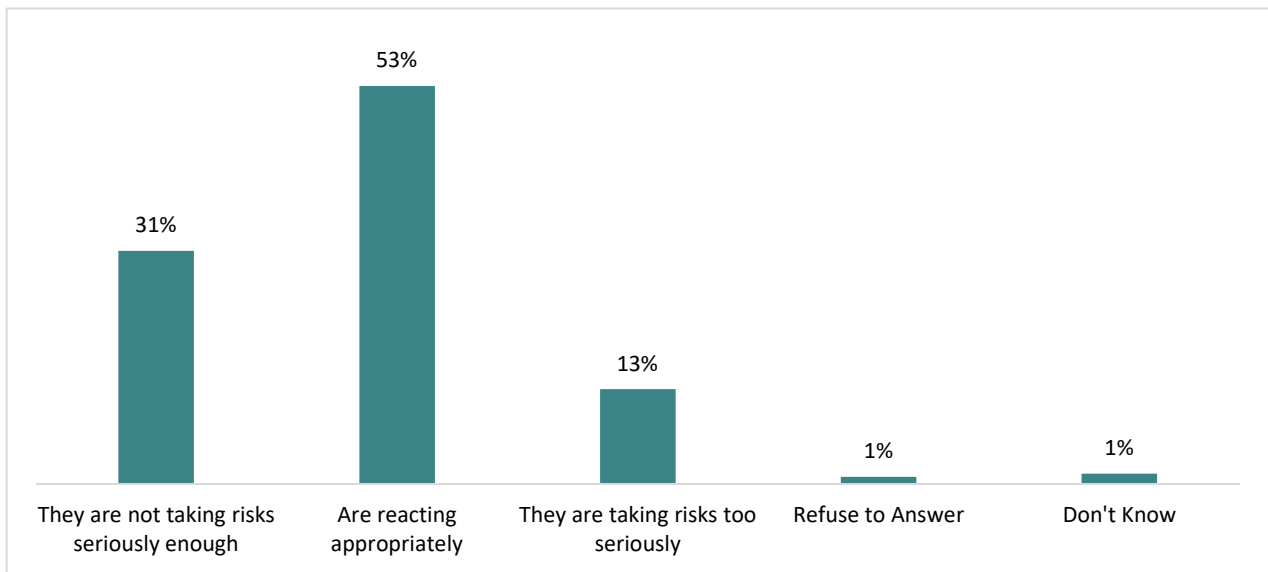


Figure 6: How would you describe the way the Kurdistanis in general are facing COVID-19?

POLITICAL TRUST

Across all governorates and all age groups, the level of trust in political figures and institutions in Baghdad was comparatively much lower than the trust placed in Kurdish authorities. Notably, the level of trust in the Iraqi President across all governorates was very low – 7% in Dohuk and Silemani, and 5% in Erbil – with 45.65% of all respondents affirming that they have no trust in him (Figure 7).

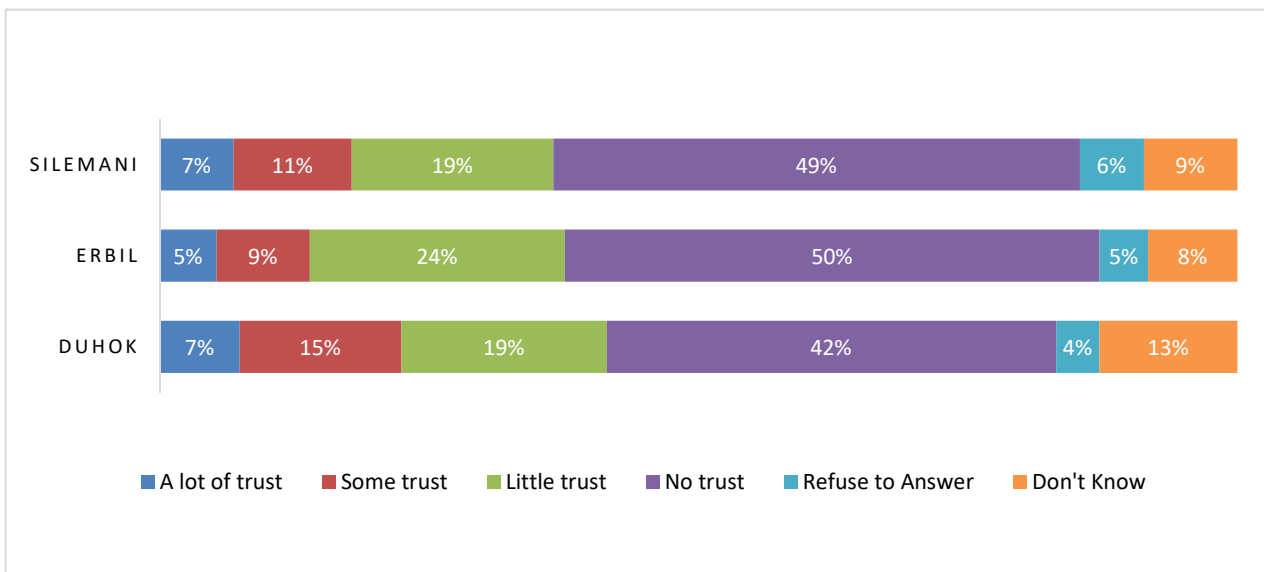


Figure 7: To what extent do you trust the Iraqi President's response to the epidemic?

These results are highly interesting as power-sharing agreements after 2005 in Iraq stipulated that the Iraqi President would be a Kurd, as a way to give representation to that share of the Iraqi population. In April 2005, despite the disproportional division of power among communal groups in Iraq in favor of the Shi'a and – to a lesser extent – the Kurds, an informal agreement was reached whereby the position of the President is now reserved for the Kurds, the premiership for the Shi'a, and the Speaker of the Parliament for the Sunnis.⁷ Historically, the President is from one of the most influential tribes in the KRI, associated with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (*Yekêtiy Nîştîmanîy Kurdistan*) (PUK), based in Silemani. Yet, even in its Kurdish stronghold, only 7% of respondents put a lot of trust in the Iraqi President, while 49% do not trust him at all (Figure 7).

⁷ For critical discussions on power-sharing arrangements in Iraq after 2005, see Alaaldin, R. (2018), 'Sectarianism, Governance, and Iraq's Future', *Brooking Doha Center Analysis Paper*, 24; Albadry, A. S. and Abdullah, M. K. B. (2014), 'Iraqi Parliamentary Institution: Power Sharing in Iraq Parliament', *European Law and Politics*, 1(1); Ltaif, E. A. (2015), 'The Limitation of the Consociational Arrangements in Iraq', *Ethnopolitics Papers*, 38 (September); Phillips, D. L. (2005), 'Power-Sharing in Iraq', *Council on Foreign Relations*, Council Special Reports No. 6.

Conversely, there was far less consensus among respondents when it comes to the KRI President across the three governorates. While 64% and 49% of respondents in Erbil and Duhok – the stronghold of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (*Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê*) (KDP) which the KRI President belongs to – put a lot of trust in him, only 4% of Silemani respondents put the same level of trust in their President. As much as 59% of respondents from Silemani did not put any trust in the KRI President, compared to only 4% and 8% in Erbil and Duhok respectively (Figure 8).

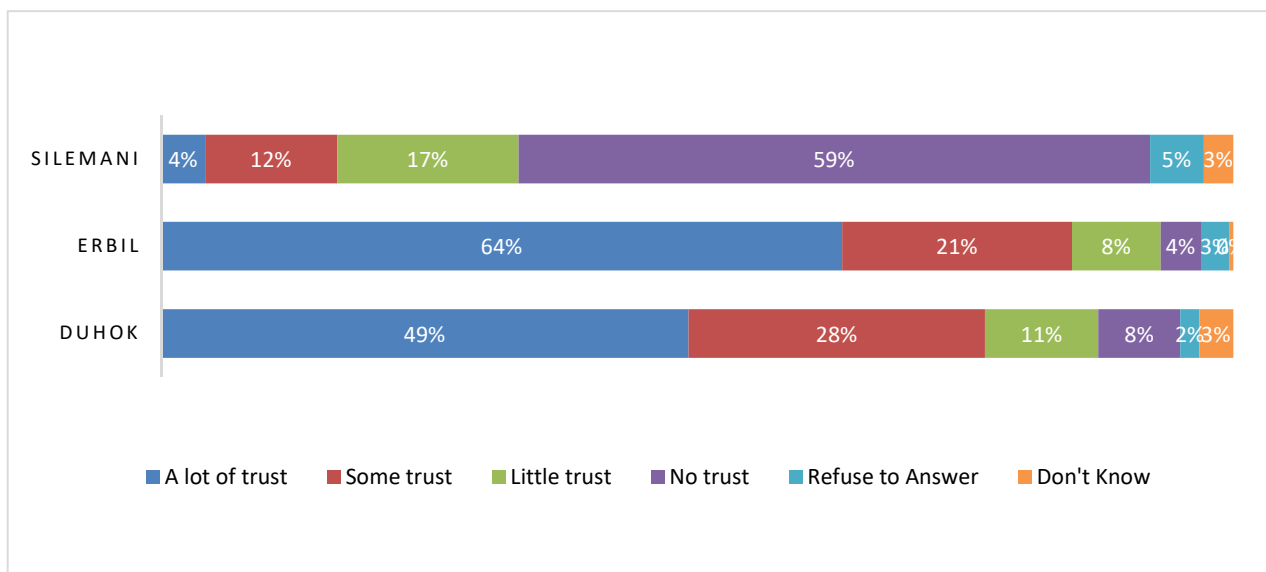


Figure 8: To what extent do you trust the KRI's President's response to the epidemic?

This geographical division in the level of trust in the KRI's President is representative of the competitive political culture in the KRI. The latter has been the theater of political confrontation between the two dominant political parties. On the one hand, the KDP is dominated by the Barzani tribe, currently led by former KRI President Masoud Barzani, and historically influential in Erbil and Dohuk. On the other, the PUK is linked to the Talabani tribe, which notably includes the former Iraqi President between 2005 and 2014 Jalal Talabani, and is dominant in Silemani.

While the KDP and the PUK de facto administered the KRI since the first Gulf War (1990-1991), the two parties engaged in a three-year conflict known as the Iraqi Kurdish Civil War (1994-1997).⁸ While the crisis was solved with the support of American mediation, the divide remained and is still reflected in the military, administration, and the geography of Kurdish communities in the KRI.

⁸ For more information about the conflict and its resolution, see Gunter, M. M. (1996), 'The KDP-PUK Conflict in Northern Iraq', *Middle East Journal*, 50(2): 224-41; Roberts, J. (1996), 'The Kurdish Crisis of 1996', *IBRU Boundary and Security Bulletin*, Autumn: 70-75.

For instance, the military forces of the KRI, the Peshmerga, are divided between two sources of power of legitimacy. The Peshmerga affiliated to Silemani retain partial independence from the KRI government and effectively a form of de facto autonomy dating from the Iraqi Kurdish Civil War. They receive orders from the PUK's military leaders rather than the Ministry of Peshmerga or the Presidency at the regional level. The division of the military command and loyalty of the Kurdish military forces was maybe best exemplified after the Kurdish referendum on the question of independence in September 2017. The Peshmerga had been in control of contested areas – areas whose sovereignty between the federal government and the KRI had not been decided in the 2005 constitution (and remain undecided) – since their military victory against the IS in 2014. In September 2017, the Iraqi military launched an offensive in those contested territories in retaliation for holding that referendum, especially in the oil-rich Kirkuk. Instead of fighting to retain military and political control over these territories, the Peshmerga units stationed in Kirkuk withdrew immediately, which was considered a treacherous action by many Kurdistanis. In the confusion surrounding the action, they blamed historical leader and independence fighter, then-President Masoud Barzani. Behind the scenes, the reality of the manoeuvre revealed, yet again, the internal rift in the KRI political landscape. The Peshmerga stationed in Kirkuk belonged to a Silemani Brigade⁹ and received the order to withdraw from the PUK, but not from the KDP nor the KRI government. The move was part of a broader strategy of rapprochement between the PUK and Baghdad, with the former seeking to gain more independence within the KRI. This not only threatened Kurdish cohesion and semi-independence, but also the federal system arrangements enshrined in the 2005 constitution.

Despite its failed bid for independence in September 2017, the KDP won the majority of seats in 2018's legislative elections, giving it the lead of the next regional government. The results aggravated mistrust amongst the people of Silemani, loyal to the PUK, who lacked a sense of political and community belonging to the KDP-led region. This continuing political and community divide would explain why Silemani respondents show the lowest amount of trust in the KRI's current President, Nechirvan Barzani, whom also happens to be Deputy President of KDP. In other words, the popular political base of the current KRI government is in Erbil and Duhok. Conversely, and despite the presence of Qubab Talabani (affiliated to the PUK) as Deputy Prime Minister, the people of Silemani may feel that politics is made at a distance, not just in Iraq but inside the KRI itself.

Going back to political trust in the KRI at a time of a public health crisis, the level of trust put in the Iraqi and KRI Prime Ministers was equally revealing of the Kurdistanis' defiance towards Baghdad. On the one hand, respondents seemed to have reached consensus across

⁹ The Peshmerga are divided into Unit 70 and Unit 80. Unit 70 is under the command of the PUK and is recognizable with its green berets. Unit 80, identified by red berets, is under the command of the KDP.

governorates when it came to trust in the Iraqi Prime Minister.¹⁰ The latter attracted less than 20% of trust while up to 44% of respondents in Silemani and Erbil reported not trusting him at all (Figure 9). On the other hand, there was a strong disagreement across respondents regarding trust in the KRI Prime Minister, Masrour Barzani. While the latter gathered a lot of trust in Erbil (70%) and Duhok (61%), only 6% of Silemani respondents agreed. Indeed, 56% of respondents from Silemani did not place any trust in their Prime Minister (Figure 10).

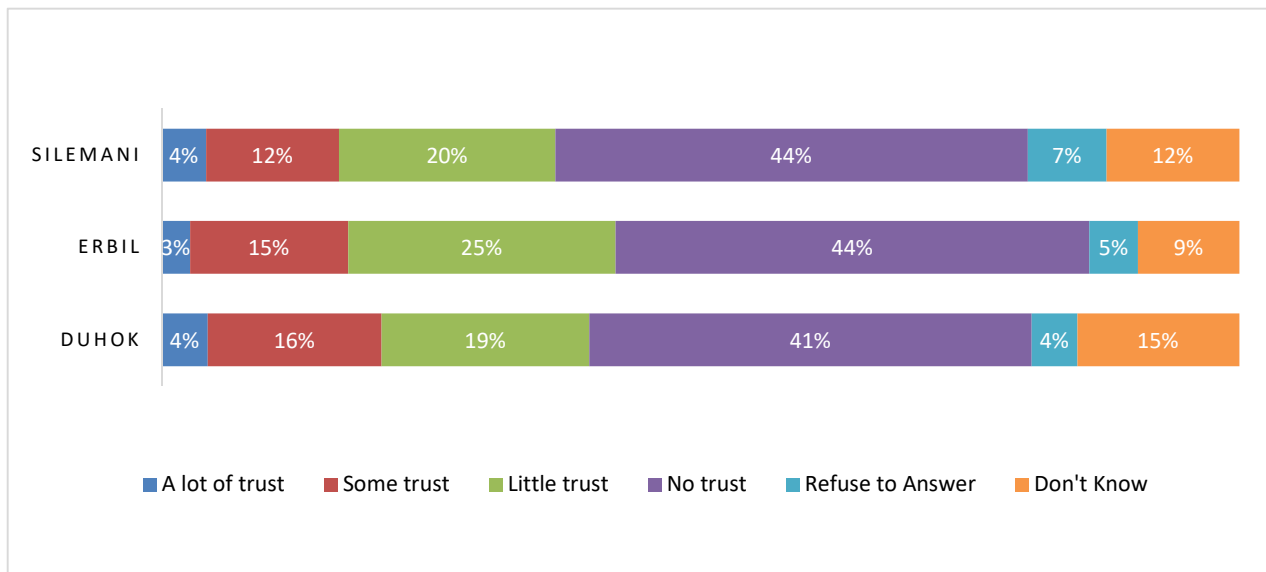


Figure 9: To what extent do you trust the Iraqi Prime Minister's response to the epidemic?

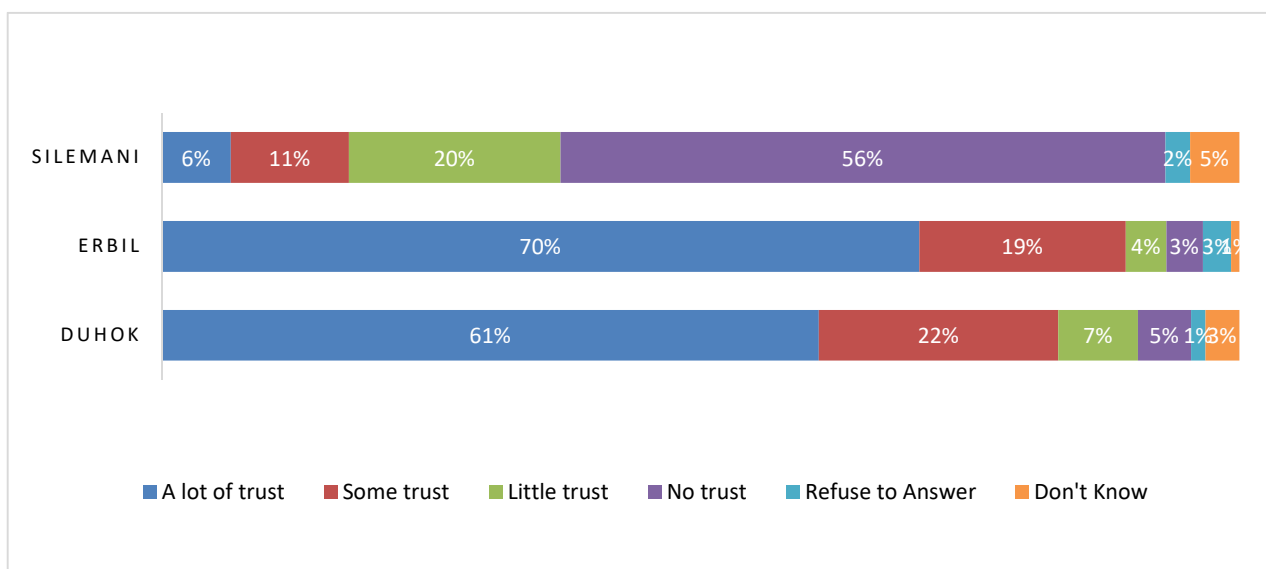


Figure 10: To what extent do you trust the KRI Prime Minister's response to the epidemic?

¹⁰ At the time this survey was conducted, Iraq did not have a Prime Minister. The institutional crisis followed the resignation of Adil Abdul Mahdi during the civil protests which started on 1 October 2019. After the withdrawal of two candidates in 10 weeks, it was the nomination of Prime Minister-designate Mustafa al-Kadhimi on 9 April 2020 that brought an end to the political deadlock.

As for the KRI Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Interior, security forces, and the police, the survey data is less geographically disparate. The average deviation between Silemani on the one hand and Erbil and Dohuk on the other was narrowed from 52.5% for the KRI President and 59.5% for the KRI Prime Minister, to 42.5% when it comes to the KRI Minister of Interior (Figure 11) and 40.5% for the regional Ministry of Health (Figure 12). The two Ministries are under the control of the KDP and thus attract significantly less trust from the respondents of Silemani compared to respondents from Erbil and Duhok.

These results suggest that Kurdistanis across the three governorates put more trust in policy than politics. In the context of COVID-19 epidemic, the survey suggests that Kurdistanis put more trust in the institutions which are responsible for mitigating the crisis, deciding on policies, and implementing those policies.

In Silemani, 15% of respondents put a lot of trust the Ministry of Interior, security forces, and the police; on average 10% more than trust in the KRI President and Prime Minister (Figure 11). The same is true for the KRI Minister of Health, with 14% of respondents in Silemani recording 'a lot' of trust, still much less than in Erbil (56%) and Dohuk (53%) (Figure 12). One explanation of this greater amount of trust in these institutions and figures compared to trust placed in the KRI President and Prime Minister is the visible presence of the Minister of Interior, KDP-affiliated Rebar Ahmed Khalid, both in the media and on the ground during the crisis. He chose to visit Silemani before any other city when it was first hit by the virus in March 2020, which may explain comparatively higher levels of trust from residents.

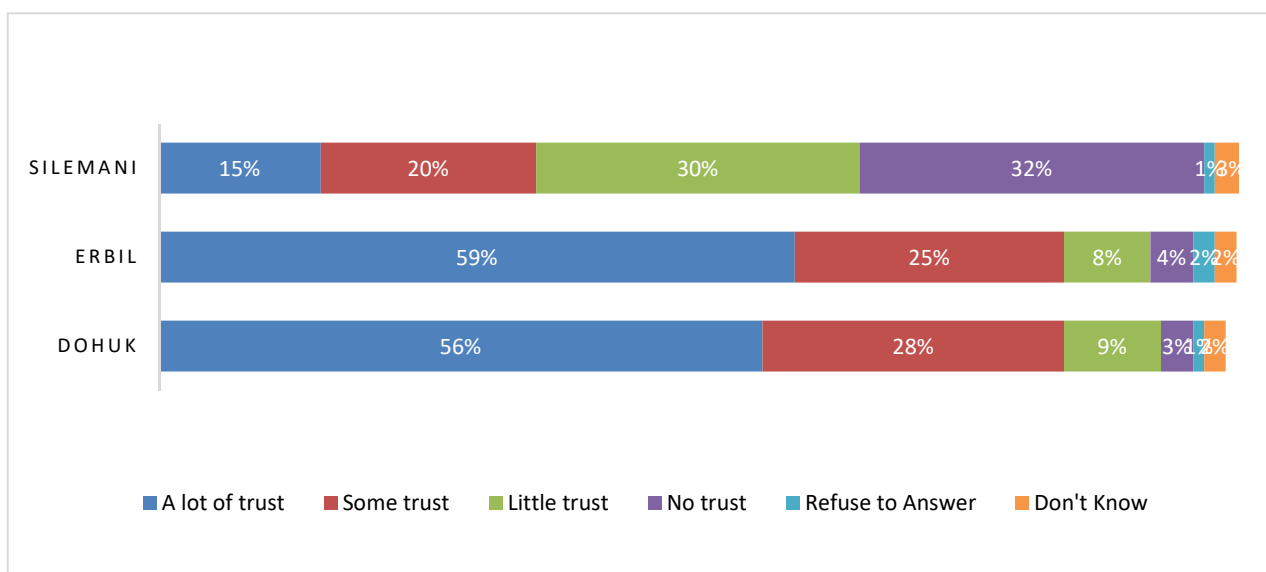


Figure 11: To what extent do you trust the KRI Ministry of Interior, security forces and the police's response to the epidemic?

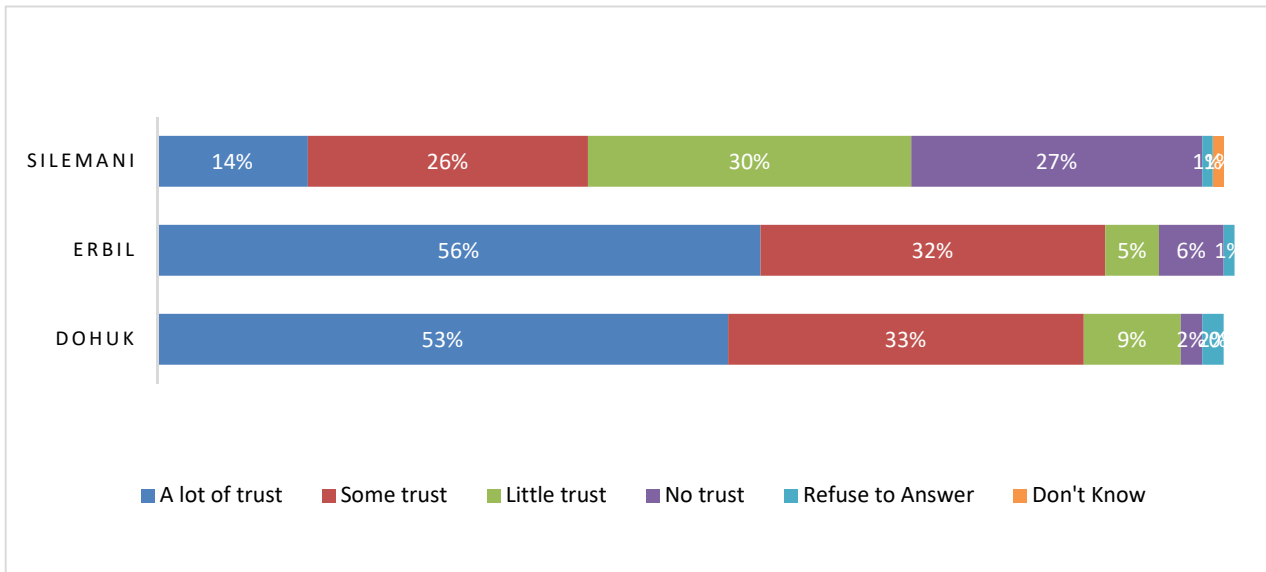


Figure 12: To what extent do you trust the KRI Ministry of Health’s response to the epidemic?

At the provincial level, the survey shows that respondents in Erbil and Dohuk put slightly less trust in the Directorate General of Health (81.5% compared to 87% of 'a lot' or 'some' trust for the Ministry of Health) while people from Silemani recorded their level of trust increasing (25.5% of 'a lot of' or 'some' trust, compared to 20% for the regional institution) (Figure 13).

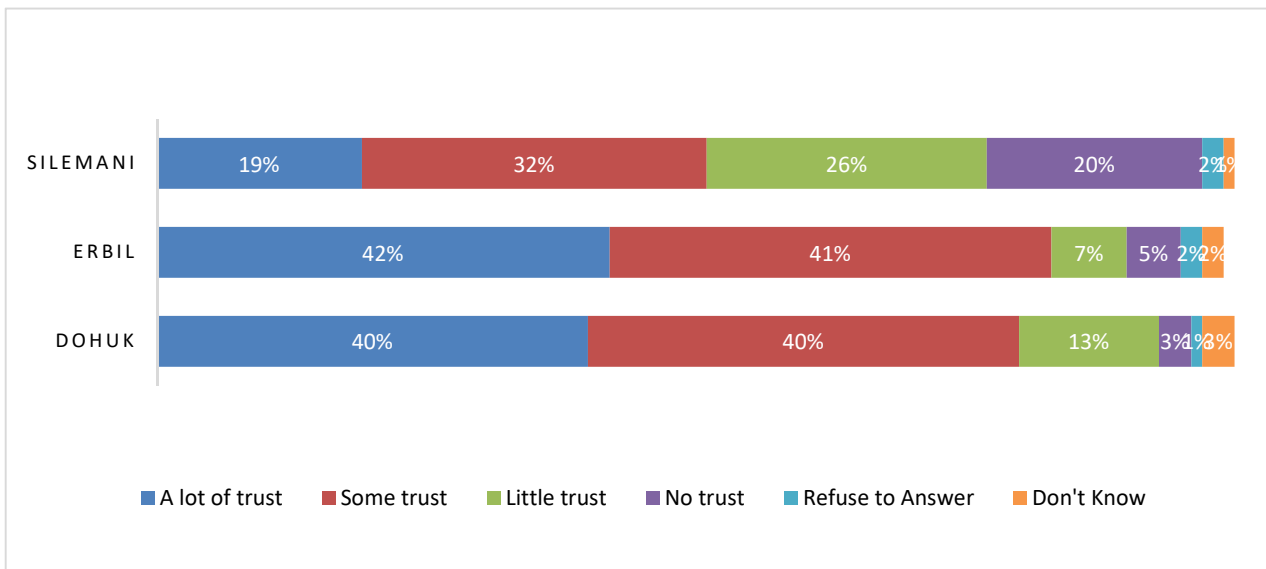


Figure 13: To what extent do you trust the Directorate General of Health at the governorate level’s response to the epidemic?

The parliament is the institution that respondents recorded the lowest levels of trust in by far, both in Iraq and in the KRI. All across the KRI, less than 2% of respondents put a lot of trust in the federal parliament, while almost 55% reported that they do not trust the Iraqi parliament at all (Figure 14).

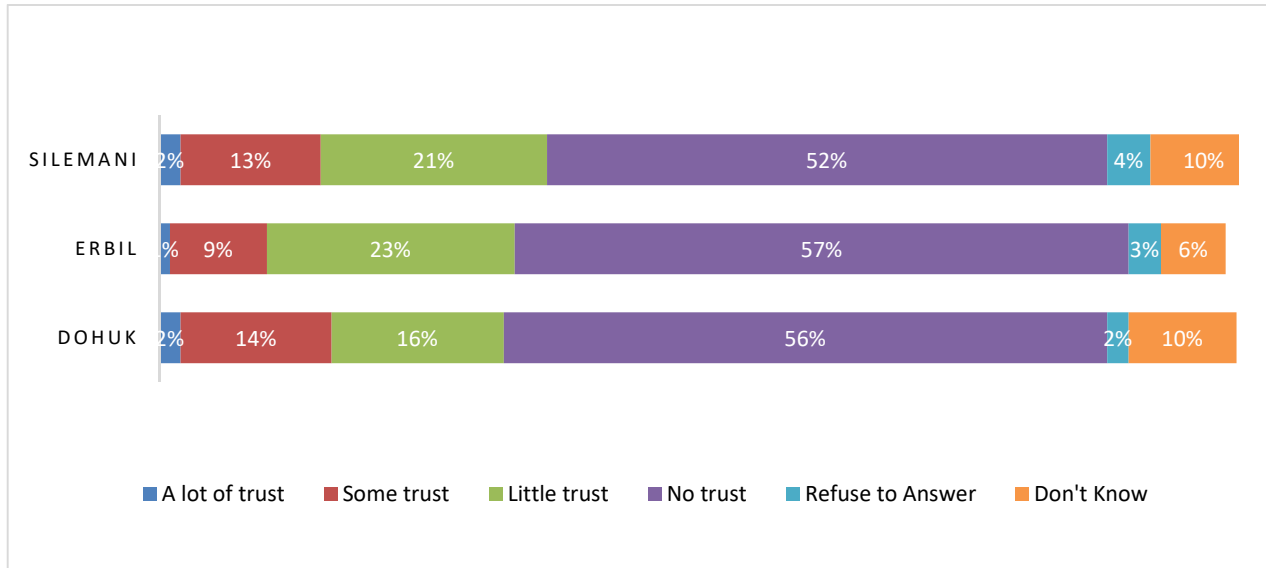


Figure 14: To what extent do you trust the federal Parliament?

Iraq leans towards a parliamentary system of government, and the task of legislating rests in the hands of the Council of Representatives. While consensual democracy is reflected in the composition of the Parliament, the latter is rarely a counterweight to the dominance of the Shi'a Prime Minister¹¹ and the position of President remains largely symbolic. This creates conditions for a majoritarian democracy. As a result, the Kurds who sit in the Iraq parliament are considered by many Kurdistanis to be in a weaker position to guarantee Kurdish rights. Generally speaking, the deferral government is not concerned with matters of the KRI and its population – except for the general budget – and the federal government itself is absent of the KRI which is de facto governed by the KRG.

¹¹ One instance occurred in 2014 when then-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki was vetoed by Sunni MPs. A new coalition government was formed in an attempt to include more Sunnis in the context of IS' military campaign in Iraq. The veto resulted from al-Maliki's renouncement to his commitment to the 2010 Erbil agreement, which outlined the distribution of ministers among Iraqi parties and communities. In 2011, al-Maliki embarked on more sectarian policies, which further alienated the Sunni community. Notably, the Prime Minister rejected the constitutional right of the Salahuddin and Diyala governorates to declare themselves as regions and break from the policy of exclusion and marginalization pursued by al-Maliki's government. For additional information, see Dougherty, B. K. and Ghareeb, E. (2013), *Historical Dictionary of Iraq*, Vol. II. Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, pp. 88-90; Kane, S., Hiltermann, J. R. and Alkadiri, R. (2012), 'Iraq's Federalism Quandary', *The National Interest*, February 28; Osman, K. F. (2015), *Sectarianism in Iraq: The Making of State and Nation Since 1920*. London: Routledge, p. 243-51.

While the explanations for the reported lack of trust in the Iraqi parliament seem straightforward, what about the strong lack of trust of Kurdistanis respondents in the KRI parliament? Answers to the survey show that the parliament attracted only 41% and 36% of trust ('a lot' and 'some') in Erbil and Dohuk respectively (Table 15). In Silemani, the defiance reaches its paroxysm: only 1% of respondents put 'a lot of' trust, and 7% 'some' trust in the KRI Parliament. Conversely, almost 80% of Kurdistanis from Silemani affirm not trusting the institution at all.

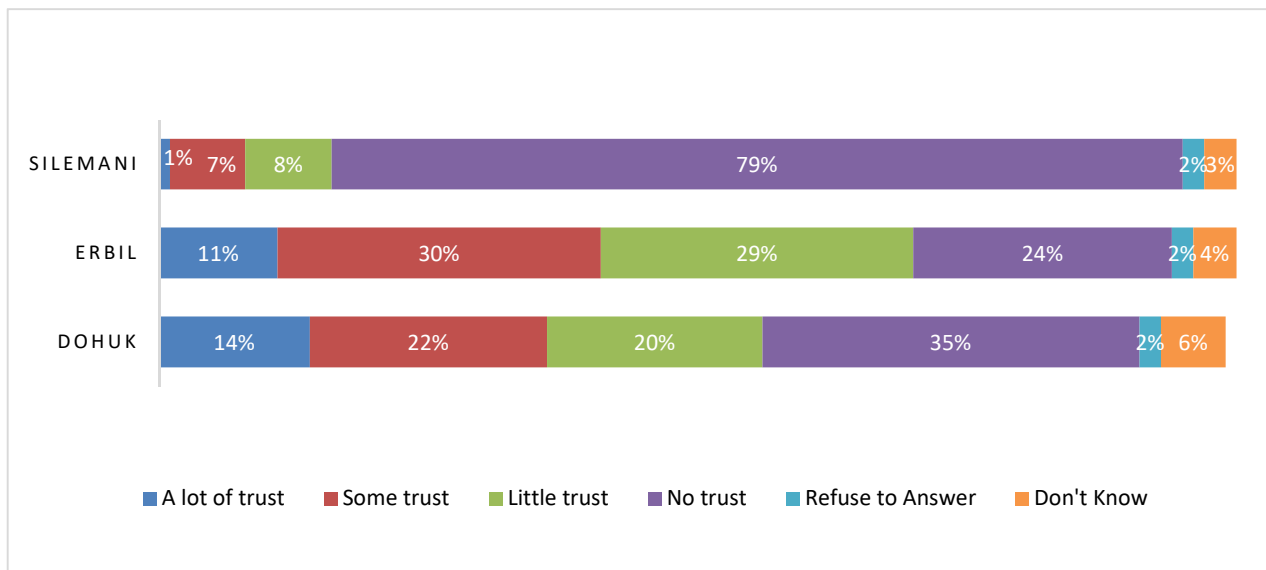


Figure 15: To what extent do you trust the Parliament of the KRI?

In contrast to Iraq, the political system in the KRI is semi-presidential and most of the power lies in the hands of the executive power, the government. In the KRI, politicians are allowed to have a dual mandate – that of a Member of Parliament, with that of Minister. In the modern political history of the region, no Minister ever chose to do so, because this double hat would not offer her or him more power than (only) being a member of the government. Similarly, only a handful of Ministers have gained experience in the Parliament before obtaining a higher position. In other words, the position of Member of Parliament in the KRI is not valued.

Another explanation for the lack of trust in the KRI parliament might be found in the relatively new political culture and political system in the semi-autonomous region. Before 2013, Kurdistanis voted for a closed-party list rather than for a candidate. The system of open list candidates is thus relatively new, and voters have higher expectations of individuals than political parties. Such expectations are often related to practical and daily matters rather than legislative demands. Thus, there is a gap between what is expected from members of parliament and their core legislating function. This common perception of Kurdistanis – that

any high-level official must be able to solve a wide range of matters – is inherited from the former Ba'ath regime in Iraq, and from post-1991 KRI governments.¹²

In the absence of strong governments and institutions in the KRI, influential officials or *Mas'oul* (the one who is responsible) would use their power to help their fellows. They would intervene in daily matters and were the main point of contact for those who have demands and complaints. Today, many Kurdistanis assume that Members of Parliament are in a position of being *Mas'oul* and, therefore, to help their constituencies and constituents reach better living standards. As such, the general public in the KRI, and more generally in Iraq, has a specific understanding of the role and function of a Member of Parliament. As a result, they are easily disappointed in their representatives and a sense of mistrust grows. Their dissatisfaction in the executive power and the government is mirrored in a mistrust in the Parliament whose role is to legislate and monitor the performance of that government. This trend is reinforced by the fact that parliamentary candidates use demagoguery and make popular promises to attract votes.

Additionally, politics in the KRI and Iraq is closely related to nepotism, patronage, and tribal affiliations. In fact, the advent of a parliamentary and institutionalized system in Iraq in 2005 did not fully replace the old system based on affiliations and loyalties. Today still, tribes choose their parliamentary candidate whose constituency includes none other than members of the same tribe. As such, modern politics provides another platform for tribal competition over representation and influence. Political competition in the modern KRI is less of a substantive urban and civil activity, than a tribal arrangement. Hence, while the system has changed, popular perceptions have not yet evolved and adapted in line with this. It might also be the case that tribes pre-existed political institutions and are still considered more legitimate or more efficient in solving family matters, than regional and local institutions. Like in other countries in the Middle East, such as Jordan or GCC members, mass mobilization is based on identity more than ideology. This system of tribal or familial affiliations is the very essence of the KRI, whose foundations are two main families who control the political and business landscape of the semi-autonomous region. This is in spite of the fact that the PUK, since its establishment by Jalal Talabani, was driven by a strong anti-tribal sentiment and was effectively set up as an intellectual movement to counter tribalism and run the KRI according to ideology – as opposed to identity. Yet, still today, the PUK remains dominated by the Talabani family. To conclude, in contemporary KRI, Kurdistanis still largely vote for a tribal-affiliated individual rather than a political party or a set of policies.

¹² In March 1991, while the south of Iraq was witnessing uprisings led by the Shi'a population, the KDP and the PUK organized a rebellion in the Kurdish populated northern areas. The rebellion was put down severely by Saddam Hussein's military forces in a series of offensives and now infamous chemical attacks. In spite of the humanitarian disasters that ensued, the Kurdish leadership established the KRG and created the Kurdish Autonomous Republic in three governorates of northern Iraq. They were supported by the US, the UK, and France, which established no-fly zones to protect Kurdistanis populations from the military assaults of the Iraqi regime.

SOCIAL COHESION

Across the three governorates included in the survey, 76% of respondents believed that the COVID-19 pandemic fostered social cohesion at some level, while only 9% thought that it did not foster it at all (Figure 16).

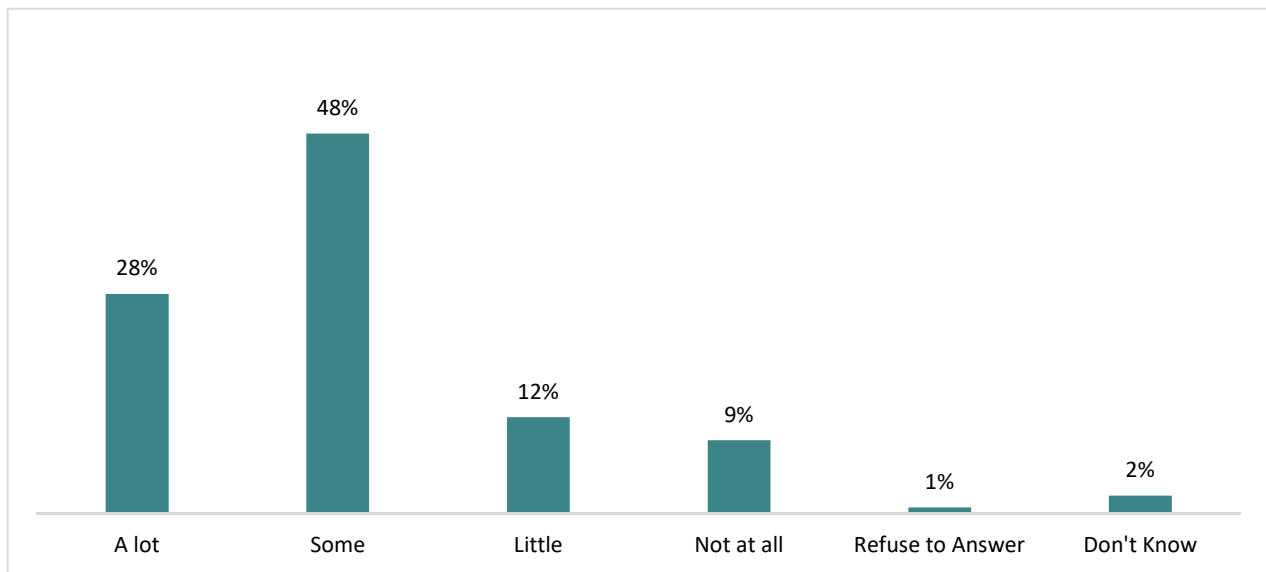


Figure 16: Did the COVID-19 situation foster social cohesion?

Interestingly, while they could select multiple answers, 43% of respondents felt that all Kurdistanis, including vulnerable and non-vulnerable groups, should be treated equally and should receive the same amount of government support during the pandemic. Yet, a significant number of respondents recognized the importance of caring for those most vulnerable to the virus and its effects, such as the elderly (24%), Syrian refugees (15%), and IDPs (15%) (Figure 17).¹³ An important dimension of this public health crisis is that whole populations are affected, which might explain why many respondents believed that all Kurdistanis should receive support. Indeed, all Kurdistanis are at risk of contracting the virus to some extent, even though one cannot negate the fact that vulnerable groups are more likely to face poorer health outcomes should they become infected.

¹³ According to official figures of the KRG, as of February 2020, there were more than one million refugees and IDPs in the KRI, coming from Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Iran, and Palestine. For more information see: KRI Ministry of Interior, Joint Crisis Coordination Center (2020), *Humanitarian Situation Report (SitRep) No. (2-20) for February 2020*, [http://jcc.gov.krd/contents/files/25-02-2020/1582612800.Humanitarian%20Situational%20Report%20\(2-20\)%20for%20February%20%20Kurdistan%20Region%20of%20Iraq.pdf](http://jcc.gov.krd/contents/files/25-02-2020/1582612800.Humanitarian%20Situational%20Report%20(2-20)%20for%20February%20%20Kurdistan%20Region%20of%20Iraq.pdf).

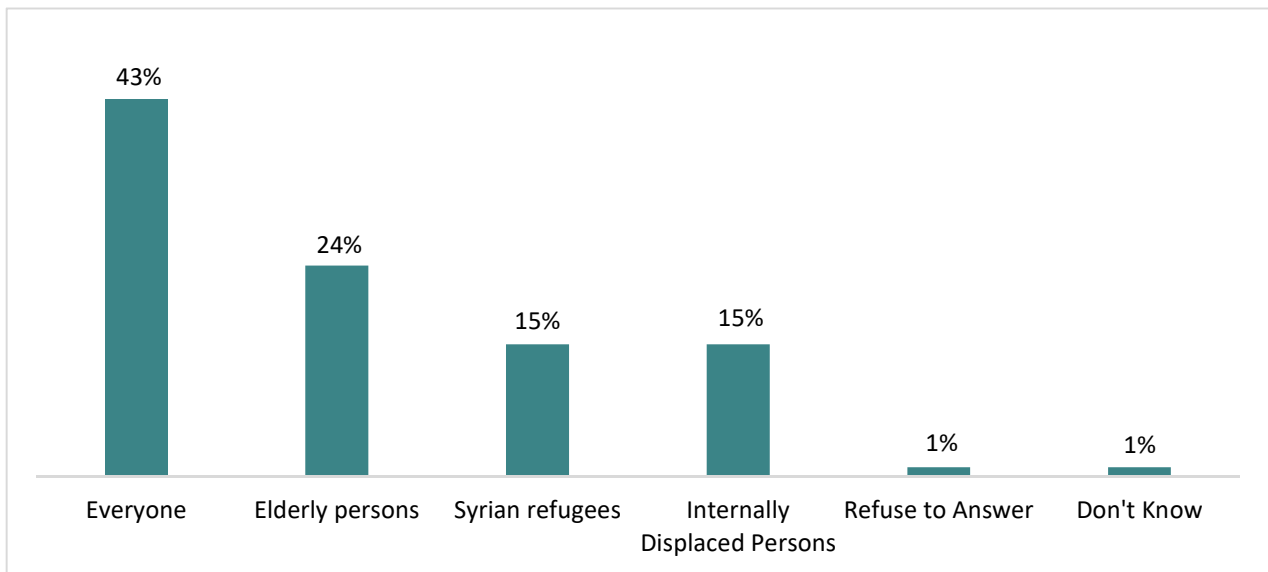


Figure 17: Who should receive support to face the COVID-19 situation?

Around 56% of respondents believed that the state at the federal and regional level should provide support to vulnerable groups, with the KRG (30%) being held responsible slightly more than the Iraqi federal government (26%). While one could have expected humanitarian organizations to be given a role in the response to the epidemic, only 16.88% of respondents reported that they relied on humanitarian actors (Figure 18).

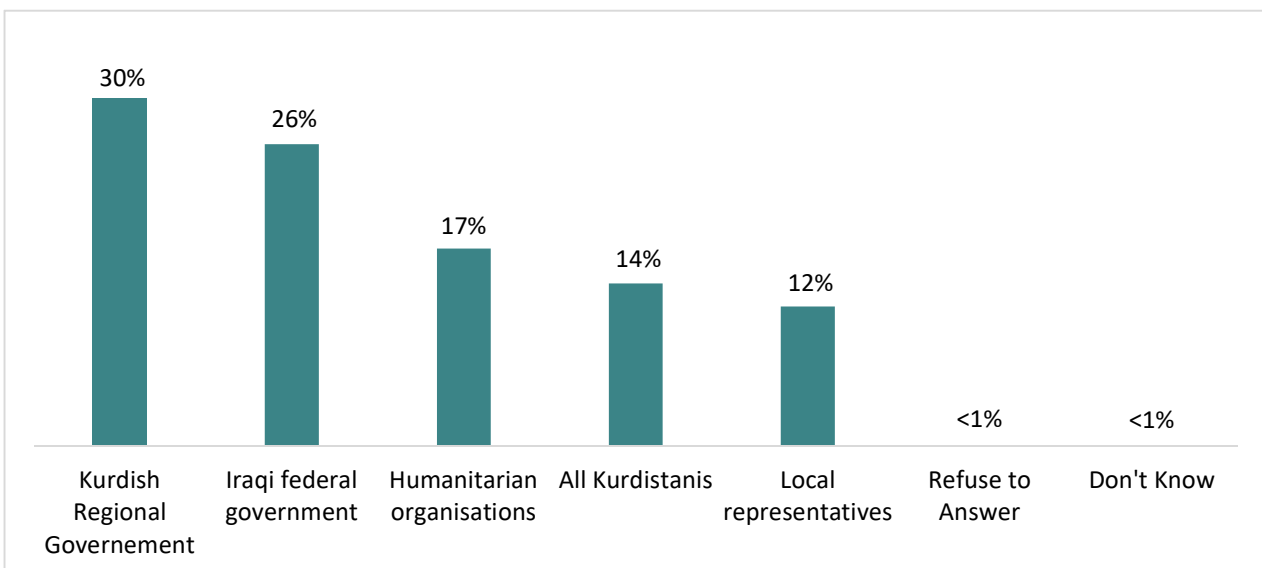


Figure 18: Who should provide support to vulnerable groups?

This accountability of the state might be inherited from the socialist past of Iraq under Saddam Hussein's regime, which reinforced the patriarchal role of the state. For decades under the regime, the Iraqi state provided all services. Socialism was also fostered at the regional level in the Middle East and North Africa as several (mostly oil-rich) countries established a rentier system, including in the Gulf monarchies, Egypt, and Algeria. In these rentier states, citizens do not pay tax but expect to benefit from revenues from natural resources. This takes the form of service delivery and protection from crises.

Yet, in the context of COVID-19, this argument can be countered. The pandemic is not a social crisis that resulted from the lack of service provision or the lack of state structures. Even in most capitalist countries, people look to the state to mitigate crises. In face of the wide-ranging impact of COVID-19, only states and international organizations have the financial and material tools and the power to protect individuals, including by applying policy restrictions, financing medical research, providing medical equipment such as ventilators, and so on. The COVID-19 crisis cannot be mitigated by the private sector or by tribal circles or any other forms of legitimacy or affiliations. If anything, the current pandemic highlights the power and the necessity of the state.

Even more so, people around the world have looked for a global response that goes beyond the nation state. Although the pandemic may have fostered social cohesion and nationalism, it has also nurtured transnational and global cooperation. While globalization caused the spread of the virus, it is arguably a key solution to it too. Wherever a COVID-19 vaccine is developed, it will likely be due to collaborative efforts¹⁴ and there is a growing, global consensus that it will be made available to all without distinction of nationality, race, or religion.¹⁵ In April 2020, all members of the UN General Assembly passed a resolution calling for 'equitable, efficient and timely' access to any future vaccines developed to fight coronavirus. In this sense, it could seem that the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to reinforce social and political peace around the world, even though the lull might be brief.

In the KRI, the great majority of respondents do not rely on the state's institutions to mitigate the health crisis, but on local representatives and social circles (Figure 19). While respondents put a high level of trust in KRI institutions, especially in Erbil and Dohuk, conversely, they do not rely on the same structures to face and mitigate the threat of COVID-19. In fact, it seems that the KRG is the actor respondents rely on the least in this respect.

¹⁴ Apuzzo, M. and Kirkpatrick, D. D. (2020), 'Covid-19 Changed How the World Does Science, Together', *The New York Times*, April 14, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/01/world/europe/coronavirus-science-research-cooperation.html>.

¹⁵ Collaborative efforts to fight the virus have been undermined by a series of discourses and policies coming mainly from across the Atlantic. On 29 May 2020, President Donald Trump announced the withdrawal of the US membership and funding from the World Health Organization (WHO). The decision sanctioned the alleged complicity between the WHO and China, which Trump accused of being responsible for the spread of the virus in a series of tweets and public addresses.

Instead, Kurdistanis prefer structures that are more familiar and geographically closer than central institutions at the regional and federal level. To conclude, in the KRI, at a time of crisis such as this, Kurdistanis seem to rely more on social cohesion than political trust.

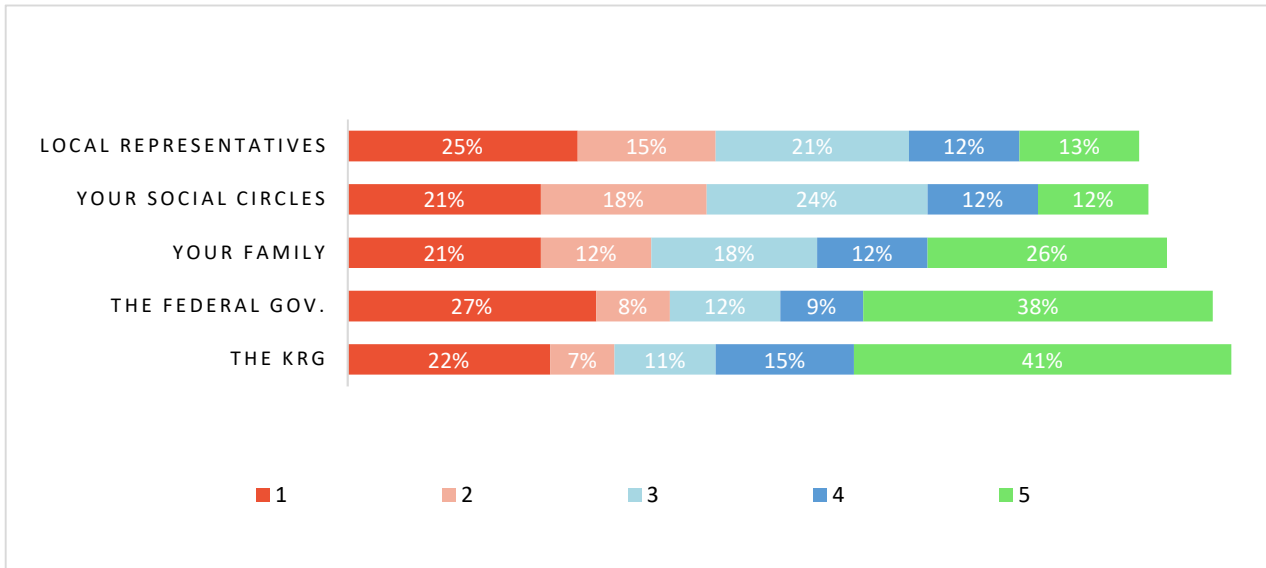


Figure 19: On whom do you rely the most to mitigate the impact of the epidemic (from 1 to 5 where 5 is the highest)?

GOVERNMENT SATISFACTION

The great majority of respondents across the KRI governorates believed that movement restrictions imposed by the KRG were adequate (Figure 20). Interestingly, while the virus first hit and spread in Silemani, 17% of the respondents from the city believed that the curfew and lockdown measures were not necessary. This opinion was shared by only 4% of respondents in Erbil and 3% in Dohuk, Dohuk being the least impacted governorate across the KRI. While the survey was conducted in the middle of a strict lockdown, which greatly impacted the lives of all Kurdistanis, up to 34% of respondents argued that more restrictions were needed to better face the pandemic in Erbil. They were 32% in Dohuk and 24% in Silemani.

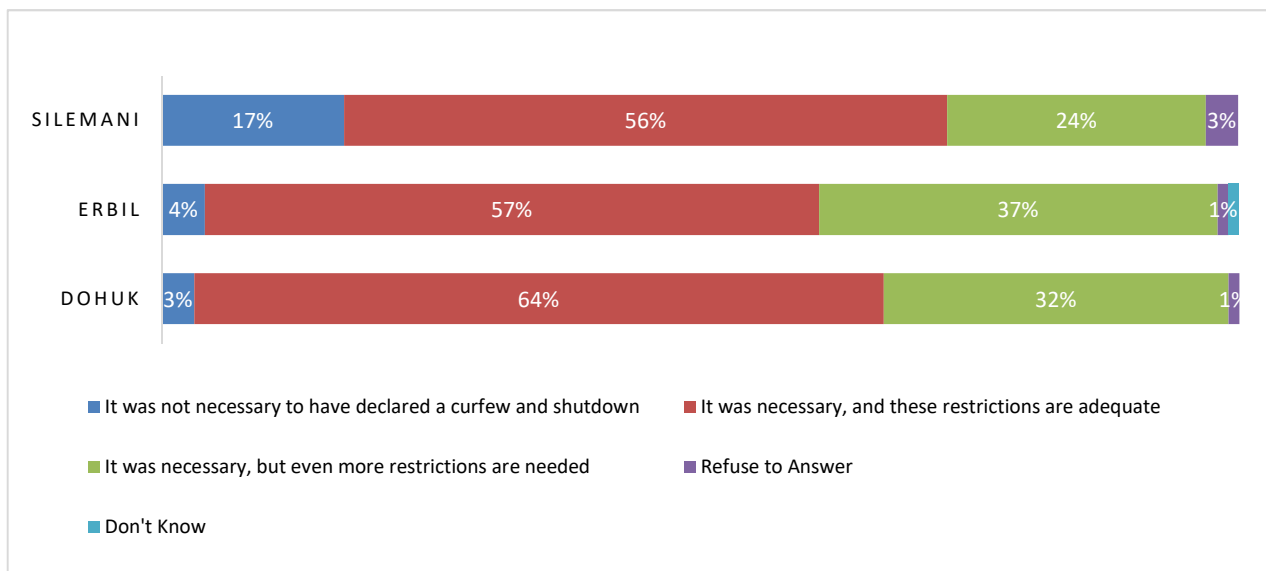


Figure 20: Regarding the declaration of a curfew and shutdown, which of the following phrases is closest to your opinion?

At the level of the KRI, almost 90% of respondents supported – either strongly (53%) or relatively (37%) – the government’s restrictions imposed on all Kurdistanis in an attempt to slow the spread of the virus (Figure 21). These results show a high level of government satisfaction and support for the KRG.

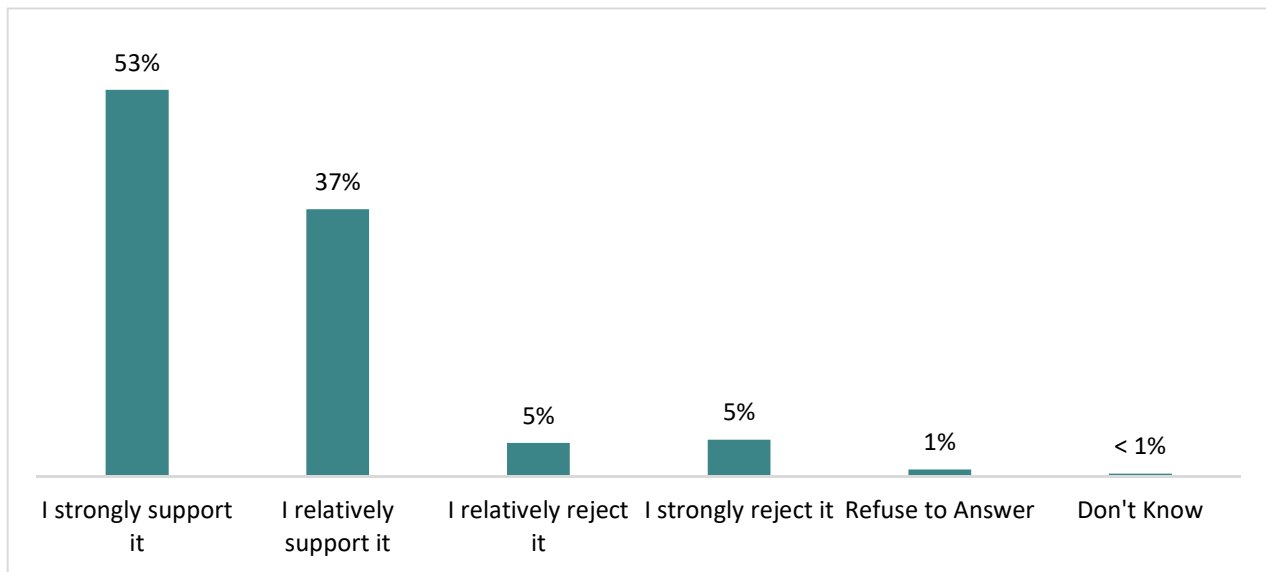


Figure 21: What is your opinion about the KRI government’s restrictions on movement?

Moreover, all respondents realized the importance of taking daily precautions and following prevention measures to mitigate the crisis. Their answers to the survey show that Kurdistanis understood their personal responsibilities and contributed to the social effort in the face of COVID-19. This demonstrates a certain understanding of the seriousness of the situation, and the necessity to back governmental measures with individual measures. Across the three governorates in the KRI, between 63% and 83% of respondents followed all the measures they were asked about (Figure 22). The respect of these measures was undoubtedly enforced by the strict confinement put in place in the KRI. The measure least well applied was the social distancing recommendation to leave two metres between two individuals.

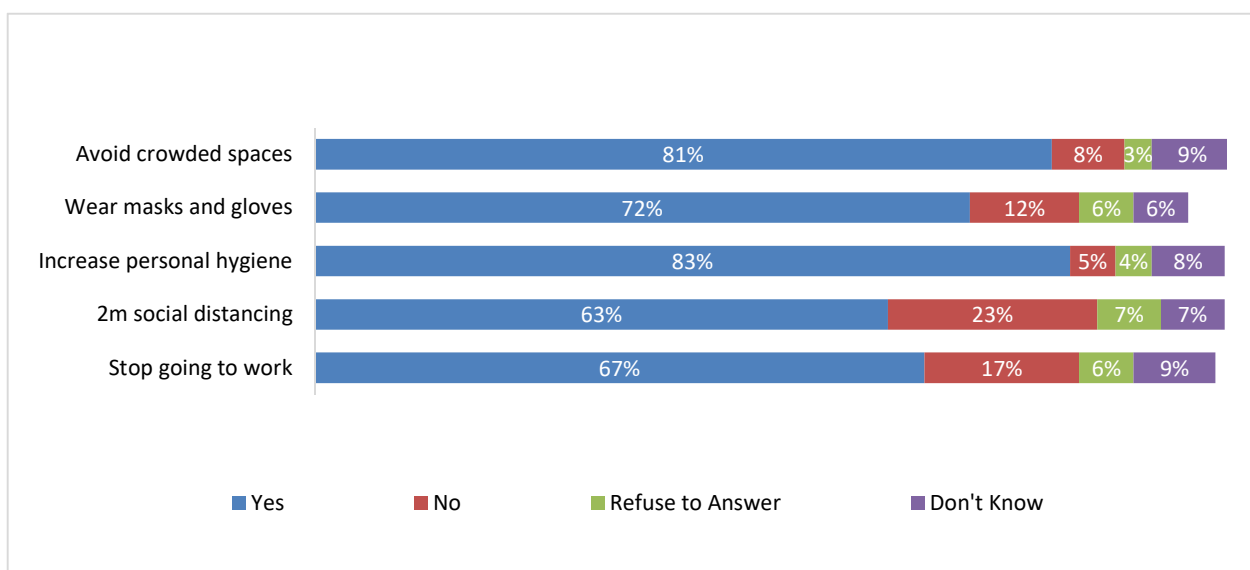


Figure 22: From the following set of behaviours that people can adopt, did you adopt...?

Generally speaking, respondents did not have a strong opinion about their capacity to adapt to the restrictions imposed following the outbreak of the pandemic in the KRI. An almost equal number of respondents found it either relatively easy (37%) or difficult (36%) to adapt (Figure 23). A slightly higher number seem to have found it very easy to adjust (15%) compared to the 11% who struggled to alter their lives. These results might be explained by how restrictions imposed by the KRG were found to be adequate and supported by Kurdistanis (see Figure 20 and 21).

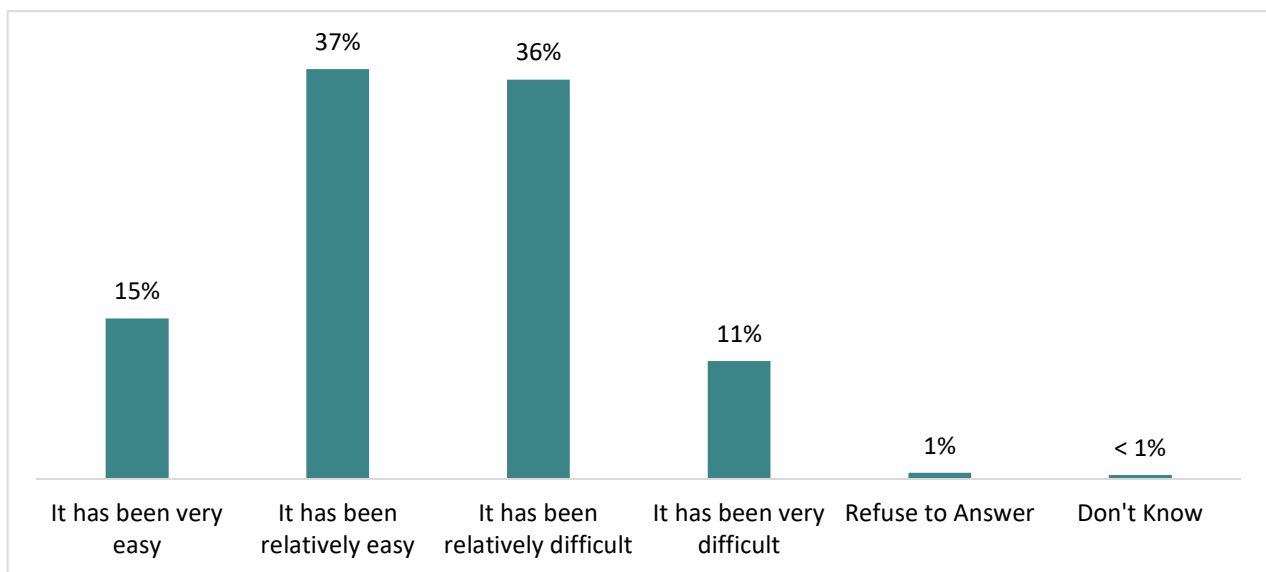


Figure 23: Generally speaking, how easy or difficult has it been for you to deal with restrictions related to COVID-19 pandemic?

FINANCIAL IMPACT OF COVID-19

Before the crisis began, 76% of all respondents across governorates and ages were satisfied with their income (Figure 24). The geographical disaggregation of the results shows more disparity, especially between Silemani and Erbil. The percentage of financial satisfaction in the capital was 13% higher than in Silemani (Figure 25).

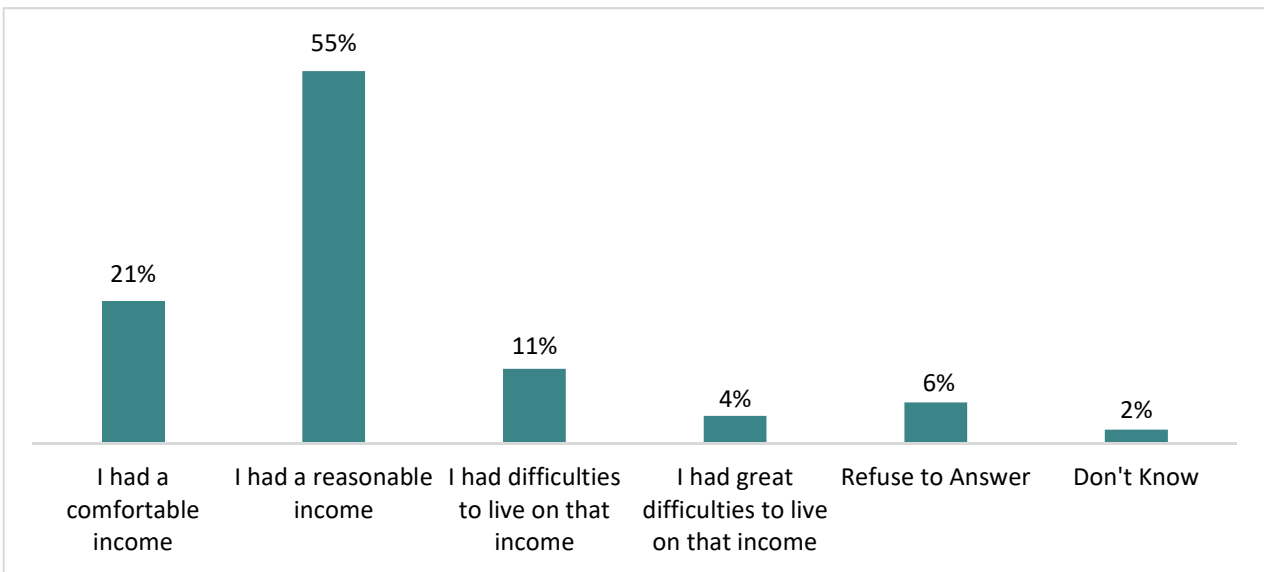


Figure 24: How would you qualify your income before the eruption of the COVID-19 epidemic?

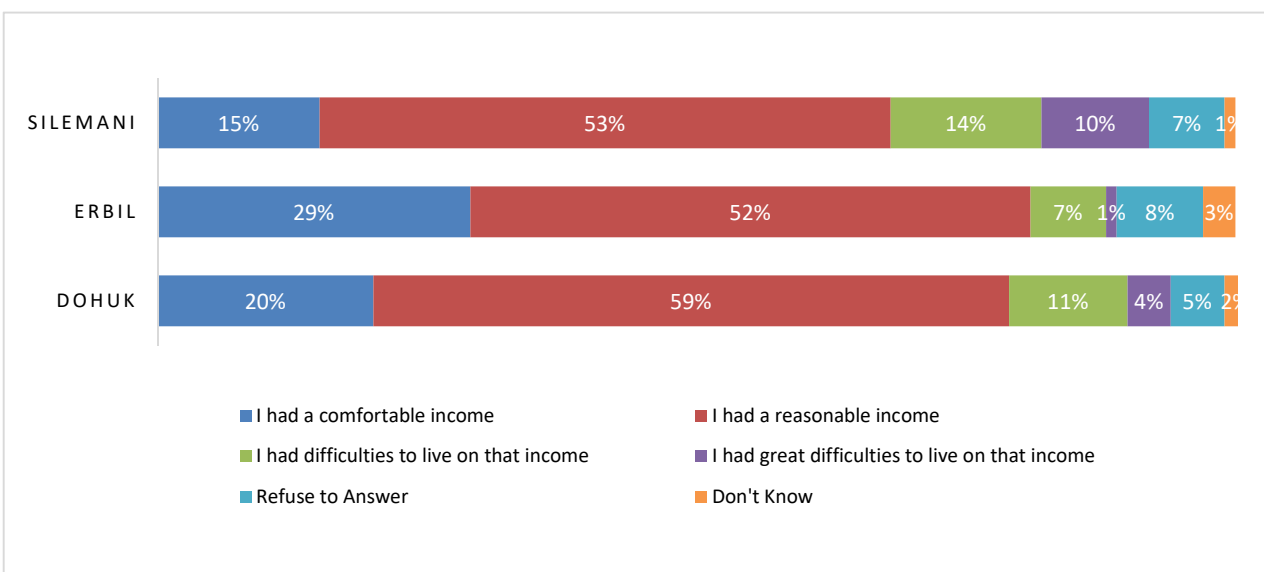


Figure 25: How would you qualify your income before the eruption of the COVID-19 epidemic? (by governorate)

The respondents mostly satisfied with their income were aged between 45 and 64, with the oldest respondents (over 64 years old) largely polarized between having either a satisfactory income or financial difficulties to sustain their living (Figure 26).

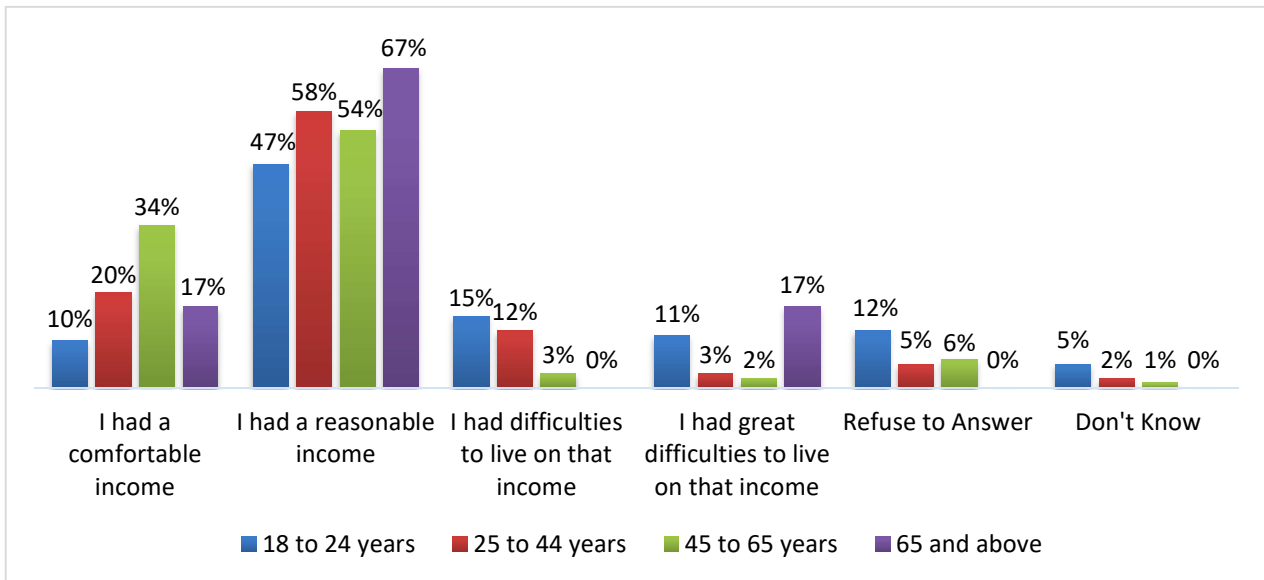


Figure 26: How would you qualify your income before the eruption of COVID-19 epidemic? (by age)

When disaggregated by level of education, Kurdistanis who struggled the most with their income were those with a lower level of education, especially those whom either had primary school level or no education. There was less disparity among the respondents satisfied with their income, yet those with a high level of education (a Master’s degree or a PhD) recorded being in a more stable financial position than their less-educated counterparts (Figure 27).

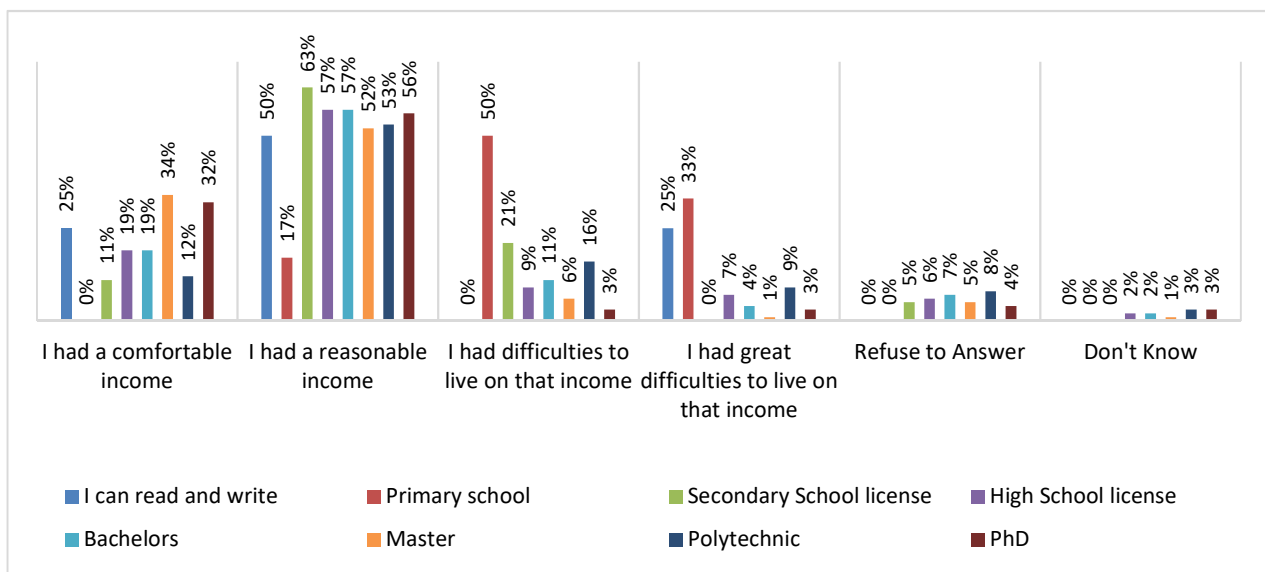


Figure 27: How would you qualify your income before the eruption of COVID-19 epidemic? (by level of education)

As of May 2020, respondents were almost equally divided between those whose financial situation had been affected (51%) and those whose situation has not been affected yet (45%) (Figure 28). The random sampling used for this survey means that respondents plausibly reflected KRI society more widely and were thus divided between Kurdistanis employed by the state, entrepreneurs who own a business, and those employed by private companies. Respondents who were employed by the state or private companies before the crisis kept receiving part of all their salaries. Thus, even though they could not work for several weeks, they were not financially affected by the impact of the pandemic. As for the 51% who were financially impacted during the pandemic, they were most likely owners of small businesses which had to close and did not generate any income. While these respondents were satisfied with their salaries before the start of the pandemic, their financial situation was the most strongly impacted by the measures imposed by the KRI, such as the lockdown. Those Kurdistanis did not receive any support from the state. In fact, many shops and activities reopened before the official lifting of the lockdown in the KRI. After several weeks of strict confinement, owners of small businesses claimed that they were forced to reopen for financial reasons.

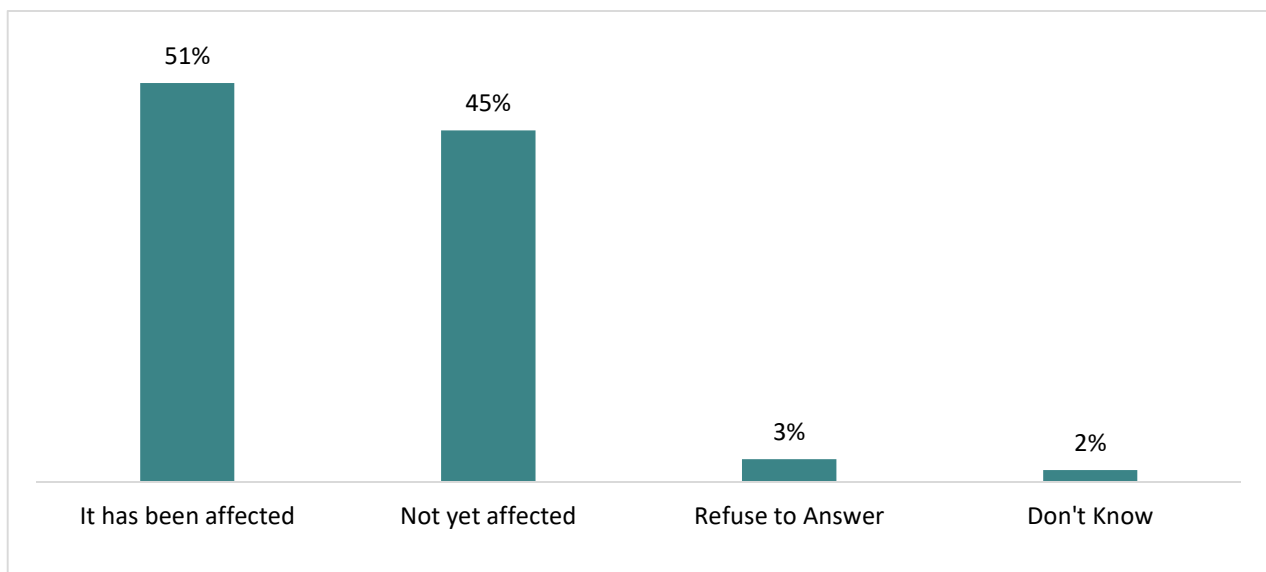


Figure 28: At this point (mid-April 2020), has the financial situation of your household been affected by the restrictions related to COVID-19 epidemic?

While about half of respondents did not feel the financial impact of the crisis at the time when the survey was conducted, about 66% anticipated a change in their future financial situation. More than 43% of Kurdistanis expected that they would have to reduce their expenses, while 22.66% feared they would not be able to pay their basic expenses if the confinement were to last another month (Figure 29).

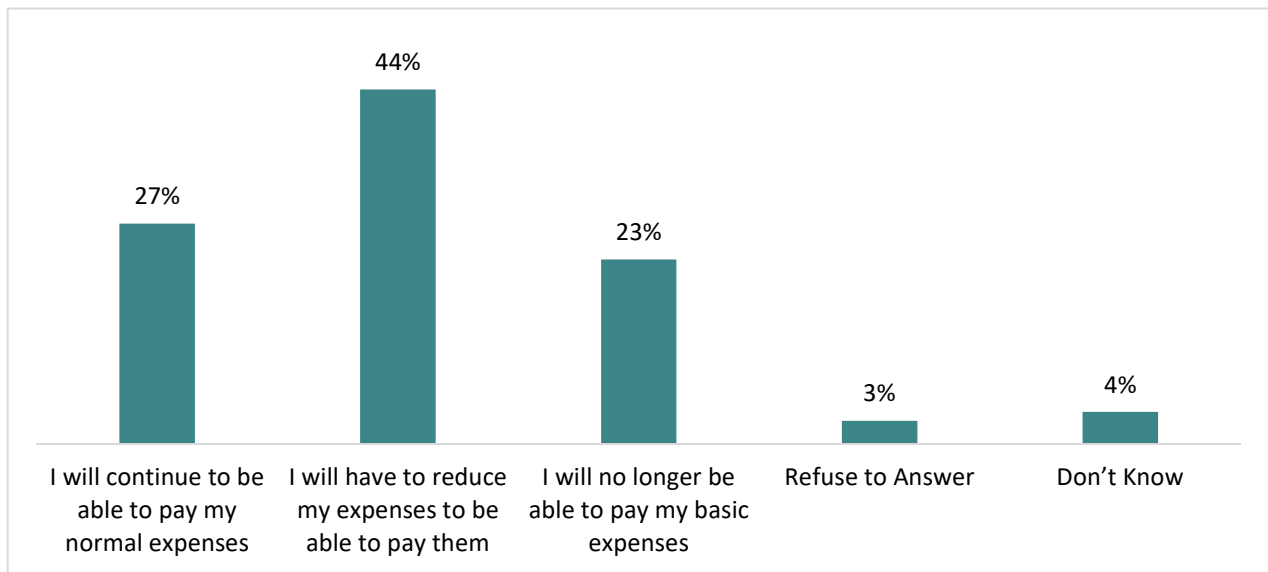


Figure 29: What do you think could happen to your household's financial situation if the current restrictions last another month?

Disaggregated data shows that Silemani might be the geographical centre of such worries, with 39% of its inhabitants who answered the survey reporting they were anxious about their future ability to pay their expenses after the crisis, as opposed to less than 20% in both Erbil and Duhok (Figure 30).

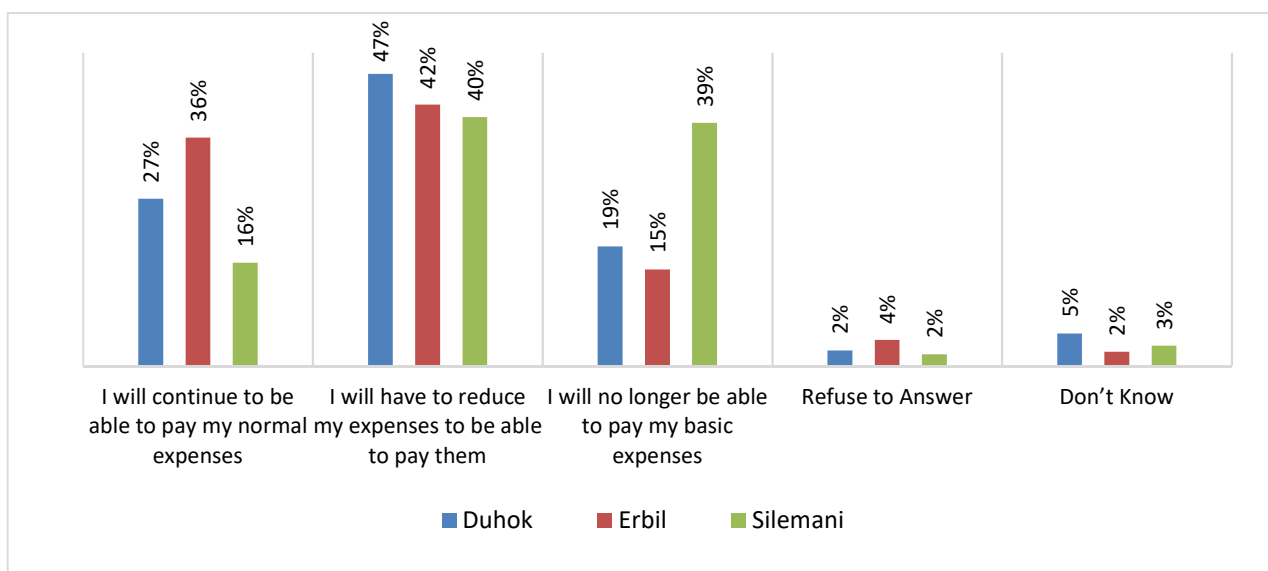


Figure 30: What do you think could happen to your household's financial situation if the current restrictions last another month? (by governorate)

Youngest respondents (between 18 and 44) were the most vulnerable financially: 31% answered that they would not be able to pay their basic expenses should the pandemic last for an additional month (Figure 31). Participants aged over 45, who had the most stable financial situation before the emergence of COVID-19, showed much more financial resilience in their responses. The lack of confidence in the future, combined with the lack of job opportunities in the KRI and the expected impact of the pandemic on the economy, might be a cause of great discontent among the youth in the near future.

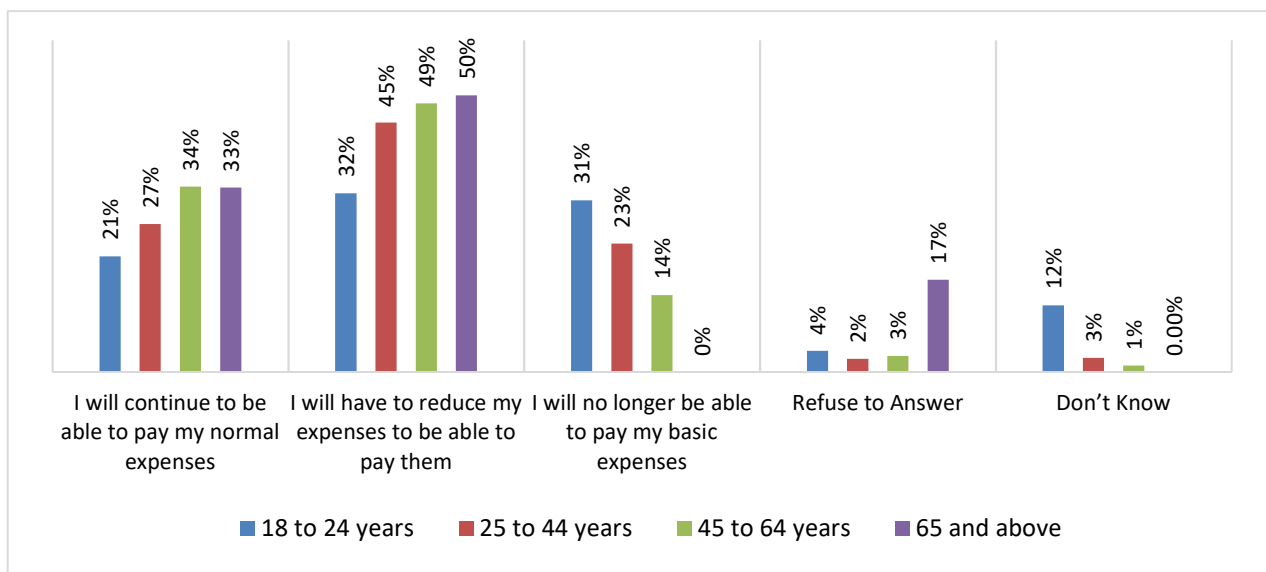


Figure 31: What do you think could happen to your household's financial situation if the current restrictions last another month? (by age)

FUTURE EXPECTATIONS

The majority of respondents were hopeful and positive about the outcome of the crisis. Almost 39% believed that normal life would resume at the end of April 2020, while 22% expected the return of normal life by the summer. Conversely, less than 20% expected the crisis to last for several months, while 17% admitted that they did not have any idea about the future trajectory of the pandemic (Figure 32).¹⁶

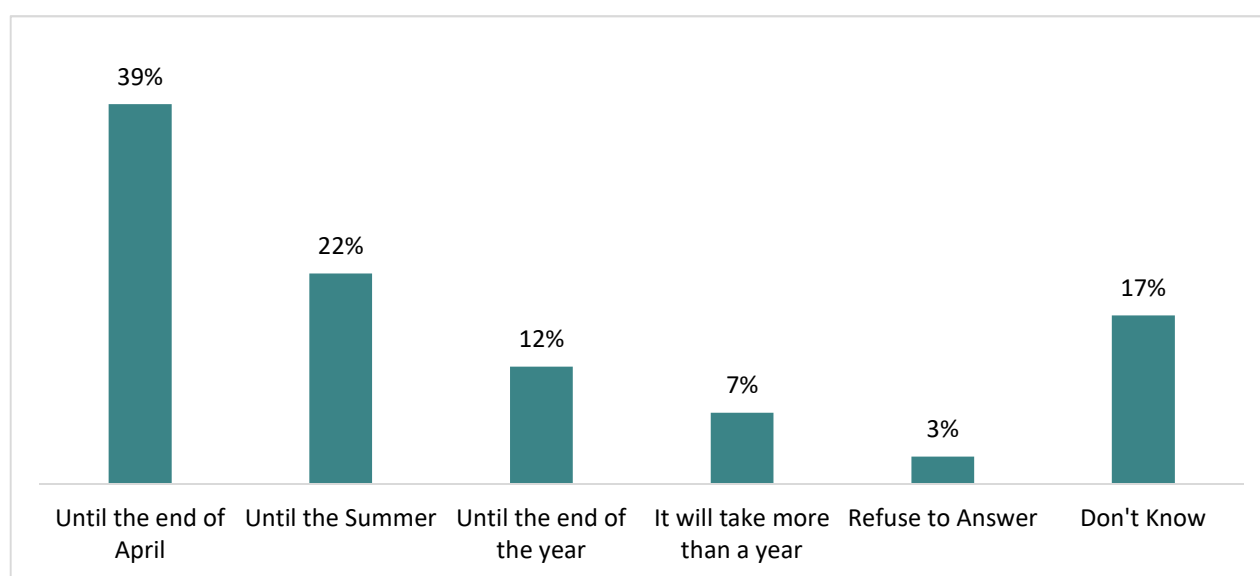


Figure 32: How long do you think you will have to wait until life returns to normal, i.e. without current restrictions?

Analyzing these answers in light of the results illustrated in Figures 29 to 31, it seems that Kurdistanis might be less optimistic than realistic regarding the necessity for them to resume a normal (professional) life in order to face, offset, and mitigate the financial impact of COVID-19. Almost 50% of participants reported that they would be able to bear restrictions linked to COVID-19 until the end of April, while 24% were ready to wait until the summer (Figure 33).

¹⁶ At the time of writing this report (May-June 2020), while the confinement measures have been lifted in all the KRI, its borders and airports remain closed. Moreover, the worsening public health situation jeopardizes the future of the KRI and some fear a second wave of infection. In early June 2020, the KRG imposed another week of full confinement as a response to the increasing number of cases of infected Kurdistanis. After 24 hours, the KRG adopted a decentralized approach to deal with the epidemic. It gave each of the three governorates the authority to decide on the most appropriate measures and their implementation.

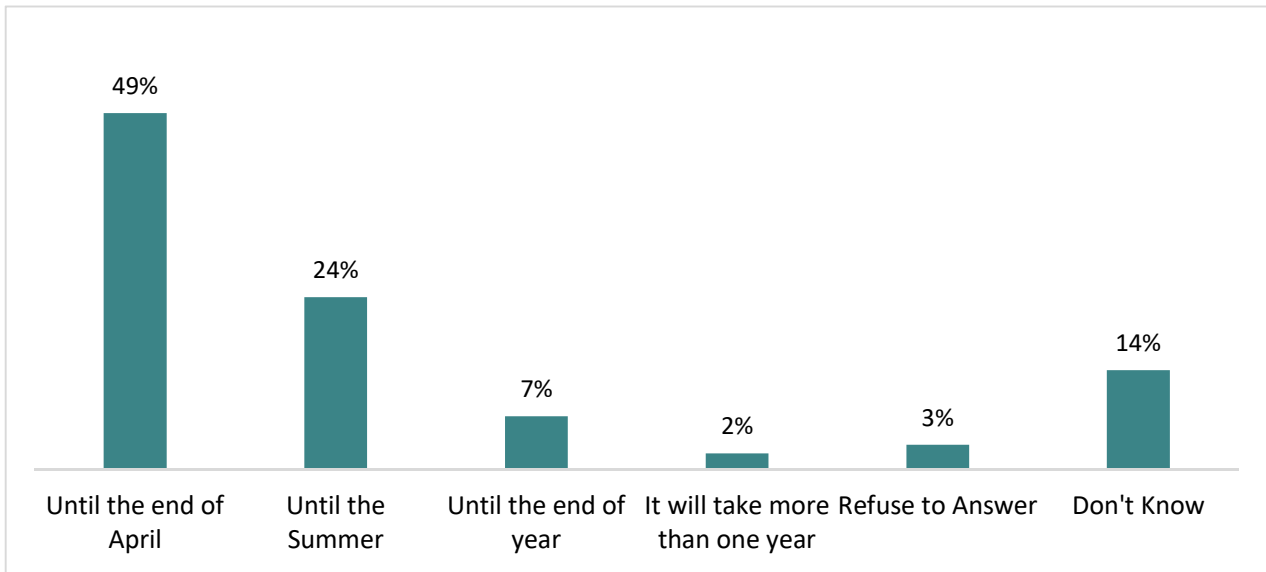


Figure 33: Until when do you feel prepared to live under the current restrictions?

Again, disaggregated answers show that 25-44 year-old respondents felt the most vulnerable economically, and were less prepared to wait until restrictions are lifted and life in public resumes (Figure 34). This is probably linked to their financial vulnerability but also to the fact that they were over-represented as a group among respondents to this survey.

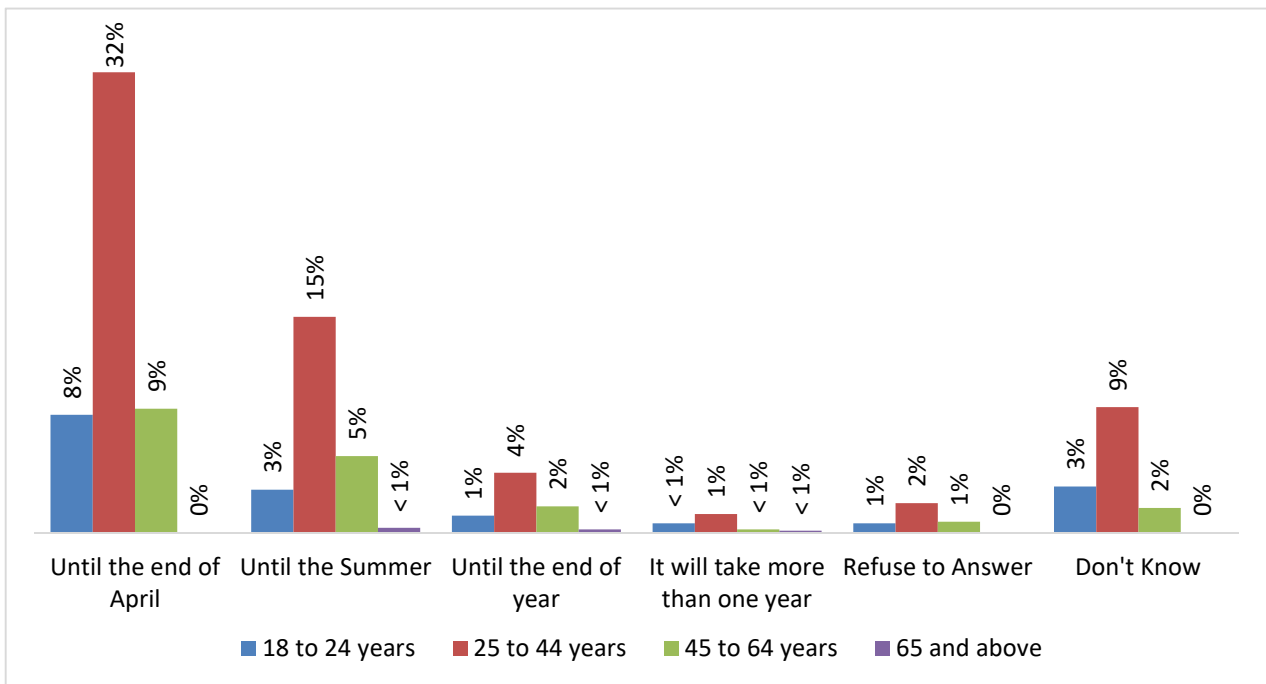


Figure 34: Until when do you feel prepared to live under the current restrictions? (by age)

CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has had a strong, visible impact on the socio-economic and political structures in the KRI, particularly around issues of political trust and social cohesion.

The great majority of respondents supported the measures imposed by the KRG to mitigate the impact of the virus. They also contributed to the impact of these policies by adopting a new set of behaviours to prevent the spread of the pandemic. As the pandemic threatened the whole Kurdistan population indiscriminately, social cohesion has been reinforced.

Yet, the results of the survey highlight a twofold division in the KRI. First, a quasi-absence of trust in the federal government and institutions. Second, a political rift between the two main political parties in the KRI – the KDP and the PUK – which is reflective of Kurdistan society more widely. Notably, trust in the KRI President and Prime Minister is highly contested in the Silemani governorate, where local distrust and dissatisfaction in the political institutions of the KRI is apparent across the survey data.

The rejection of Baghdad's rule and social division inside KRI, along with political affiliations and the financial uncertainty facing the youngest Kurdistanis, are further challenges that Kurdish political institutions must mitigate. While the COVID-19 pandemic has been met by social calm and order in the KRI, it might well reinforce existing vulnerabilities and grievances which could then be factors of further fragmentation and conflict both between the federal and the regional governments and within the KRI.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the results of this survey – answered by 936 Kurdistanis across the three governorates in the KRI – the authors would like to suggest the following general recommendations to the KRG and the federal state of Iraq:

- Times of crisis should be considered opportunities to bridge political and identity divides in Iraq in order to face common challenges and foster cohesion between the regional and federal institutions, and between all the communities that live in the Republic of Iraq.
- The COVID-19 crisis is an important test for the political institutions in the KRI and Iraq, which are expected to support all communities and alleviate their concerns.
- The political discourse around COVID-19 must address diverse communities and be tailored to each of them individually.
- Health officials should assume a central role in communications relating to COVID-19 because they are generally more trusted than other political figures or institutions.
- Local representatives enjoy more legitimacy and trust than their federal and regional counterparts. As such, they are key figures to build a bridge between the governments (both in the KRI and Iraq) and local populations.
- Kurdistanis are greatly concerned about their future financial situations. Policies related to the COVID-19 pandemic must be part of a package which not only protects the health of the population but also mitigates the broader impact of the epidemic on everyday life. An economic response plan should be prepared in collaboration between the KRG and the Iraqi government.
- The financial concerns of the Kurdistanis will only be aggravated by the political disagreement on the federal budget. Although Baghdad and Erbil agreed on a federal budget in February 2020, in late March, the KRG claimed more than 378.7 million dollars of unpaid salaries from the 2019 budget. This unsolved question jeopardises the safety and wellbeing of thousands of Kurdistanis and the prosperity of the region. A solution must be found urgently in the framework of the 2005 constitution.

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APPENDIX

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Are you a ... (gender) ?

- Female
- Male

In which governorate do you live in the KRI? (ONE Answer Only)

- Duhok
- Erbil
- Halabja
- Silemani

What is your level of education?

- PHD
- Master
- Bachelors
- Polytechnic
- High School license
- Secondary School license
- Primary school
- I can read and write

How old are you?

- Under 18 years (Thank you and End)
- 18 to 24 years
- 25 to 44 years
- 45 to 64 years
- 65 and above

QUESTIONS

Q1. How closely have you followed the news about the Coronavirus epidemic known as COVID-19?
With a lot of attention, some attention, little or no attention?

- With a lot of attention
- Some attention
- Little attention
- No attention
- Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**
- Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q2. Have you or someone you know personally been infected by COVID-19?

- Yes
- No
- Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**
- Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q3. There are people who belong to so-called risk groups: over 70 years old or chronically ill, with hypertension, heart and breathing problems, diabetics or immuno-depressed people. Do you belong to any of these risk groups?

Yes

No

Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**

Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q4. At the moment, are you able to or do you have enough support to allow you to leave the house if you face an emergency?

Yes

No

Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**

Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q5. Asking about several possible sources of information about COVID-19. For each of them, to what extent do you trust the information that comes from that source:

Q5.1 The television?

A lot of trust

Some trust

Little trust

No trust

Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**

Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q5.2 The press, newspapers and magazines?

A lot of trust

Some trust

Little trust

No trust

Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**

Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q5.3 Social Media (facebook, twitter, instagram, Snapchat, youtube, tiktok, and etc.)?

A lot of trust

Some trust

Little trust

No trust

Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**

Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q5.4 Your friends and family?

A lot of trust

Some trust

Little trust

No trust

Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**

Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q6. How would you describe the way the Kurdistanis in general are facing COVID-19?

- They are not taking risks seriously enough
- Are reacting appropriately
- They are taking risks too seriously
- Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**
- Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q7. From the following institutions, to what extent do you trust their response to the epidemic:

Q7.1 The Iraqi President?

- A lot of trust
- Some trust
- Little trust
- No trust
- Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**
- Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q7.2 The Iraqi Prime Minister?

- A lot of trust
- Some trust
- Little trust
- No trust
- Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**
- Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q7.3 The KRI President?

- A lot of trust
- Some trust
- Little trust
- No trust
- Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**
- Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q7.4 The KRI Prime Minister?

- A lot of trust
- Some trust
- Little trust
- No trust
- Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**
- Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q7.5 Iraqi (federal) Ministry of Health?

- A lot of trust
- Some trust
- Little trust
- No trust
- Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**
- Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q7.6 The KRI Iraqi Ministry of Health?

- A lot of trust
- Some trust
- Little trust
- No trust
- Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**
- Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q7.7 Directorate General of Health at the province level?

- A lot of trust
- Some trust
- Little trust
- No trust
- Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**
- Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q7.8 The Federal parliament of Iraq?

- A lot of trust
- Some trust
- Little trust
- No trust
- Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**
- Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q7.9 The parliament of Kurdistan Region of Iraq?

- A lot of trust
- Some trust
- Little trust
- No trust
- Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**
- Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q7.10 Ministry of Interior, Security forces and the Police?

- A lot of trust
- Some trust
- Little trust
- No trust
- Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**
- Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q8. Asking about whether the COVID-19 situation tightens social solidarity and support.

Q8.1 In your opinion, the COVID-19 situation fosters social cohesion

- A lot
- Some
- Little
- Not at all
- Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**
- Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q8.2 In your opinion, whom should receive support to go through the situation? (**READ ALL OPTION. YOU MAY SELECT SEVERAL ANSWERS**)

- Syrian refugees
- Internally Displaces Persons
- Elderly persons
- Everyone
- Refuse to Answer (**if spontaneous**)
- Don't Know (**if spontaneous**)

Q8.3 In your opinion, whom should offer support to vulnerable groups? (**READ ALL OPTION. YOU MAY SELECT SEVERAL ANSWERS**)

- The Iraqi federal government
- The Kurdish Regional Government
- Local representatives (provincial councils, local elders, religious figures)
- Humanitarian organisations
- All Kurdistanis
- Refuse to Answer (**if spontaneous**)
- Don't Know (**if spontaneous**)

Q9. On whom you rely the most to mitigate the epidemic (**SCORE FROM 1 TO 5 WHERE 5 IS THE HIGHEST SCORE**)

- The Iraqi federal government
- The Kurdish Regional Government
- Local representatives (Provincial councils, local elders, religious figures)
- Your social circles (friends, colleagues, neighbours)
- Your family
- Refuse to Answer (**if spontaneous**)
- Don't Know (**if spontaneous**)

Q10. Regarding the declaration of a curfew and shutdown, which of the following phrases is closest to your opinion?

- It was not necessary to have declared curfew and shutdown
- It was necessary, and these restrictions are adequate
- It was necessary, but even more restrictions are needed
- Refuse to Answer (**if spontaneous**)
- Don't Know (**if spontaneous**)

Q11. From the following set of behaviours that people can adopt, please tell me whether or not you had adopted this behaviour during the past week.

Q11.1 Avoiding crowded places

- Yes
- No
- Refuse to Answer (**if spontaneous**)
- Don't Know (**if spontaneous**)

Q11.2 Wear a mask in public places

- Yes
- No
- Refuse to Answer (**if spontaneous**)
- Don't Know (**if spontaneous**)

Q11.3 Increase your personal hygiene care

- Yes
- No
- Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**
- Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q11.4 Keep a distance of 2 meters from the people you meet outside your home.

- Yes
- No
- Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**
- Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q11.5 If you worked outside the home before the epidemic, did you stop going to the workplace?

- Yes
- No
- Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**
- Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q12. Now think about your income before this epidemic. Regarding this income, I would say that:

- I had a comfortable income
- I had a reasonable income
- It was difficulties to live on that income
- It was great difficulties to live on that income
- Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**
- Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q13. At this point, has the financial situation of your household been affected by the curfew and shutdown or has it not yet been affected?

- It has been affected
- Not yet affected
- Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**
- Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q14. How long do you think we will have to wait until we return to a normal life without the current restrictions?

- Until the end of April
- Until the Summer
- Until the end of the year
- It will take more than a year
- Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**
- Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q15. What is your opinion on the government's restrictions of movement?

- I strongly support it
- I relatively support it
- I relatively reject it
- I strongly reject it
- Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**
- Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q16. In general, how easy or difficult has it been for you to deal with current restrictions?

It has been very easy

It has been relatively easy

It has been relatively difficult

It has been very difficult

Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**

Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q.17 What do you think could happen to your household's financial situation if the current restrictions last another month?

I will continue to be able to pay my normal expenses

I will have to reduce my expenses to be able to pay them

I will no longer be able to pay my basic expenses

Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**

Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

Q18. Until when do you feel prepared to live under the current restrictions?

Until the end of April

Until the Summer

Until the end of year

It will take more than one year

Refuse to Answer **(if spontaneous)**

Don't Know **(if spontaneous)**

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