

معرفة السلام والنزاع: وجهات نظر طلاب العلوم الإنسانية في جامعة دهوك

Navigating Peace and Conflict: Perspectives of Humanities Students in Dohuk University

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الملخص:

تستكشف هذه الدراسة تصورات السلام والنزاع بين طلاب العلوم الإنسانية في جامعة دهوك في كردستان العراق، وهي منطقة ذات تاريخ من العنف والتهميش الاجتماعي والسياسي والنزاع المستمر. الأولى من نوعها في هذه المنطقة، تسعى الدراسة إلى دعم برامج تعليم السلام المناسبة ثقافياً، وربط الدراسات النظرية للسلام بالسياسات التعليمية العملية.

استناداً إلى الاستطلاعات والمقابلات ومناقشات المجموعات التركيزية، تقدم النتائج رؤى حول فهم الطلاب للعنف الثقافي والهيكل المتأصل – الموروثة من عصر صدام، والحرب الأمريكية، وحكم داعش – كعناصر ديناميكية في الخطاب المعاصر. بينما كان جميع المشاركين على دراية بالسلام كتجربة يومية معاشة، شعر معظمهم بعدم كفاية تجهيزهم لحل النزاعات، حيث فهموا السلام ببساطة على أنه غياب العنف بدلاً من كونه مفهوماً مشبعاً بالوصفات الثقافية. ومع ذلك، اعتقد حوالي خمسين بالمئة أن تعليمهم الجامعي أثر بشكل إيجابي على فهمهم للسلام، حيث أظهر طلاب علم الاجتماع فهماً أكثر تأملاً ونظرياً. أبرز المشاركون كيف أن الهوية العرقية والدينية هي سلاح ذو حدين، حيث توفر المرونة بينما تساهم في الانقسام.

من خلال دراسة وجهات نظر الطلاب في سياقهم المحلي، يبرز البحث أهمية النماذج المستندة إلى السرد الثقافي المحلي، لا سيما في الشرق الأوسط حيث غالباً ما تثبت الأساليب المفروضة من الخارج عدم فعاليتها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تعليم السلام، النزاع، السياق المحلي، الثقافة الكردية، المناهج الدراسية.

Abstract:

This research explores conceptions of peace and conflict among humanities students at Dohuk University in Iraqi Kurdistan, a region with a legacy of violence, socio-political marginalization, and continuing conflict. The first of its kind in this region, the study seeks to support culturally appropriate peace education programs, linking theoretical peace studies with pragmatic educational policy.



Based on surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions, the findings give insight into students' understanding of ingrained cultural and structural violence – inherited from the Saddam era, the US war, and ISIS governance – as dynamic components in contemporary discourse. While all participants were aware of peace as everyday, lived experience, most felt inadequately equipped to resolve conflicts, understanding peace simply as the absence of violence rather than a concept densely saturated with cultural prescriptions. However, approximately fifty percent believed that their university education favorably impacted their comprehension of peace, with sociology students demonstrating a more reflective and theoretical grasp. Participants highlighted how ethnic and religious identity is double-edged, providing resilience whilst driving division.

By examining student perspectives within their local context, the research underscores the importance of models rooted in local cultural narratives, particularly in the Middle East where externally imposed methods often prove ineffective.

Keywords: peace education, conflict, local context, Kurdish Culture, curricula.

Introduction

The study of peace and conflict among the Kurdish humanities students at Dohuk University offers a unique lens to explore the intersection of historical trauma, socio-political marginalization, and cultural identity. The Kurds, an ethnically distinct group who live throughout Iraq, Turkey, Syria and Iran, have faced systemic oppression and violence throughout much of modern history. In Iraq, in particular, they have endured waves of displacement, destruction of villages, chemical attacks during the Saddam Hussein regime, and ongoing wars with external powers and internal actors. Such a lengthy record of violence and marginalization has heavily shaped Kurdish perspectives on peace, conflict, and governance.

The dynamic complexities have persisted in the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI) even after it emerged as a quasi-autonomous region in the early 1990s. Politically, inter-Kurdish rivalries between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) initiated a civil war (1994-1998) that welded traumatic scars into Kurdish society. Externally, troubles with Baghdad over oil revenues and administrative control have added to the economic malaise. As a result, the average citizen is too often left to shoulder the consequences, such as delays and decreases in salary payments or shortages of basic services.

Adding to this, is the continuous security threat from external actors. The Turkish military's invasion against the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) in Kurdistan has resulted in killings, destroying farms and rural areas, and scaring many villagers into migrating to the city. The Syrian Civil War from 2011 till 2024 and the rise of

ISIS in 2014 gave rise to other forms of violence, such as the genocides of Yazidi Kurds and the displacement of many Kurdish Syrians. Consequently, the city of Dohuk, in particular, has been transformed into a center for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees fleeing both Iraq and Syria, which has placed a great burden on local services and infrastructure.

The Kurdish population's relative inexperience as rulers complicates the situation further. The semi-autonomous position of the KRI is relatively recent and, when coupled with internal and external forces, it has engendered a turbulent socio-political landscape. These challenges highlight the importance of re-examination of humanitarian and peace concepts against the background of these simultaneous crises, as well as the need for a more nuanced understanding of how Kurdish students of humanities perceive peace and conflict within the context of overlapping violence in the region.

Thus, this study investigates how the concepts of peace and conflict are constructed by Kurdish students with a particular focus on their historical experiences, cultural identity, and socio-political context. To do so, I first clarify the use of certain concepts pertinent to developing a theoretical framework that supports an analysis relevant to these interrelated issues. Then, after presenting and discussing the findings, I explore the implications of this for Kurdish society, which by extension or comparison may provide insights for Middle Eastern peacebuilding more generally.

Contextual definitions of the concepts Peace

Peace, as conceptualized in this study, reflects both the absence of violence (*negative peace*) and the presence of justice and equitable social structures (*positive peace*), as defined by Galtung¹. In the Kurdish context, peace is deeply tied to historical struggles for autonomy, cultural preservation, and socio-economic stability. For Kurds, negative peace generally means the cessation of military aggression (e.g., Turkish bombardments, ISIS attacks) and the establishment of self-governance that respects cultural identity, language, political aspirations, and coexistence of diverse groups. Meanwhile positive peace might involve creating opportunities for equitable access to education, healthcare, and employment, which remain strained due to the influx of IDPs and refugees in Dohuk. This localized understanding of peace aligns with Richmond's² emphasis on the transformation of peace in post-conflict settings, where localized conditions significantly shape peacebuilding efforts.

Conflict

Conflict as a concept is multi-faceted and contextual. According to Edward Azar³, albeit in a protracted social conflict context, conflict is a protracted, multi-



dimensional, and inter-group struggle rooted in identity, governance crisis, and socio-economic deprivation. Likewise, Chris Mitchell⁴ defines conflict in a situation where parties perceive they have incompatible goals, creating a situation of tension and struggle. The form of conflict that this study focuses on is defined as a state of disagreement or struggle that can be interpersonal or large-scale political violence. In the context of the Kurds, conflict contains a history of systematic marginalization, rivalry between groups, and interference from outside powers, all of which have had a meaningful impact on the socio-political structure of the region.

Governance

In this study, the word governance is used to denote the mechanisms, processes and institutions through which Kurdish society organizes its political, economic, and social activities. This definition builds on Bevir's⁵ understanding of governance as a network of decision-making agents. Politics in the Iraqi Kurdish region are a mix of semi-autonomy, tribal influences, and external and Baghdad political pressure. This encompasses both the formal systems of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and informal systems stemming from tribal and cultural traditions.

Cultural Identity

Cultural identity comes from common language, traditions, customs and values that unify a group of people and separates them from others. Within this context, Kurdish cultural identity is understood as a connection with the Kurdish language, folklore, music, and the historical narratives of struggle and resilience. It has been both a source of unity as well as a reason for socio-political struggles. A history of marginalization and denial of rights, as well as external pressures, have both elevated the cultural identity as a banner of defiance and survival, and also exacerbated intragroup tensions in the Kurdistan Region.

Theoretical Framework

1. Outline of framework

This research uses a multidisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates perspectives from peace studies, sociology, and cultural studies:

a. Galtung's Theory of Peace and Violence⁶ distinguishes positive peace (which is characterized by justice and equality) from negative peace (defined as the absence of direct violence). It emphasizes that developing transformative and sustainable peace requires addressing injustice at both the structural (systemic) and the cultural (norms that justify violence) levels. This theory can be seen as an analytical lens through which we can focus on the influences of social constructs, as well as the more overarching structural and cultural dynamics of the Kurdish context. In the context of this paper, Galtung's approach helps us understand how these contribute to shaping humanities students' approaches to peace and conflict.

b. Social constructivism emphasizes that peace and conflict are shaped by cultural and social contexts, arising from shared beliefs, traditions, and experiences⁷. It posits that language and interaction play a central role in constructing the subjective meanings of conflict and peace. This part of the framework is particularly relevant for examining how students in Iraqi Kurdistan, a region with a complex history of violence, define and perceive peace within their sociopolitical and cultural realities.

c. Peace education stresses transformative learning, which encourages critical thinking, empathy, and enables learners to examine their roles in perpetuating or alleviating conflicts⁸. It is rooted in critical pedagogy that invites questioning of societal structures and cultural norms that foster violence or inequity, creating space for education as a liberating force to help imagine a more just society⁹. Moreover, peace education emphasizes building practical skills in peacebuilding including conflict resolution techniques, mediation skills, and nonviolent communication, thus, empowering people with tools that prepare them to engage in peace processes actively.

Using peace education, the study aims to explore whether students at Dohuk University embrace peace values through knowledge and skills, and how well prepared they are for applying these to the socio-political realities of their local region.

d. Post-conflict reconstruction theories: in these theories, the younger generation is considered a source of agents of change, given their potential for advancing social change and creating better prospects in post-conflict societies by engaging in education and peacebuilding opportunities¹⁰. Systemic work linked with social reconstruction is essential in addressing root causes such as fragile institutions, divided communities, and economic inequality; all of which require rebuilding relationships and trust for effective peace¹¹. Post-conflict reconstruction also calls for trauma-informed approaches and building youth resilience, understanding that healing from collective trauma is crucial for creating a culture of peace and resilience in post-conflict societies.

e. Intersectionality studies the intersection of different social identities (gender, ethnicity, religion, etc.) in contributing to an individual's experience of oppression, domination, or privilege¹². It offers a lens to examine how these intersecting identities shape students' views of peace and conflict. It also underscores the importance of cultural sensitivity in peace operations, noting that gender, class, and cultural norms affect individuals in a community differently.



Thus, in the context of Dohuk University, understanding of intersectionality has led to the importance of examining how the plurality of students' identities and lived experiences may shape their conception of peace. This is crucial in shaping inclusive and reflective peacebuilding initiatives relevant to the complexities of their context.

Applying these theories as an integrated framework in the context of Dohuk University, sheds light on how students, from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds in a post-conflict society, view their potential for combating systematic problems and contributing to building peaceful coexistence.

Synthesis of Theoretical Framework

Each approach contains a distinct perspective on the nature of peace and conflict however, when combined, they provide a more comprehensive approach: Galtung's theory complements social constructivism's emphasis on subjective perceptions and cultural narratives by providing a systemic lens through which we can identify structural and cultural violence. Joined together, they link the macro-level drivers of conflict and war with micro-level lived experiences. Theories of peace education and post-conflict reconstruction emphasize practical skills, empowerment, and the rebuilding of institutions. They fill the gap in Galtung's and social constructivism's (too) abstract models by offering actionable pathways for change. This complementary angle is strengthened by the concept of intersectionality since it signifies how multiple identities can overlap in determining a person's experience, allowing for inclusion and nuance in tackling structural and cultural violence. It gives depth to Galtung's systemic view and supports peace education and social constructivism, which place great emphasis on diversity.

Significance of the Study

This research has important implications for multiple parties:

Educators: Knowledge about students' understanding of peace and conflict helps educators design curricula and courses that address these topics effectively. The latter emphasizes the importance of peacebuilding approaches that are tailored to each region, drawing upon the contextual realities of the Kurdish community.

Curriculum developers: The results can provide a foundation for preparing curriculum documents with peace and conflict education according to needs and culture of Kurdish society. This is especially important in fostering critical thinking and promoting sustainable peacebuilding.

Academics and researchers: The first study to be conducted in this area with Kurdish students, it lays the ground for future research in peace and conflict studies in the Kurdish region. This can lead to comparative studies and even interdisciplinary approaches.

Civil society organizations: The insights gained can inform the design and implementation of community-based programs that aim to address conflict transformation and promote social cohesion.

The significance of building peace from the bottom up has increasingly gained recognition as a vital approach in conflict-affected societies. The local turn in peacebuilding critiques the reliance on externally imposed, Western liberal frameworks, arguing that such models often underestimate the agency and wisdom of local communities to craft sustainable peace. Mac Ginty¹³ introduces the concept of "everyday peace" as the practices and norms individuals and groups deploy in deeply divided societies to reduce and manage conflict in their daily lives. These informal, localized efforts often go unrecognized in mainstream peacebuilding discourse but play a critical role in fostering social cohesion. In the context of Iraqi Kurdistan, understanding how humanities students—future leaders and professionals—perceive peace and conflict provides valuable insights into these bottom-up processes. Their perspectives can illuminate how localized, grassroots approaches can complement or challenge formal peacebuilding efforts, offering a pathway toward more context-sensitive and durable peace initiatives.

Research Questions

How do students of humanities at Dohuk University understand and conceptualize peace and conflict?

What role do historical narratives, cultural identity, and socio-political dynamics play in shaping their perceptions?

How can these insights inform educational curricula and policy frameworks for peacebuilding in Iraqi Kurdistan?

What are the challenges and opportunities for integrating peace and conflict studies into the Kurdish educational system?

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research topic. All methods were conducted in Kurdish and the responses translated into English.

a. Quantitative methods: The sample was selected by posting in student WhatsApp and Viber groups and sharing information in class. It included a minimum of 50 respondents from each department – sociology, history, geography, religious education and drama – comprising 250 in all.

The gender representation was 43% male and 57% female. Most of the answers were collected via Kobotoolbox. The survey used closed-ended questions and Likert-scales, so measurable results were obtained.



b. Qualitative interviews methods: these comprised nine interviews with students of different departments and three focus groups. These aimed to gather detailed insights and gain an appreciation of students' detailed meanings of peace and conflict. The students were then encouraged to share personal and shared reflections in discussions about each issue.

c. Data analysis: Quantitative data was analyzed using statistical software to find trends and patterns whereas thematic analysis was used for the qualitative data to extract key themes and insights.

d. Ethical issues: All participants provided informed consent, and their privacy was protected throughout the study. The study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles to protect participants' wellbeing.

Findings

Participants' Understanding of Peace and Conflict/Definition of Peace and Conflict

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Peace is the absence of violence or war	5% (25)	10% (50)	15% (75)	40% (200)	30% (150)
Peace is the presence of justice and equality	3% (15)	7% (35)	10% (50)	45% (225)	35% (175)
Conflict is always negative and harmful	10% (50)	15% (75)	15% (75)	30% (150)	30% (150)
Cultural traditions in my region are sometimes a source of conflict	27% (135)	35% (175)	18% (90)	12% (60)	8% (40)

Most participants associated peace with the absence of violence, reflecting a traditional understanding of peace. A significant portion, mostly sociology students, recognized the importance of justice and equality in peacebuilding, though fewer strongly agreed with this compared to the first statement. Many students (60%) agreed with the statement that conflict is always negative and harmful, reflecting the dominant belief within the broader community. Meanwhile, a majority (67%) disagreed that cultural traditions can contribute to conflict, believing that cultural traditions are not the cause of conflict; rather, they are seen as promoting peace. This reflects how traditions and norms have evolved over time, and as people move away from traditional practices, tensions and divisions have emerged.

The interviewees reflected the survey findings: as one 4th year sociology student stated, "We are not in war and violent conflict, but we don't have a real peace either, because there is corruption and inequality and injustices in the system." Another 3rd year history student stated: "In my life, conflict has always been destructive. When people fight, nothing improves, it just gets worse."

Personal, Cultural, or Societal Influences

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
My definition of peace is influenced by my personal experiences	10% (50)	10% (50)	20% (100)	30% (150)	30% (150)
Cultural norms and traditions shape my understanding of peace	6% (30)	10% (50)	18% (90)	38% (190)	28% (140)
Societal issues in Iraqi Kurdistan influence how I perceive conflict	4% (20)	9% (45)	15% (75)	42% (210)	30% (150)

The data suggest that students consider their perceptions of peace and conflict to be shaped by a combination of personal experiences, cultural teachings, and broader societal challenges. Their understanding is not static but influenced by ongoing socio-political changes, which aligns with established psychological and sociological theories on how individuals form worldviews.

This is also in line with the interview results. One 2nd year geography student explained: "Growing up in a region with so much conflict has made me think deeply about what peace really means. My personal experiences have shaped my views a lot." Another 4th year student from the History department said, "We are taught to respect traditions, but some traditions cause harm. For example, women don't have the same opportunities as men, and no one questions it."

Perception of Constructive vs. Destructive Conflict, and of Conflict Outcomes

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Destructive conflict often arises due to a lack of communication	5% (25)	8% (40)	14% (70)	42% (210)	31% (155)
Conflict can lead to stronger relationships if managed well	6% (30)	12% (60)	20% (100)	40% (200)	22% (110)

The students' acknowledgment of the role of communication in preventing destructive conflict aligns with established research in conflict resolution and communication studies. Their recognition that conflict can lead to positive outcomes suggests an awareness of the potential for growth, learning, and improved relationships when disputes are addressed constructively. This perspective supports the promotion of peace education and dialogue-based conflict resolution strategies in academic settings.



In interview, one 3rd year archeology student stated, "I've seen conflicts in my family that started small but became destructive because no one wanted to communicate. It's all about how you handle it." Another 4th year drama student said, "When conflicts are managed well, they can actually bring people closer. It's like clearing the air and understanding each other better."

Background Knowledge of Conflict Resolution Techniques

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
My academic education has provided me with tools to resolve conflicts effectively	20% (100)	30% (150)	25% (125)	15% (75)	10% (50)

This result suggests that students perceive a gap in their education when it comes to learning conflict resolution skills. A 4th year geography student stated, "I don't feel like my education has taught me how to resolve conflicts. I avoid conflicts because I don't know how to handle them properly." Most of the students felt eager to have a course on conflict resolution: as one 4th year religious education student said, "I would love to learn more about conflict resolution. It's such an important skill, especially in a place like ours where conflicts are common."

Confidence in Managing Conflict

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
I feel confident managing inter-personal conflicts and conflicts within groups	15% (75)	25% (125)	20% (100)	25% (125)	15% (75)
I often avoid conflict because I lack the skills to resolve it	8% (40)	15% (75)	22% (110)	35% (175)	20% (100)
I would like to learn more about conflict resolution strategies	2% (10)	5% (25)	10% (50)	40% (200)	43% (215)

Such a high percentage of students who do not know how to mediate or are not confident in their abilities reduces the capacity of educational institutions that do not offer skills training and conflict resolution programs tailored to equip students with the necessary skills to resolve conflicts, self-efficacy, and ultimately to perform better.

Most students, however, said they do tend to avoid conflict because when it comes to resolutions, they do not necessarily feel confident in their ability to improve a situation. This indicates that training and education in conflict management are

lacking and that students could benefit from additional programs focused on increasing their confidence and skills in dealing with disagreements effectively. Overall, 83% of students want to learn more about conflict resolution skills. This suggests that there are many students already aware of the need for these skills and that they are likely to recognize the importance of using their skills in conflict or preparing for best practice. A 4th year drama student said, "I avoid arguments at all costs, even when I know I need to speak up." Another said "I never learned how to handle conflict, so I feel like it's just safer to take a step back."

Role of Education in Shaping Peace Perceptions

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
My academic background in humanities has enhanced my understanding of peace and conflict	10% (50)	15% (75)	25% (125)	35% (175)	15% (75)
Humanities courses encourage critical thinking about societal issues, including peace and conflict	25% (125)	38% (190)	20% (100)	10% (50)	7% (35)

A combined total of 50% (15% Strongly Agree + 35% Agree) of participants believed that their humanities education has enhanced their understanding of peace and conflict. This suggests that half of the respondents find value in their studies and recognize the relevance of the humanities in exploring these complex topics. However, a significant portion remained neutral or unconvinced. A combined total of only 17% of students believed that humanities courses encourage critical thinking about societal issues, including peace and conflict. This suggests a significant perceived lack of effectiveness of these courses in fostering critical analysis among students.

In interview, a 4th year history student stated: "I don't think my humanities education has had much impact on my understanding of peace and conflict. If anything, I've learned more about these topics through personal experiences and outside sources." However, another 4th year sociology student said, "I think my education has given me a better understanding of peace and conflict, especially in relation to society. While it's not the main focus of our courses, we do learn about different perspectives that help us think critically about these issues."



Youth and Peacebuilding, Role as Agents of Peace

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
University students are key agents of change in peacebuilding efforts	5% (25)	8% (40)	15% (75)	42% (210)	30% (150)
I feel personally responsible for promoting peace in my community	6% (30)	10% (50)	20% (100)	39% (195)	25% (125)

This result indicated a definite recognition of the students' role in peacebuilding. A combined total of **72%** of students believed that university students are key agents of change in peacebuilding efforts. This reflects a strong recognition among the majority of students of their potential influence and responsibility in contributing to peacebuilding initiatives. Similarly, a combined 64% (25% Strongly Agree + 39% Agree) expressed a personal sense of responsibility for promoting peace in their communities. This indicates a strong inclination among students to take an active role in peacebuilding efforts at the local level. This was in line with interviewees, as one 3rd year religious education student said: "Young people have the energy and ideas to make a difference. We just need more opportunities to get involved in peacebuilding." Another argued, "I feel a responsibility to promote peace, but sometimes it's hard to know where to start. We need more support from the community and the government."

Cultural and Regional Context

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
The history of conflict in Iraqi Kurdistan influences how I perceive peace	4% (20)	9% (45)	15% (75)	42% (210)	30% (150)

The majority acknowledged the impact of the region's history of conflict: 72% (30% Strongly Agree, 42% Agree) of students believe that the history of violence in Iraqi Kurdistan is part of what they associate with peace. These tensions continue to play an important role in how students are conceptualizing and understanding peace. "We are hopeful," one interviewee said, "the history of conflict in Kurdistan has made us cautious, but it's also made us resilient. That gives us hope for the future, I think."

Attitudes in a Post-Conflict Region

Statement	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
I feel hopeful about the future of peace in Iraqi Kurdistan	18% (90)	30% (150)	22% (110)	18% (90)	12% (60)

Low Optimism About Peace: Only **30%** of students feel hopeful about the future of peace in Iraqi Kurdistan. This suggests that optimism about lasting peace is relatively low among students. In interview, a 4th year sociology student stated: "I feel hopeful about peace in our region, but it's going to take time. We need to address the root causes of conflict, like unemployment and inequality."

Lack of Gender Differences

The data indicates no significant differences in responses between male and female students.

Differences by Academic Year

Responses showed slight variations according to academic year. The 3rd year students had a relatively low level of awareness and understanding of peace and conflict concepts, which improved somewhat by the end of the 4th year.

Differences by Department

Sociology students, whose coursework covers theories of communities, social structures and conflict resolution, had a better understanding of the issues involved in peace and conflict as compared to students with other backgrounds. Drama and religious education students displayed relatively limited awareness, while history and geography students tended to have a diverse range of perspectives.

Discussion of the Findings

This discourse analyzes the relationship between students' understanding of peace and their individual experiences and social settings. The findings suggest that their perceptions of peace are fluid, adapting to their social, educational, cultural, and political contexts. Specifically, engagement with peace and conflict education allowed students to connect abstract concepts to their everyday issues, suggesting that knowledge can progressively transform perspectives.

This debate examines how students embrace peace, the influence of institutions and broader societal systems on these personal interpretations, and the role of identity as a source of both division and resilience. Finally, the analysis considers the impact of deeply ingrained Kurdish cultural norms and outside actions work together to maintain established power structures.



Everyday Peace and Lived Realities

Peace, as described by participants, is not limited to the abstract; it relates to their daily experiences, the absence of social services, the prevalence of corruption, inequalities, and the oppressive silence of the international community regarding local and regional conflicts. These understandings resonate with Richmond's formulation of everyday peace, which highlights the lived experiences and practices through which people cope with conflict in their day-to-day lives¹⁴. He criticized liberal peace models for focusing too much on issues of Western notions of democracy and market-based economics while neglecting local contexts and agency¹⁵. Although they do not receive education on peace and conflict, participants in the present study referenced media exposure and personal experiences in shaping their understanding. This supports Richmond's call¹⁶ for peacebuilding efforts that build upon global constructs and local actors, emphasizing the importance of peace education programs that are contextualized and relevant to students' lived experiences.

Meanwhile, the absence of gender differences suggests that perceptions of peace and conflict are shaped more by academic background, personal experiences, and societal influences rather than gender-based differences.

Governance and Structural Inequalities

Governance failures, such as corruption, inefficiency in resource distribution, and lack of accountability within the Kurdistan Regional Government, are central to students' understanding of peace and conflict. These issues, compounded by political factionalism and external pressures, create mistrust toward formal governance structures and exacerbate social divisions. This perspective is in line with Edward Azar's theory of protracted social conflict, which highlights governance as one of the crucial factors contributing to the prolongation of conflict because governance maintains structural inequalities¹⁷.

In line with Richmond's¹⁸ findings, for our participants, notions of citizenship, governance, and governmentality are assessed, critiqued, and negotiated through everyday peace in a city where they can encounter diverse and unpleasant aspects of governance in their everyday life. Thus, addressing governance challenges, such as corruption and inequity, is essential for fostering social cohesion and creating an environment conducive to peace.

Cultural Identity and its Dual Role

Cultural identity significantly shapes students' understanding of peace and conflict. For many, their Kurdish identity provides a sense of pride and unity in the

face of historical oppression, reflecting Richmond's observation that cultural identity serves as a resource for resilience in conflict-affected regions¹⁹. They emphasized the role of traditional conflict resolution methods, such as mediation by tribal or community leaders, and conceptualize peace as fostering coexistence between diverse groups (e.g., IDPs, refugees and host communities) within Dohuk.

However, the participants also recognized that cultural identity can be a source of division, particularly when it intersects with political factionalism or tribal loyalties. The study indicates that students viewed conflict as an inevitable part of Kurdish history, shaped by external aggression (e.g., Turkish incursions, Baghdad-Kurdish disputes) and internal tensions (e.g., political rivalries between KDP and PUK). Thus, religion is seen as both a source of peace and potentially a source of conflict when politicized.

This distinction illustrates the dualism of identity, which is consistent with Azar's Protracted Social Conflict theory, whereby identity-based conflicts become protracted²⁰. Cultural identity provides a source of solidarity for Kurds in their struggle for recognition but poses challenges to its role in reconciliation due to external and internal pressures. The students' evolving sense of cultural identity reflects their integration in the peace and conflict landscape of the Kurdistan Region.

Structural and Cultural Violence

Students' experiences reflect Johan Galtung's concepts of structural and cultural violence. Structural violence, defined as "unequal power and consequently unequal life chances"²¹, manifests in systemic inequalities, such as limited access to education, economic hardships, and employment barriers. Cultural violence, where cultural norms and traditions justify structural inequalities, further complicates efforts to achieve peace²². For example, cultural and religious norms in Iraqi Kurdistan often reinforce traditional power structures, making systemic inequalities appear natural or divinely ordained. These forms of violence shape students' perceptions of peace as not merely the absence of violence (negative peace) but the presence of justice and equality (positive peace)²³.

Historical Narratives and Socio-Political Dynamics

Closely connected with cultural identity, historical narratives and socio-political dynamics play a significant role in shaping students' perceptions. Participants referenced collective traumas – such as the Anfal campaign, chemical attacks, and displacement – as pivotal events that shape their understanding of conflict.



Moreover, the Kurdish question is a re-occurring theme that has the potential for a peaceful future through political self-determination. Both tribal loyalty and oral traditions are crystallized in the form of communal identities with diverse implications for how students perceive community and conflict resolution.

Meanwhile, the valorization of Kurdish cultural pride and signifiers (like the use of the Kurdish language) represent acts of resistance to historical oppression. Socio-political dynamics (like inter-political competition between KDP and PUK) and external penetration (like the operations of Turkey, and Baghdad's hegemony over resources) are also considered as major obstacles to the establishment of sustainable peace.

In local communities, these dynamics frequently normalize structural and cultural forms of violence, reducing their visibility or raising doubts about them. By focusing on this, the study emphasizes the importance of critically interacting with culture and education.

Challenges

Before exploring the implications of this study, it is useful to consider a brief overview of the challenges involved.

a. Funding constraints: Overloaded university halls and low-budget institutions in Dohuk struggle to accommodate such new courses or programs.

b. Political interference: The intrusion and influence of political parties in the administrative and academic decision-making undermines universities' independence, hindering the right to educational quality.

c. Cultural resistance: To some, peace studies and peacebuilding is irrelevant or naive—especially in contexts where the struggle to survive and fulfil immediate needs overrides all else.

d. Language gap: The vast majority of academic content is written in Arabic or English which poses a challenge in developing Kurdish-language literature on peace studies.

Implications

This study has important implications for education policy and practice, students' resilience and effectiveness in conflict resolution, psychosocial health, and fostering coexistence between culturally diverse groups:

1. Incorporating Multidisciplinary Peace Education

The greater awareness of the relevant issues demonstrated by 4th year students compared to 3rd year students, especially sociology students – who had

been exposed to theories on communities, social structures, and conflict resolution – suggests that education influences how understanding of the conflict resolution develops. The implications of this are that integrating peace and conflict studies earlier in academic curricula would enhance the potential of interdisciplinary approaches to better equip students in every department.

Since the study also demonstrated students' interest in learning about peace, the Bologna system of education – that is used in Iraq and enables more elective courses – can facilitate multidisciplinary peace education curricula in humanities departments. These can be both more sensitive to local context and more globally aware.

2. Increasing the Social and Psychological Resilience of Students

Students are better equipped to handle difficult societal and interpersonal issues when peace education is combined with critical thinking, reflection and development of emotional awareness. The implication being that curricula that include discussion regarding trauma, stress, and developing coping strategy, advance the goal of empowering young people to be resilient and self-reliant as future community peacebuilders.

3. Promoting Mental Health and Psychosocial Resilience

The findings of the study have significant implications for the many students who have experiences of trauma, displacement, and loss of family members, including IDPs and refugees. Others struggle with poverty, discrimination, gender-based violence that restrict and limit their freedom, yet university methods of teaching and curriculum rarely take this into consideration. By improving students' understanding of the skills they need to build empathy, negotiation, and nonviolent communication, peace education provides ways to cultivate qualities essential to confronting the psychological ramifications of war.

4. Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Critical Reflection

The flexibility of the Bologna system means that students can be engaged and involved within and outside campus activities that reflect on cultural, social norms, and build confidence in addressing sensitive issues peacefully. They can learn how to be peacemakers in their own communities through projects that bring people from different groups together, encourage community conversations, and research that is inclusive. Through case studies, simulations, and critical reflection exercises, students can navigate detrimental norms and engage effectively with individuals possessing diverse identities, values, and life experiences.



Overall, the findings suggest that while students primarily associate peace with the absence of physical violence (negative peace), their experiences of social injustice and inequality underline the importance of integrating concepts of positive peace into their education. This integration would enable them to critically examine and address the systemic factors that perpetuate conflict and limit their potential.

Conclusion

Galtung's assertion that peace research must address both negative and positive peace (Galtung, 1969, 183) highlights the need for a comprehensive approach in analyzing students' perspectives. To facilitate this, the study designed a theoretical framework to enable an multifaceted understanding of peace and conflict among humanities students in Dohuk University. Drawing from diverse theoretical approaches, we can see how each provides a unique lens for interpreting students' perceptions and their potential roles in peacebuilding.

Using **Galtung's theory of peace and violence**, the study demonstrates that the students understand there was a high level of structural and cultural violence in the region. Moreover, most realize that peace cannot just be the absence of war, it must also incorporate justice, equality, and opportunities. However, their lack of theoretical knowledge reinforces the difficulty of nurturing critical analysis of the structural causes of conflict.

From the perspective of **social constructivism**, the study reveals how students' understandings of peace and conflict are shaped by social and cultural narratives. Supercharged by family, community, and place-based history, these narratives highlight the potency of subjective meaning-making. However, this perspective also reveals the danger of relativism and how it can mask critical scrutiny of pernicious norms.

The **peace education** approach emphasizes the importance of the role of education in developing skills for communication and conflict resolution, through non-violent means. Through this study, this approach demonstrates that many students want practical tools and a curriculum that prepares them to address conflicts constructively. However, their enthusiasm also highlighted gaps in the current educational system, which fails to integrate peace education into its programs effectively.

Post-conflict reconstruction theories highlight the importance of trust-building, youth empowerment, and addressing the root/systemic challenges that post-conflict societies encounter. Students' reflections indicated that they have

a deep sense of responsibility as agents of change, but also a frustration with the lack of opportunities and institutional support. This approach advocates policy and education initiatives that empower youth and bring people together across societal divides.

Finally, **intersectionality** highlights how individual experiences of peace and conflict are filtered through the complex, overlapping layers of identity—gender, ethnicity, economic status, displacement. In particular, the experiences of marginalized groups, such as Yezidi women and displaced individuals, underscore the importance of inclusive peacebuilding processes that take into account both systemic inequities and interpersonal dynamics.

These viewpoints collectively illustrate the complexity of how systemic and individual elements promote understanding of peace and conflict for students. Though systemic approaches, such as Galtung's theory and post-conflict reconstruction, uncover the larger structures at play in the process of peace, theories like social constructivism and intersectionality emphasize the lived realities and identities of individuals that exist within these structures. Peace education is the bridging tool that provides the ways to deal with such complexity while all students are leveraged toward acting as agents of peace for their communities.

This article analyzed the interaction between external interventions and established Kurdish cultural norms in sustaining traditional power structures. These processes often normalize structural and cultural forms of violence, hiding their visibility and promoting a lack of scrutiny within local communities. The study underscores the imperative of critically analyzing education and culture to promote lasting peace by exploring these dimensions and warns of the serious implications of overlooking structural and cultural factors.

Below I suggest recommendations for supporting a future characterized by justice, equality, and sustainable peace by addressing the particular obstacles encountered by students, and equipping them with the skills, information, and opportunities necessary for success.

Recommendations

Peace and conflict studies in the humanities: micro-teaching resources

Universities need to develop interdisciplinary peace education programs across humanities departments including modules on conflict resolution practices rooted in Kurdish traditions while integrating global peacebuilding theories. Including components on critical thinking and negotiation skills would empower students to address local conflicts constructively.



Enhancing practical conflict resolution training

Incorporate practical conflict resolution training involving programs and activities involving conflict resolution, mediation, and negotiation workshops and simulation exercises for practical exposure.

Civic engagement for those who are pessimistic about a peace process

Establish student-driven peace initiatives to engage youths in active peacebuilding. The younger generation's interest in societal change and their exposure to diverse perspectives (e.g., through IDPs and refugees) offer fertile ground for peace education.

Promoting awareness of cultural transformations

Promote community-based dialogue programs to bridge cultural and generational gaps.

Also, educational programs need to include critically examining cultural traditions to understand their evolving role in modern conflict dynamics.

Policy frameworks

Advocate for policies on peace education focusing on young people as change-makers, including preparing universities in collaboration with civil society organizations to develop programs on peacebuilding and inter-community dialogue. Promote initiatives to preserve Kurdish historical narratives while encouraging critical examination to avoid perpetuating divisive rhetoric.

Resource mobilization

By partnering with international organizations, universities can provide funding, training, and resources to implement peace education effectively.

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