

The role of strategic planning in addressing Iraqi youth migration

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Abstract

Purpose – This study examines the role of strategic planning in reducing youth migration in Iraq by promoting sustainable development. It highlights how comprehensive strategies can address economic, political, and environmental drivers of migration, offering practical alternatives for a stable future for Iraqi youth.

Design/methodology/approach – A descriptive–analytical qualitative approach was used, combining a literature review with a structured workshop of 100 political science students. Data from focused group discussions were thematically coded to explore youth perceptions of migration and the role of strategic planning.

Findings – Results indicate that economic diversification, green economy promotion, sustainable employment, education reform, and political stability can reduce migration. Coherent policies, cross-sector collaboration, and innovative models like Masdar City demonstrate sustainable development and technological innovation.

Research limitations/implications – This study has some limitations, including a small sample of 100 students from the College of Political Science at the University of Baghdad and reliance on qualitative data, which may be subject to bias. Nevertheless, the findings provide useful insights into the drivers of youth migration in Iraq and offer practical guidance for policymakers and institutions. Future research could include larger samples and additional regions to strengthen the results.

Practical implications – The finding of this study have several practical implications for addressing youth migration in Iraq. First, the fragile security condition and ongoing conflicts indicate the need for targeted programs that ensure the safety and engagement of young people in affected regions. Second, the high rates of unemployment and limited economic opportunities highlight the importance of developing sustainable employment initiatives, particularly in sectors such as renewable energy, smart agriculture and green technologies, to retain young talent. Third, environmental challenges, including climate change and resource scarcity, call for programs that support climate-resilient livelihoods for youth. Fourth, weak governmental policies and the absence of a comprehensive legal framework for migration suggest the necessity of implementing clear, actionable policies that connect migration management with social and economic development objectives. Finally, the ongoing brain drain emphasizes the importance of strengthening educational and vocational training programs, improving public services and promoting good governance to enhance institutional trust and reduce incentives for migration. These measures collectively provide actionable guidance for policymakers and institutions seeking to retain youth, reduce brain drain and promote sustainable development in Iraq.

Originality/value – The study addresses a contemporary issue by applying Bryson’s strategic planning model as an analytical framework to mitigate Iraqi youth migration, integrating the Sustainable Development Goals and green economy initiatives. This innovative approach provides a novel, policy-oriented perspective and actionable insights for policymakers seeking sustainable and effective solutions.

Keywords Youth migration, Strategic planning, Sustainable development, Green economy, Good governance

Paper type Research article

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1. Introduction

Youth migration in Iraq has intensified over the past decades due to ongoing armed conflicts and persistent political and economic instability. Since the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), through the Gulf War (1990–1991) and the period of economic sanctions (1993–2003), and continuing into the post-2003 US invasion era, Iraq has experienced successive waves of both forced and voluntary migration ([International Organization for Migration, 2023b](#)). This phenomenon escalated significantly following the seizure of five Iraqi provinces by the ISIS

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terrorist organization in 2014 (Obaid, 2021) compelling an increasing number of young people to seek better opportunities abroad.

Despite Iraq's abundant natural resources, particularly its oil wealth, the combination of economic deterioration, high unemployment rates, weakened infrastructure, and ineffective development policies has contributed to a growing propensity for youth migration. According to the (Arab barometer, 2022), 46% of male youth and 31% of female youth express a desire to migrate, particularly through irregular channels, reflecting a widening deficit of confidence in the country's economic prospects and institutional effectiveness.

The significance of this study lies in examining the relationship between strategic planning and youth migration within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis that supports policymakers in developing national strategies capable of mitigating the loss of human capital and promoting sustainable development. In doing so, it seeks to bridge the gap between strategic policymaking and the urgent need to address the socio-economic and institutional challenges faced by young Iraqis.

This study specifically seeks to analyze the role of strategic planning in addressing the root causes of youth migration in Iraq, assess the impact of institutional gaps and governance weaknesses on youth migration decisions, and propose a strategic national framework aligned with the SDGs. Such a framework would focus on promoting entrepreneurship, creating green jobs, and improving the investment climate, thereby fostering a more stable and sustainable environment.

Accordingly, the primary research question guiding this study is: To what extent can strategic planning, grounded in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), reduce the drivers of youth migration in Iraq? To answer this question, the study examines the main motivations behind youth migration economic, social, institutional, and environmental and explores how strategic planning can enhance trust in national institutions while aligning governmental policies with sustainable development objectives.

Based on these considerations, the study hypothesizes that improving the effectiveness of strategic planning and systematically linking it with the SDGs can reduce youth migration in Iraq by creating a stable economic and social environment, enhancing access to decent and sustainable employment, supporting entrepreneurship, and strengthening confidence in national institutions.

To address this hypothesis, the study is divided into interconnected sections to ensure a clear and logical flow. It begins with the introduction, followed by the theoretical framework and literature review. The methodology section outlines the approaches and tools used for data collection and analysis. The results and analysis section examines migration trends in Iraq, its causes and impacts, and presents the findings of the field workshop with students. The discussion focuses on government efforts and the role of strategic planning in achieving sustainable development and reducing youth migration. Finally, the study concludes with practical recommendations aimed at improving migration management and enhancing opportunities for Iraqi youth.

2. Theoretical framework and literature review

This research is based on several academic theories that explain the phenomenon of migration and strategic planning frameworks to address it. On the sociological side, there is Ravenstein's (1885) push-pull theory, which posits that migration occurs because of the interaction of repulsive factors, such as unemployment and instability, with attractive factors, such as improved living standards in destination countries. It is also based on global systems theory, which explains migration because of economic disparities between developed and developing countries, making Iraqi youth more likely to seek better opportunities outside the country (Hagen-Zanker, 2008).

In addition, this research relies on the use of strategic planning as an analytical tool to understand the phenomenon and provide practical solutions to reduce it. John Bryson theory of strategic planning is an important analytical framework that helps governments design initiative-taking policies to manage migration by increasing employment opportunities, improving the entrepreneurial environment, and developing sustainable development plans

that create an attractive environment for young people within Iraq. Bryson emphasizes the importance of analyzing the internal and external environment, engaging stakeholders, and developing a clear strategic vision based on correct data (Bryson, 2004).

Studies indicate that youth migration in Arab countries is a structural phenomenon influenced by intertwined economic, governance, and sustainable development challenges, with variations in the severity and nature of these crises across countries. In Iraq, (Abdulla *et al.*, 2023) highlighted unemployment and the lack of economic opportunities as the primary drivers of youth migration, while (Ibraheem and Freh, 2018) emphasized that the fragility of economic policies has made migration a “necessity” rather than a voluntary choice. Furthermore, (Ibrahim, 2013) pointed out that the depletion of skilled human resources poses a direct threat to development sustainability, reflecting the insufficient utilization of human capital as a developmental lever.

In Tunisia, (Al-Shibani and Abdallah, 2021) reported that high youth unemployment was the main factor behind irregular migration to Europe, and that post-2011 state responses largely consisted of temporary employment programs and partial measures, lacking strategic planning, mirroring Iraq’s gap in effective strategic approaches to migration. In Syria, economic and social factors converge with security concerns, as war and insecurity constitute the primary drivers of youth migration (Shaheen, 2023), while climate change and drought exacerbate pressures on young people and increase internal displacement (Angermayr *et al.*, 2022; International Organization for Migration, 2022). In Egypt, demonstrated the impact of coastal erosion on population displacement, highlighting the need for governance and environmental justice policies, which parallels challenges in Iraqi and Syrian regions affected by water scarcity and drought (Temur, 2025).

Regarding security and strategic dimensions, on Morocco shows that managing irregular migration requires an integrated approach combining security and development, a framework currently lacking in Iraq. Comparing these cases reveals that youth across Arab countries share key migration drivers, including unemployment, lack of opportunities, insecurity, and exposure to socio-environmental crises, although the intensity of these factors and governmental responses differ (Sdairi, 2021).

This study distinguishes itself by offering an integrated approach that links strategic planning with sustainable development goals to address youth migration. Unlike prior literature, which treats migration because of isolated economic, social, environmental, or security crises, this research combines these factors within a unified strategic vision aimed at promoting economic growth, enhancing governance, efficiently managing resources, and building resilient communities. It provides a practical and strategic framework illustrating how strategic planning can reduce the depletion of human capital and address the structural causes of migration, thereby filling a clear gap in previous studies.

3. Conceptual framework and analytical model

Building on established migration theories and strategic planning literature, this study develops an integrated analytical framework to examine youth migration in Iraq. Push–pull theory and world-systems theory are employed to explain the structural and individual drivers of migration, including unemployment, political instability, economic inequality, and disparities in global labor markets. While these approaches provide important explanatory insights, they offer limited guidance regarding how state-level strategic interventions can mitigate migration pressures in post-conflict settings.

To address this gap, the study incorporates Bryson’s strategic planning model as a governance-centered analytical lens. Strategic planning is conceptualized as a mediating institutional mechanism through which public policy can influence key migration drivers. Specifically, the effectiveness of strategic planning shapes four interrelated dimensions aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): economic opportunity creation, institutional performance, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability. Improvements in

these dimensions are expected to reduce structural push factors and enhance youth confidence in national institutions, thereby influencing migration outcomes.

The framework is further contextualized within Iraq's post-conflict and rentier-state structure, where institutional fragility and resource dependency constrain policy implementation and long-term planning capacity. By systematically integrating migration theory with strategic governance analysis, the study develops a structured analytical model that links migration drivers to the effectiveness of state planning.

The originality of this study lies in integrating migration theory with strategic planning as a governance mechanism for addressing youth migration. While existing studies largely focus on descriptive explanations of migration drivers or offer general policy recommendations, this research introduces a policy-oriented analytical model that conceptualizes strategic planning as a mediating variable linking governance performance and migration outcomes. In this framework, youth migration is analyzed as a dependent outcome shaped by the interaction between strategic planning capacity and sustainable development performance, rather than merely as a descriptive social phenomenon.

This integrated approach provides both theoretical and practical contributions. By combining migration theory, strategic governance, and sustainable development dimensions within a single analytical structure, the study advances the literature on migration governance and demonstrates how strategic planning can influence the structural drivers of youth migration. Moreover, the framework offers a systematic basis for assessing governance effectiveness in fragile rentier states such as Iraq.

Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework of the study, illustrating the relationship between Iraq's post-conflict and rentier-state context, the adapted Bryson strategic planning model, the sustainable development dimensions, and youth migration drivers and outcomes.

4. Methodology

This study employed a descriptive–analytical approach, dividing the research into two main components: a theoretical section and an empirical section. The theoretical component relied on the descriptive–analytical method to examine the most relevant literature and previous studies related to the topic, providing the conceptual foundation necessary to understand the structural drivers of youth migration. The empirical component focused on collecting qualitative data that help interpret the phenomenon from both cognitive and strategic perspectives.

A structured discussion workshop was utilized as the primary data collection tool. The workshop adopted a focused group discussion format that allowed participants to freely express their perceptions, motivations, and lived experiences related to migration. This tool aimed to uncover prevailing patterns of thought, assess the impact of the absence of effective strategic planning on young people's desire to migrate, and explore their views regarding governance quality and the management of national development priorities.

The sample was selected purposively and consisted of one hundred students from the College of Political Science at the University of Baghdad. This selection was justified by the assumption that students in this field possess a high level of critical awareness and an academic background that enables them to analyze issues of governance, policy-making, and strategic planning. Their insights were therefore considered suitable for generating in-depth qualitative data relevant to the goals of the study.

The qualitative data extracted from the workshop were analyzed using systematic thematic coding, through which ideas and quotations were categorized into major themes that emerged during the discussions. This analytical procedure facilitated the organization of the material into coherent categories that explain the relationship between migration drivers and the absence of effective strategic planning. These themes were later presented in analytical tables within the results section.

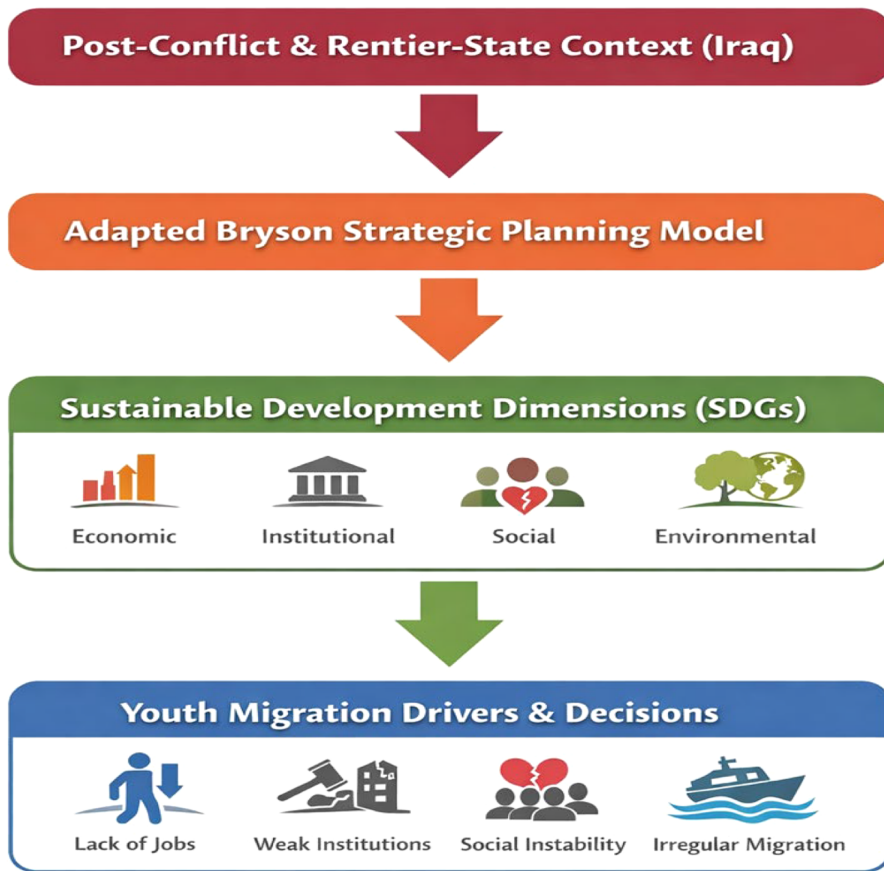


Figure 1. Conceptual framework linking strategic planning and youth migration in Iraq. Source: Prepared by author

Despite the rigor of the methodological procedures, the study faced several limitations. The sample was restricted to students from a single college within one university, which limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader Iraqi youth population. Additionally, some viewpoints may have been influenced by subjective biases, including social desirability. Nevertheless, the use of a structured workshop and a systematic qualitative analysis provided a strong methodological framework that enhanced the reliability of the findings and offered a nuanced interpretation of the phenomenon.

5. Results and analysis

5.1 Migration and displacement in Iraq: an analysis of trends and data (2014–2024)

Forced displacement and migration represent two of the most pressing humanitarian challenges facing Iraq in recent decades. Once a destination for migrants during the 1970s, Iraq has, since the 1990 Gulf War, transformed into a major country of origin for migration. These dynamics have become deeply embedded in the country's social and economic fabric.

According to a study by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), multiple factors have driven millions of Iraqis to seek asylum in Europe and other Western countries, most notably unemployment and insecurity. Although five million Iraqis have returned from abroad due to legal, social, or economic challenges in host countries, nations such as Finland and Germany remain key destinations. The study also reveals that half of the returnees wanted to migrate again, citing persistent economic hardship and a lack of employment opportunities in Iraq (International Organization for Migration, 2023a, b).

Statistical data between 2014 and 2024 show significant fluctuations in the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and Iraqi refugees. In 2014, internal displacement peaked at 3.6 million due to the rise of ISIS. However, with the recapture of territory, the number of IDPs declined to under two million by 2018, reflecting a relative improvement in security conditions. Conversely, the refugee population dropped from 369,960 in 2014 to approximately 264,000 in 2015, with next fluctuations influenced by global asylum policies. By 2024, the number of Iraqi refugees stood at 322,904, while IDPs totaled 1,098,913 underscoring Iraq's ongoing struggle to achieve full post-conflict stabilization.

These trends are also linked to rising rates of irregular migration, especially among youth, which has contributed to a significant brain drain. As of 2024, data from the Global Migration Data Portal reported 2.3 million Iraqi migrants globally, standing for 0.9% of the national population. Youth aged 15–24 made up 22% of migrants, while those under nineteen accounted for 32.8%. Women formed 45.9% of the migrant population, while individuals over sixty-five formed only 3%, highlighting that migration is concentrated among working-age youth (Migration Data Portal, 2025).

Table 1 outlines changes in the number of refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons, while Figure 2 illustrates temporal trends in displacement over the past decade. Internal displacement reached its peak in 2014 and 2015 due to intensified armed conflict but gradually declined following military operations and the return of some IDPs. Although refugee numbers decreased slightly post-2015, Iraq is still among the top ten countries in terms of refugee and asylum-seeker populations (Refugee Data Finder - Data Finder, 2025).

These figures highlight the persistent structural challenges impeding Iraq's recovery. Addressing this crisis requires the adoption of comprehensive development strategies aimed at mitigating youth migration and fostering long-term socioeconomic stability.

It is seen that the rise in migration rates coincides with periods of political instability and high unemployment rates, highlighting the role of economic factors in driving individuals to migrate. The slight decline in some years can be attributed to factors such as improvements in

Table 1. Migration and displacement data in Iraq during the period (2014–2024)

Year	Refugees	Asylum seekers	IDPs	Others
2014	369,960	103,724	3,596,356	3,307
2015	264,086	237,168	4,403,287	3,598
2016	316,056	278,367	3,604,285	15,778
2017	362,056	272,627	2,615,988	11,227
2018	372,332	256,716	1,802,832	7,901
2019	336,274	302,741	1,414,632	31,760
2020	333,200	272,567	1,224,108	31,258
2021	343,899	254,454	1,186,556	30,456
2022	287,446	228,961	1,168,619	28,805
2023	329,032	192,202	1,123,663	2,032
2024	322,904	174,986	1,098,913	20,340

Source(s): Refugee Data Finder

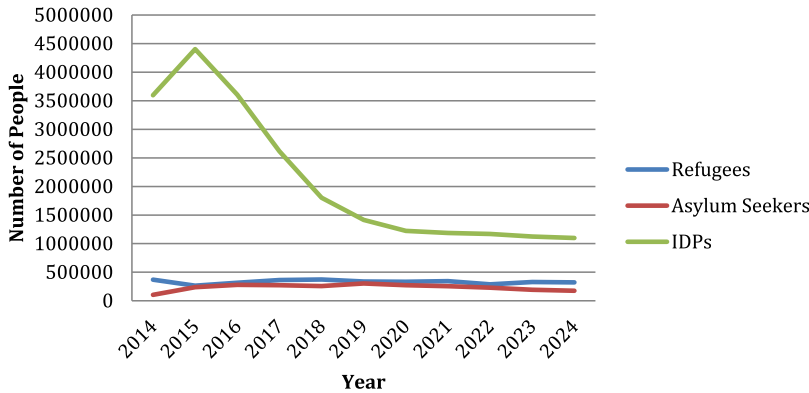


Figure 2. Temporal trends of displacement and refugees in Iraq (2014–2024). Source: Prepared by author using data from Refugee Data Finder

security conditions or travel restrictions, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. This underscores the need for a deeper analysis of the impact of economic and social factors on individuals’ migration decisions.

5.2 Push factors of youth migration in Iraq

5.2.1 Political and security factors. The Iraqi environment faces numerous challenges, reaching a point where the strategic framework of the state is under threat. The instability within Iraq’s security environment is the primary reason for the migration of youth and skilled professionals. This instability manifests through wars and internal conflicts, notably the rise of terrorist organizations. While Iraq succeeded in dropping ISIS (the Islamic State), there are still active terrorist cells, along with movements from a new generation of extremist ideologies and the children of ISIS members (referred to as the “Caliphate Generation” in ISIS literature). Additionally, violence has become a widespread societal phenomenon in Iraq, compounded by the proliferation of weapons and non-state armed groups (Majeed Hameed, 2020). Many Iraqis, particularly professionals such as academics and doctors, have been subjected to killing and displacement. According to reports, since 2003, at least one hundred doctors have been killed, and over 250 others have been arrested across the country (UNAMI, 2006).

The youth segment is one of the most significant groups considering migration in search of a better life and future. This is due to the absence of strategic planning by political leadership to address their needs. The failure to accommodate their aspirations has led to the emergence of a generation of protestors rejecting corruption and the political process. The political class, which does not stand for the interests of the public but rather reflects regional, familial, and sectarian interests, has led to compounded crises political, economic, and healthcare-related since the formation of successive Iraqi governments since 2003. Iraq ranks 136th globally for corruption and eighth among Arab countries in the 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index by Transparency International, which told that governments hindered by corruption are unable to protect their citizens (Corruption Perceptions Index, 2025).

Amidst these compounded issues, Iraq saw protests starting in October 2019, which were initially centered around the lack of public services and job opportunities. The demands expanded to include calls for political reform and changes to the electoral system, aiming to enhance national identity under the slogan “We Want a country.” After these protests, many young people, particularly women, were subjected to violence, including killings and threats (Alkhudary, 2024).

Political oppression and corruption generate a sense of frustration and marginalization, which are among the key driving factors behind migration. Deprivation of basic rights, including restrictions on political freedoms, freedom of expression, and political exclusion, as well as the absence of human rights principles and respect for civil liberties, create an environment where individuals feel unsafe. This is often accompanied by an urge to escape this harsh reality, with migration being viewed as one of the most effective solutions in the search for refuge (Namuq and Al-Bayati, 2021).

Iraq suffers from the disappearance of civil society and the personalization of state institutions, leading to the exclusion of citizenship and the rise of discrimination and authoritarianism. This has created a fragile social and political structure that continues to affect the societal reality today. Although there are indicators of coexistence at a general level, there is a lack of cultural, social, and political coexistence that embraces diversity. Consequently, political actions and the logic of political pluralism in Iraq have been characterized by conflict rather than competition, division instead of cohesion, and tension rather than reconciliation.

5.2.2 Economic factors. Economic factors represent a fundamental driver of youth migration in Iraq, particularly given the country's ongoing challenges in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The failure to achieve SDG 1 (No Poverty) is strongly correlated with increasing migration aspirations among the youth. According to the 2024 Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), 36.8% of Iraq's population experiences multidimensional poverty, with a deprivation intensity of 29.4%, while income poverty stands at 17.5%. The disparity between rural and urban areas is especially pronounced, as rural poverty reaches nearly 60%, creating a significant push factor for both internal and international migration (Republic of Iraq, Ministry of Planning, and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2024).

Unemployment further exacerbates these pressures: 12.7% of the population suffers direct deprivation due to lack of employment, while an additional 16.5% experience underemployment. These figures indicate that a substantial portion of Iraqi youth faces limited access to sustainable livelihoods, which motivates them to seek opportunities elsewhere. The high concentration of poverty in rural areas also explains the prevalence of migration from these regions, where lack of agricultural and industrial opportunities leaves young people with few viable options (Republic of Iraq, Ministry of Planning, and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2024).

The persistence of poverty and labor market challenges cannot be attributed to resource scarcity. Rather, they stem from structural issues including prolonged conflicts, concentration of state resources under ruling elites, insufficient equitable distribution mechanisms, political factionalism, and the absence of effective poverty reduction strategies. Iraq's economy remains heavily dependent on oil revenues, which constitute approximately 95% of the federal budget. This reliance on volatile global oil markets undermines GDP growth, limits the expansion of productive sectors such as agriculture and industry, and reduces the creation of sustainable employment opportunities (Al-Sultani and Shadha, 2023).

Recent federal budgets (2023–2025) reflect a marked expansion in public spending, with total expenditures exceeding \$153 billion in 2023 alone. While this indicates fiscal capability, it also raises concerns regarding the rapid depletion of unanticipated oil revenues and delays in implementing structural reforms necessary for a sustainable economy (Law No. 13 of 2023 Concerning the Federal General Budget of the Republic of Iraq for the Fiscal Years, 2023–2025, 2023). Furthermore, Iraq's Human Development Index (HDI) declined from 0.686 in 2021 to 0.643 in 2022, placing it 128th globally and well below the global average of 0.739 (United Nations Development Programme, 2024). This decline highlights broader setbacks in sustainable development and reflects the compounded effect of poverty, unemployment, and limited access to services on youth migration decisions.

Taken together, these data suggest that economic instability, structural inequalities, and lack of sustainable employment are primary push factors driving Iraqi youth to migrate. Addressing these challenges through effective strategic planning adopting Bryson's model and

aligning policies with the SDGs can strengthen economic stability, expand access to decent employment, support entrepreneurship, and enhance youth confidence in national institutions, thereby mitigating the economic drivers of migration and supporting the study's hypothesis.

5.2.3 *Climatic factors.* Iraq is facing a range of environmental challenges. According to the sixth Global Environment Outlook (GEO-6) report for the West Asia region, Iraq ranks fifth among the countries most affected by climate change. In recent decades, the country has experienced increasingly severe climate phenomena such as extreme temperatures, insufficient and irregular rainfall, drought, water scarcity, and the frequent occurrence of sandstorms, dust storms, and floods (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2021). These environmental stresses have had significant adverse effects on Iraqi youth, with harsh climatic conditions appearing as a major threat to their livelihoods and well-being.

Climate-induced migration has become one of the key coping strategies adopted by Iraqi families in response to environmental degradation and climate variability. Thousands of Iraqis have lost their homes, jobs, and even lives because of the persistent impacts of climate change, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected regions. Climate change functions as a threat multiplier, worsening existing vulnerabilities. Declining agricultural productivity, reduced employment opportunities in farming, farmers' inability to afford animal feed, and the failure of government institutions to implement effective climate adaptation policies especially in impoverished provinces have all contributed to the displacement of many young people, who are forced to leave their communities in search of better job opportunities, water, and food security.

This has led to an increase in the number of affected populations and has fueled further conflict and social tensions. In areas previously controlled by the terrorist group ISIS north of Baghdad such as Kirkuk, Nineveh, and Diyala many families have been displaced. In Nineveh, Al-Ba'aj, and Al-Hadar, for instance, approximately 303 families were displaced. Southern provinces have also seen prominent levels of internal migration due to climate change impacts. Basra, Dhi Qar, and Maysan recorded the highest rates of migration, due to water scarcity, pollution, and salinity. According to the International Organization for Migration, 2,058 families were displaced in 2021 alone. Additionally, heavy rainfall and resulting floods destroyed homes and forced further displacement in provinces such as Karbala, Qadisiyah, Najaf, and Wasit, affecting around 937 families (IOM, 2022).

Looking ahead, rising sea levels are projected to cause flooding in southern Iraq by 2050, potentially submerging parts of Basra, Dhi Qar, and Maysan (UNDP, UNFPA and Government of Iraq, 2025). These projections are based on official, scientifically grounded sources, ensuring that the analysis is evidence-based rather than speculative.

5.3 Effects of Iraqi youth migration

Iraq has seen a significant outflow of youth migration, which has profound impacts across economic, social, cultural, and security dimensions. Economically, this migration leads to the depletion of human capital, particularly among scientifically and technically skilled young individuals who form a critical foundation for national growth. Reports from the Arab Barometer (2022) reveal a widespread desire among Iraqi youth to emigrate, with approximately 46% of males and 31% of females expressing willingness to leave the country. This trend negatively affects sustainable human development rates. Youth constitute about 46% of the total population, highlighting (Arab barometer, 2022) their pivotal role in driving political change and societal development, as demonstrated by the October Revolution movement in Iraq.

On another front, migration contributes to the deterioration of healthcare and educational services in Iraq, especially since 2003. Both sectors suffer from a severe shortage of qualified personnel due to the emigration of doctors, engineers, and university professors, further worsening the existing challenges. Furthermore, migrants face a loss of social security, as host countries do not recognize them as refugees, while Iraq considers them citizens without access

to benefits, exposing them to substantial economic and livelihood risks. ([The Waston school of international and public affairs 2023](#)).

Politically and security-wise, irregular migration exposes individuals to significant dangers. Many undertake illegal routes through Turkey to Greece and other countries, risking their lives and those of their families. Hundreds of migrants have been reported dead or missing due to these perilous journeys. Additionally, migration networks reinforce connections between terrorist groups and smuggling gangs, as these groups exploit trafficking routes to infiltrate their operatives into stable countries, thereby heightening security threats.

Socially and culturally, migration alters the community structure by depleting stable local elements, particularly males, which affects family cohesion and social fabric. The situation worsens if host countries do not integrate migrants effectively, leading to the emergence of new generations with differing cultural backgrounds and increasing intergenerational disparities. In some cases, migrants become vulnerable to recruitment by armed or terrorist groups due to experiences of oppression and harsh conditions, posing further risks to national security ([Sdairi, 2021](#)).

Migration leads to the depletion of creative human resources that could have contributed to innovation across various sectors, thereby limiting the state's ability to achieve development and reform. On the international level, irregular migration may place additional pressure on host countries due to the rising number of undocumented migrants, which can create diplomatic tensions that negatively affect Iraq's foreign relations.

These multifaceted impacts stand for a major challenge to Iraq's national security, calling for urgent attention from the Iraqi government and host countries to address this phenomenon and develop comprehensive solutions to mitigate the adverse effects of migration on individuals, society, and the state.

5.4 Field workshop result with coded data table

The findings of the field workshop, which was based on a focus group discussion involving 100 students, provide a clear understanding of the factors influencing youth migration in Iraq. Through content analysis of the participants' contributions, it emerged that political and security factors constituted the dominant theme of the discussion. Issues of weak security and ongoing terrorist threats accounted for approximately 80% of the interventions, while political corruption and declining trust in governmental institutions were raised in roughly 57% of the comments. Furthermore, an estimated 54% of participants voiced concerns about the absence of strategic planning directed at youth. [Table 2](#) summarizes the coded findings of the workshop.

Table 2. Summary of coded workshop findings (approximate percentages)

Factor category	Number of participants	Approx. Percentage
Weak Security and Terrorism	80	80%
Political Corruption	57	57%
Lack of Strategic Planning	54	54%
Limited Employment Opportunities	65	65%
Difficulty Improving Living Std	60	60%
Socio-cultural and Safety Issues	20	20%
Environmental/Climate Factors	40	40%

Note(s): Percentages are approximate, derived from content analysis of focus group discussions

Economic factors also featured prominently as drivers of migration. Approximately 65% of the students discussed limited employment opportunities and low wages, and about 60% emphasized the difficulty of improving living standards within the country.

With respect to socio-cultural and environmental-climatic factors, around 20% of participants addressed the impacts of post-2019 violence and an increased sense of insecurity among women, while an estimated 40% of students pointed to climate change and environmental degradation as negatively affecting natural resources, agricultural productivity, and related employment opportunities.

A holistic reading of the discussion, as illustrated in [Table 2](#), indicates a clear hierarchy of influence: political-security and economic factors are the principal drivers prompting youth to contemplate migration, whereas socio-cultural and environmental-climatic factors hold a secondary but non-negligible role. These results correspond with priorities embedded in the Sustainable Development Goals, notably Goal 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), Goal 5 (Gender Equality), and Goal 13 (Climate Action).

The findings also indicate that the principal drivers of youth migration—such as weak governance, unemployment, and service deterioration—align with what Bryson’s Strategic planning Model identifies as strategic issues that must be addressed prior to formulating a forward-looking vision. Participants’ inputs reflect a realistic assessment of internal and external environments, constituting a pivotal step in the strategic-planning process. The results additionally emphasize the central role of youth as key stakeholders who should be actively involved in policy development, serving as a foundational element for shaping proposed strategies to reduce migration.

6. Discussion

The study’s findings indicate that the primary causes of migration in Iraq are rooted in the lack of strategic planning in government actions to address the structural factors behind this phenomenon. Although the government adopted the National Migration Management Strategy in 2020, which included protecting migrants’ rights, organizing voluntary return, and establishing a centralized database ([Migration Policies in the Arab Region, 2025](#)), the strategy primarily focused on managing migration as an existing phenomenon rather than addressing its underlying causes, such as weak governance, dependence on oil revenues, and declining public trust in governmental institutions.

On the security front, the government enhanced border officers’ capacities through specialized committees and training programs in collaboration with international organizations such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and NATO, aiming to regulate migrant flows and combat irregular migration. Despite the effectiveness of these measures in controlling migration, they do not address the structural causes of migration, highlighting the need for a more comprehensive approach that integrates security measures with economic and social reforms ([IOM, 2020](#)).

Regarding legislation, the government has implemented partial laws to combat irregular migration and transboundary crimes, notably Law No. 28 of 2012 on Combating Human Trafficking, which criminalizes sexual exploitation and forced labor. While this law reflects adherence to international standards, it does not provide a comprehensive framework for migration management, reflecting the government’s reliance on fragmented legislation rather than a unified law capable of ensuring social justice and comprehensive protection for migrants ([Official Gazette of Iraq, 2012](#)).

In the economic and social dimension, the government has implemented policies to attract Iraqi talent from abroad through “reverse brain drain” programs and customs exemptions, aiming to reintegrate returning professionals and provide them with housing or land. These efforts reflect an attempt to rebalance the system within the framework of world-systems theory, where Iraq is classified as a semi-peripheral state experiencing a continuous brain drain

to core countries. Nevertheless, these policies often focus on short-term solutions rather than addressing the deep-rooted causes of migration, such as unemployment, poor public service quality, and limited future opportunities for youth, as highlighted in the workshop on youth expectations and concerns (IOM, 2020).

At the international level, Iraq has formal cooperation agreements to combat human trafficking, including participation in the Bali Process since 2002, collaboration with INTERPOL, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, and the International Labour Organization (IOM, 2020). Agreements also include the EU Partnership Agreement, which involves cooperation on migration and the implementation of national legislation in line with the 1951 Geneva Convention and its 1967 Protocol, while adhering to the principle of non-refoulement. Furthermore, Iraq has signed agreements with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to support youth assessment, policy improvement, programs, and budgets targeting young people, who represent approximately 33% of the population aged 10–24 and are expected to reach 17.3 million by 2031, aiming to enhance their participation in achieving sustainable development goals (Official Gazette of Iraq, 2014).

Despite these diverse efforts, analyses reveal that governmental policies remain limited and fragmented, failing to fully address the structural causes of migration. Based on these gaps, there is an urgent need for comprehensive strategic planning that links migration management to sustainable development goals. From a development perspective, this planning encompasses four interrelated dimensions: economic, social, health, and environmental, which constitute the core pillars for creating a sustainable environment (Zhovnirchuk *et al.*, 2023) that reduces migration drivers and promotes youth integration.

The economic dimension is a fundamental pillar of sustainable development, including enhancing productivity, creating employment opportunities, and improving the national economy's competitiveness. Economic pressures on Iraqi youth are evident due to the stagnation in industry, agriculture, and services over past decades, coupled with excessive reliance on oil as the primary revenue source. Therefore, a national strategy capable of creating sustainable employment opportunities through policy reforms, support for productive sectors, promotion of entrepreneurship, and financing small and medium enterprises is essential. Additionally, investing in human capital through training and capacity-building programs aligned with labor market needs is a critical entry point for achieving economic growth in line with sustainable development goals, particularly in terms of providing decent work and strengthening the national economic structure (Arzrony, 2024).

The social dimension extends this comprehensive vision of sustainable development, focusing on improving quality of life, ensuring social justice, and empowering youth as a key demographic force. This includes reforming the education system, increasing funding for the sector, and improving curricula to foster citizenship and national belonging. Educational spending also reflects the state's economic philosophy; however, Iraq allocates only a small portion, approximately 10%, of government spending to education. To achieve meaningful progress, this share should be increased to at least 16%. Curricula must align with labor market needs and promote citizenship values. Quality education is vital for empowering youth and preparing them to face future challenges (Republic of Iraq, Prime Minister's Advisory Commission (PMAC), 2023). Labor force reports indicate that about 60% of Iraqi youth lack the skills required to enter the labor market. Integrating topics such as irregular migration into social studies, Arabic language, and civic education curricula, alongside training teachers and social workers to address these issues, could further mitigate migration drivers. Furthermore, improving quality of life through affordable housing and access to basic services is crucial to reducing migration rates (Republic of Iraq, Prime Minister's Advisory Commission (PMAC), 2023).

The health dimension represents another core pillar of sustainable development due to its direct impact on population well-being and stability. The Iraqi healthcare system has faced significant challenges over past decades, including insufficient funding, deteriorating

infrastructure, and a shortage of medical staff. WHO data indicate that health expenditure does not exceed 5.08% of GDP, while the organization recommends a minimum of 15% to ensure sustainable health outcomes. Consequently, developing digital and mobile health strategies has become increasingly important. WHO emphasizes the role of digital health in global strategies due to its positive impact on healthcare access, particularly for marginalized and displaced populations. These technologies help reduce healthcare costs and play a critical role in monitoring patients with chronic illnesses, preventing complications, and decreasing hospital admissions, especially in cases like diabetes and hypertension. Furthermore, digital and mobile health technologies facilitate effective real-time communication between healthcare providers and patients through internet connectivity and modern technological tools (EISMENA, 2024).

The environmental dimension is also integral to sustainable development and has become a decisive factor in explaining migration patterns in Iraq. Major environmental challenges, such as climate change, desertification, and water scarcity, have negatively impacted all productive sectors, including the labor market, prompting youth to seek more stable environments abroad. This underscores the importance of adopting a sustainable environmental strategy that supports the green economy and promotes renewable energy use while capitalizing on the country's vast spaces and natural resources. The green economy contributes to creating "green jobs," with the International Labour Organization estimating the potential to create 100 million new green jobs worldwide by 2030, including at least 25 million net new jobs (Organization, 2023). To capitalize on these opportunities, Iraq must support youth transition to new professions and enhance climate adaptation strategies, which are currently lacking in environmental migration policies. This aligns with national initiatives such as the Central Bank of Iraq's program to stimulate the national economy by providing financing to the banking sector, including concessional loans for citizens, supporting small and medium enterprises, and encouraging investment in renewable energy, such as solar power, contributing to the transition toward a green economy and aligning with Sustainable Development Goals 7 and 8.

Improving governance and security also forms a central dimension linking all previous pillars, as the success of any sustainable development plan depends on public trust in institutions, rule of law, anti-corruption measures, and social justice. When youth feel their rights are protected and opportunities for participation in national decision-making exist, their likelihood to migrate decreases, and their attachment to their communities increases. International cooperation and civil society empowerment are essential for effective migration management, as partnerships with international and regional organizations facilitate technical knowledge exchange and comprehensive policy development, while civil society ensures implementation oversight, transparency, and accountability. Regulatory and financial barriers limiting civil society participation in migration-related decision-making should also be removed (International Organization for Migration, 2023a,b).

Considering the above, it is evident that current governmental efforts in Iraq are limited and fragmented, addressing existing phenomena without tackling the root causes of migration. Therefore, comprehensive strategic planning, integrating economic, social, health, environmental, and political dimensions, represents a pivotal tool to redirect national development, ensure youth integration, and reduce migration, in line with Iraq's 2030 Sustainable Development Vision to build an empowered citizenry in a secure country, unified society, diversified economy, and sustainable environment characterized by justice and good governance. Achieving this vision requires national human development aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, focusing on eradicating marginalization and improving living conditions, starting with poverty reduction as a fundamental aim (Republic of Iraq, Ministry of Planning, 2019).

Figure 3 in this study illustrates the interaction among three core elements: strategic planning, sustainable development, and migration reduction. It highlights the mutual influence among these factors. Strategic planning serves as the foundation for sustainable development by

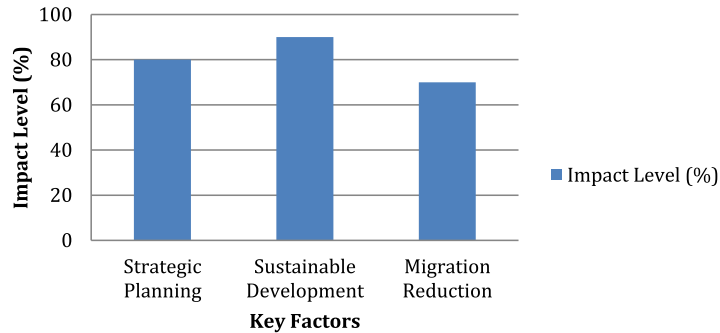


Figure 3. Relationship between strategic planning, sustainable development, and migration reduction. Source: Prepared by author

establishing long-term policies aimed at improving the business climate, enhancing infrastructure, and fostering innovation. Achieving sustainable development improves quality of life and creates new employment opportunities, reducing poverty and making staying in the country a more attractive option for youth. The figure emphasizes the integrative relationship among these elements; as the effectiveness of strategic planning increases, so does sustainable development, thereby lowering migration rates. Conversely, weak strategic planning leads to developmental decline, exacerbating the economic and social drivers of migration. Accordingly, adopting a comprehensive approach based on sustainable strategic planning will reduce migration by improving living conditions in Iraq, reinforcing economic and social stability, and providing youth with genuine opportunities for growth and development within their homeland.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

The absence of effective strategic planning by Iraq political leadership in addressing youth-related issues has significantly weakened the ability to engage and retain young people, contributing to the emergence of a protest generation that rejects corruption and lacks faith in the political process. Since 2003, successive Iraqi governments have faced overlapping political and economic crises, leading to increased unemployment and poverty rates. According to the 2024 Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), 36.8% of Iraq's population experiences multidimensional poverty, with a deprivation intensity of 29.4%, while income poverty stands at 17.5%. Unemployment reached 12.7% in 2024, with an additional 16.5% experiencing underemployment.

Furthermore, Iraq ranked 33rd globally in the 2023 Global Misery Index, reflecting deteriorating economic conditions. In terms of human development, Iraq slipped to 128th globally, with its Human Development Index (HDI) declining from 0.686 in 2021 to 0.643 in 2022, below the global average of 0.739. These conditions highlight persistent challenges that hinder stability and impede Iraq's progress toward achieving key Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly those related to poverty reduction, economic growth, governance, and social inclusion.

The study's key findings can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Fragile security conditions make up the primary driver of youth and skilled labor migration, resulting from wars, internal conflicts, and the emergence of terrorist organizations and irregular armed groups
- (2) Iraq's failure to achieve sustainable development objectives, particularly in eradicating poverty, reducing unemployment, and combating corruption, has made migration a crucial option for youth seeking a more stable and secure life.

- (3) Climate change and environmental degradation, such as desertification and water scarcity, have directly affected the labor market, leading to increased climate-induced migration among youth looking for a more stable environment.
- (4) Weak governmental policies in managing migration, with no comprehensive legal framework addressing migration, limit the effectiveness of official solutions.
- (5) The continuous brain drain exacerbates the loss of human capital, as host countries benefit from the skills and talents of migrating Iraqis, while Iraq faces persistent challenges in national development.

Based on the results of the interactive workshop with students, which highlighted the challenges and opportunities related to youth migration, we recommend the following measures to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals:

- (1) Aligning international experiences with Iraq's local context: the UAE's "Masdar City" project ([Masdar City, 2026](#)) demonstrates a comprehensive model for transforming desert environments into productive spaces through renewable energy and innovation. Iraq could benefit from adapting this model, particularly in Anbar, Basra, and other southern provinces, which share similar climatic conditions, including high solar radiation, vast unused lands, and arid climates. By applying this experience to the Iraqi context, sustainable development complexes could be established to provide renewable energy jobs for youth, such as solar panel installation and maintenance, low-energy cooling management, smart agriculture, and efficient water resource management. Furthermore, implementing public-private partnerships can attract investment in renewable energy projects, generate local economic opportunities, and reduce both internal and external migration pressures.
- (2) Developing national programs for youth employment in the green economy: Given that unemployment is a primary driver of youth migration, Iraq should launch training and guidance programs to prepare youth for work in solar and wind energy projects, as well as waste management, particularly in resource-rich provinces such as Basra, Nineveh, and Babylon. These programs will strengthen professional capacities, increase sustainable employment opportunities, and retain young talent within the country.
- (3) Investing in human capital and public services: The workshop revealed that many participants lack confidence in the quality of education and healthcare services, perceiving this as a major driver of migration. Iraq should therefore strengthen technical and vocational education programs to better align with the local labor market, while improving healthcare quality through infrastructure upgrades and professional development for teachers and medical staff. These measures will directly benefit youth, enhance institutional trust, and reduce the motivation to migrate.
- (4) Promoting good governance and combating corruption through youth engagement: With 57% of participants identifying corruption and weak political institutions as migration drivers, Iraq should implement transparent and accountable policies, strengthen judicial and integrity institutions, and enable meaningful youth participation in local decision-making, particularly in high-migration provinces. This will foster a sense of belonging, civic responsibility, and trust in state institutions.
- (5) Establishing a unified legal framework for migration management: The workshop revealed that many young people perceive a lack of clear migration policies. Iraq should develop a comprehensive legal framework linking migration to developmental, economic, and social policies, defining the causes and patterns of

migration, and including programs for the reintegration of returnees. This framework will enhance governance effectiveness and address the structural drivers of migration in the Iraqi context.

Ethical statement

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards. No identifiable personal data were used.

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