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Information as Peacebuilding: Grassroots Strategies Against Chemical Weapon Misinformation in Kurdistan

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Abstract

In the absence of effective international mechanisms to uphold the right to peace, access to accurate information becomes a critical bottom-up peacebuilding strategy. This paper examines how communities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq navigate the convergence of historical trauma with ongoing insecurity and mis/disinformation surrounding chemical weapon (CW) threats. The legacy of CW use – particularly the 1988 Halabja massacre – continues to shape Kurdish collective memory and risk perception, while more recent concerns linked to Islamic State reinforce persistent uncertainty. These dynamics are compounded by a fragmented and politicised media landscape marked by uneven regulation. Drawing on qualitative interviews with journalists, educators, and civil society actors, this study employs thematic analysis alongside discourse and narrative analysis. It examines how information is produced, perceived and, importantly, utilised. The findings show that CW-related memories function simultaneously as trauma and resilience, shaping identity and motivating civic engagement. Participants reported widespread mistrust in local media and emphasised the need for stronger informal verification practices and critical media literacy during crises. They also described emerging initiatives that integrate peace education and participatory knowledge production aimed at countering information disorder and strengthening social cohesion.

Building on critical peace education and epistemic justice frameworks, this paper argues that access to truthful, contextually grounded information can operate as both a protective resource and a form of civic resistance. It conceptualises information as peace infrastructure that enables human security in contexts of institutional fragility. The paper concludes by proposing a range of recommendations to strengthen informational resilience and support sustainable grassroots peacebuilding.

Keywords: *chemical weapons, peace education, misinformation, resilience, Kurdistan, genocide.*

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1. Introduction

In recent years, allegations of chemical attacks have repeatedly surfaced in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), arguably turning information into a weapon. Across multiple incidents, Kurdish media outlets accused Türkiye of deploying chemical agents against Kurdish fighters (Glynn 2022). These allegations were denied by Ankara (Reuters 2022), but amplified through Kurdish networks and international advocacy groups (Dri 2022). For Türkiye, such denials serve to reaffirm its legitimacy as a state operating within international law, defending both its armed forces and diplomatic standing. For Kurdish communities, by contrast, the circulation of these claims functions as a call for justice and recognition – a way to expose enduring vulnerability and demand international accountability.

In this asymmetrical information struggle, truth itself becomes a casualty. Different claims are leveraged by different actors for strategic advantage, and the factual accuracy of events grows increasingly difficult to establish. The result is a fractured information landscape in which rumours, trauma, and political interests intertwine. This deepens mistrust and obscures avenues to accountability.¹ Crucially, Kurdistan's lack of international recognition means that official bodies such as the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) have no mandate to conduct independent investigations, leaving local populations trapped in uncertainty between speculation and silence.

However, in this paper we seek to flip the script – by positioning information not as a source of division or manipulation, but as a potential resource for civic agency. We argue that, in contexts where formal mechanisms of protection and accountability remain limited or inaccessible, access to credible information can help communities navigate competing claims and resist confusion. For Kurdish communities historically unable to rely fully on either state institutions or international mechanisms following chemical violence, such bottom-up communication practices are becoming increasingly powerful.

Consequently, the guiding research question of this paper is: how can access to accurate information function as a form of grassroots peace² infrastructure

¹ In this paper, accountability extends beyond legal or political answerability; it refers to the capacity to maintain evidence-based responsibility by distinguishing incomplete and manipulated accounts, and by transparently justifying actions and decisions while accepting responsibility for them and their consequences.

² Peace is a sustained condition in which violence is absent or unlikely to recur, enabling people to live freely, safely and securely with dignity and respect. This should also mean that political competition and regional tensions are managed without brutality, and that everyday life can proceed without coercion.

for marginalised Kurdish communities facing chemical weapon (CW) information disorder?³ To address this question, we examine how trauma and mistrust in formal institutions shape community responses to inaccurate information and public risk communication in the KRI, particularly in the context of repeated chemical attacks. We begin by outlining relevant political context, including the legacy of the 1988 Halabja massacre, recurring fears of chemical threats during the conflict with Islamic State (IS), and the Kurdistan Region's semi-autonomous status in combination with its constrained media environment.

Building on this context, we argue that reliable and locally grounded information can help sustain conditions necessary for peace by strengthening chemical security,⁴ human security⁵ and resilience.⁶ We therefore approach information not only as a communication issue, but as a human rights concern connected to the right to truth and the broader right of peoples to peace (UNESCO 2026). Our analysis draws on peace education scholarship – particularly approaches that understand this as a participatory and community-driven process through which people can challenge hegemonic narratives, resisting manipulation and strengthening civic agency. Accordingly, this paper contributes to human rights scholarship by conceptualising access to truthful information as a practical form of grassroots peacebuilding in contexts where official international accountability mechanisms remain beyond meaningful reach.

More broadly, we argue that information literacy has become an increasingly important dimension of peace and security in digitally mediated conflict environments, where access to – or lack of – verified information shapes how communities experience and respond to chemical attacks. Drawing on

³ Misinformation is false information shared without intent to deceive, whereas disinformation is deliberately false information spread to mislead or cause harm. Malinformation refers to accurate information used in harmful ways, such as through decontextualisation or selective disclosure. Together these can be described as information disorder.

⁴ Chemical security entails an integrated set of preventive, protective, and response measures aimed at reducing risks from hazardous chemicals – including their theft, diversion, sabotage, or deliberate release. This also includes information that could enable or amplify such harms or undermine mitigation and emergency response.

⁵ Human security refers to protection from threats that undermine life, dignity, and wellbeing, including freedom from fear and freedom from want. It also encompasses conditions that enable meaningful participation in social and political life, such as the capacity of individuals to navigate and critically evaluate information.

⁶ Resilience refers to the ability to anticipate, adapt to, and recover from insecurity and disruption while maintaining social cohesion and collective agency. In this paper specifically, it refers to the skills to prepare for, detect, and respond to chemical threats or attacks, recover from their effects, communicate reliable information, support evidence collection, and preserve relevant records.

qualitative interviews, we examine how community initiatives in the KRI seek to address informational insecurity and rebuild social trust. In doing so, this paper highlights the tension between international neglect and local agency, showing how grassroots practices of information production and interpretation can support peacebuilding and resilience.

2. Historical and Political Context: Chemical Weapons and the Right to Peace in Kurdistan

2.1 Historical Trauma and Political Marginalisation

Many Kurds have now endured over a century of systemic oppression and displacement. Denied a nation-state and repeatedly subjected to state-led violence, Kurdish communities have faced genocide and mass killings, as well as suppression of basic political rights and aspirations for self-determination. Attempts to address these injustices – through negotiation or armed resistance – have been consistently undermined by governmental intransigence and mistrust (Lortz 2005; Rogg and Rimscha 2007; Tomàs and Vilellas 2009; Hama 2017; Washington Kurdish Institute 2025).

Within this historical trajectory, chemical attacks constitute particularly significant trauma. During the final phase of the Iran-Iraq War, the Anfal campaigns (23 February-6 September 1988) destroyed as many as 3,000 villages and killed an estimated 150,000-180,000 people (Trahan 2008). The devastating chemical assault on Halabja on 16 March 1988 stands out especially, profoundly shaping Kurdish collective memory (Kirmanj and Rafaat 2021). Awareness of Halabja influences not only local threat perceptions but also broader societal attitudes toward reconciliation and justice. When IS militants deployed chlorine gas decades later, these prior experiences reactivated both physical and psychological trauma, reinforcing the perception that international guarantees of ‘never again’ have historically failed to protect Kurdish communities (Stein 2018).

Notably, CW represent a distinctive form of violence. Unlike many conventional weapons, such as firearms, they are often difficult to immediately detect or verify. Some agents may be invisible, while others produce effects that resemble illness or environmental contamination. Understanding the risks and appropriate forms of protection usually requires specialised scientific and medical knowledge that many civilians do not possess, particularly if they have not been exposed to targeted education or awareness programmes. This uncertainty creates vulnerabilities that extend beyond physical harm.

However, in the absence of a sovereign nation-state, formal institutions have been largely unable to document chemical attacks against Kurdish communities – or support preservation of knowledge and build future resilience. As a result, oral histories and generational ‘post-memory’ have become central to preserving the past and shaping collective understanding. Although experiences of violence and displacement differ across regions, and the transmission and negotiation of these memories is complex – shaped by how different actors remember, interpret, and mobilise traumatic events – they converge around a shared sense of vulnerability and a legacy of human rights violations (Karim and Baser 2023; Muhammad *et al.* 2022).

2.2 Failures of International Protection and Legal Accountability

Despite the existence of extensive international legal frameworks – from the Strasbourg Agreement of 1675 and the Geneva Protocol of 1925 to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) of 1997 – enforcement has historically relied on the political will of states. Stateless populations like the Kurds, situated between competing sovereign jurisdictions, remain largely beyond the protective reach of these mechanisms. The Chemical Weapons Convention, which entered into force on 29 April 1997, represents the most comprehensive global treaty regulating CW (Bajgar *et al.* 2009). Complementing this, UN Security Council Resolution 1540 (28 April 2004) urges states to prohibit non-state actors from acquiring, producing, or using weapons of mass destruction – while mandating domestic enforcement measures, including border control and accounting. Yet, these measures remain primarily declarative in the absence of effective oversight and consistent implementation.

The discourse surrounding the right of peoples to peace, first articulated in the UN General Assembly Resolution 39/11 in 1984 and reaffirmed through the UN Declaration on the Right to Peace in 2016, illustrates the gap between normative recognition and practical enforceability. Within human rights scholarship, this right is increasingly understood not merely as the absence of armed conflict, but as the presence of conditions enabling human dignity, security, participation, and the meaningful exercise of other fundamental freedoms (Alston 1982; Evans 2012; Hassan 2024). However, its implementation likewise remains heavily dependent on state institutions and international cooperation. This produces a structural paradox in international law: while many human rights frameworks rely on states for enforcement, those most affected by violence and exclusion – particularly stateless or politically marginalised populations – are often least able to access these protections (Arendt 1973; Blitz 2009).

These structural limitations intersect with a related but distinct strand of human rights scholarship in transitional justice contexts, concerned with the ‘right to truth’. Emerging from struggles over enforced disappearances and mass atrocities, this right affirms the entitlement of victims and affected communities to access accurate information about past violence and historical injustice (Naqvi 2006; Bakiner 2015). Rather than functioning solely as a mechanism of legal accountability, truth-telling is a practice that supports recognition, and it can contribute to longer-term processes of social repair and non-recurrence (Hassan 2024). In contexts like the KRI, where official investigations are absent or denied, access to credible information becomes an important avenue through which claims to justice can be articulated.

2.3 From Epistemic Vulnerability to Grassroots Infrastructures of Agency

The KRI enjoys relatively greater media openness than the Republic of Iraq, yet its semi-autonomous status has produced a fragmented information ecosystem shaped by party loyalties and weak institutional safeguards (Winthrop 2022; Homan *et al.* 2025). This unique landscape leaves Kurdish communities particularly susceptible to CW information disorder.

Many Iraqi Kurdish journalists enter the profession without formal academic training in journalism and ethics, while the absence of comprehensive media legislation and robust privacy protections complicates the regulatory environment. Although Press Law No. 35 of 2007 improved upon the restrictive Publication Law No. 10 of 1993 by removing direct censorship for periodicals, it primarily governs print media and does not adequately address convergent digital platforms such as audio, visual, and web-based journalism (Aivas 2017). What is more, entrenched distrust present in societies with histories of betrayal and marginalisation can simultaneously result in both heightened scepticism toward authoritative sources and greater susceptibility to inaccurate information (Amazeen *et al.* 2024).

This informational asymmetry deepens existing insecurity. It is part of a wider context of institutional neglect that has left Kurdish communities exposed to recurrent threats to life and rights. In response, local actors have developed their own practices to preserve collective memory and strengthen community resilience. These include documentation initiatives and public commemorations, with advocacy campaigns that record attacks and transmit knowledge to future generations (Mlodoch 2012; Majid 2023; Karim and Baser 2023). Such practices underline how access to credible communication is essential for civic engagement and peacebuilding – challenging political

erasure and reaffirming the community's right to security (Ağ 2023; Ventura 2022).

Through participation in these locally grounded practices, Kurds have been able to strengthen social cohesion and build solidarity despite the historical limitations of formal protection mechanisms. Engagement with history and justice has become a form of resilience – with communities mobilising knowledge, anticipating potential threats and developing informal infrastructures of protection. Everyday practices of information-sharing and knowledge production thus have the potential to function as forms of empowerment, reinforcing collective capacity to respond to uncertainty.

3. Literature Review: from Formal to Informal Peace Education

3.1 Foundations of Peace Education in Conflict Affected Contexts

Peace education encompasses pedagogical efforts aimed at promoting understanding, tolerance, and conflict transformation – while also reorienting how learners understand violence, justice, and responsibility (Ardizzone 2001). It emerges from the broader peace movement, alongside human rights education and development education, which link civic imperatives to pedagogical practice and position education as a key site for advancing rights and dignity (Suarez and Ramirez 2007). Early approaches to peace education focused on ethical reasoning, moral development, empathy, and the cultivation of peaceful values and relationships (Page 2008). While these foundations remain important, formal educational institutions can struggle to address historical trauma or provide space for critical reflection – for instance, in contexts where curricula are shaped by political constraints and discriminatory histories.

Notably, a distinction between 'post-conflict' and 'conflict-affected' is necessary here, as many settings continue to be marked by unresolved tensions (Mac Ginty 2010; Autesserre 2014). Contexts such as Bosnia, Rwanda, and Northern Ireland demonstrate that while educational reform has at times supported reconciliation and coexistence, it may also be influenced by contested histories and widespread mistrust of formal institutions (Zembylas 2007). In this regard, peace education can either perpetuate trauma, through silencing or selective representation of narratives – or foster healing and resilience, through critical engagement with the past (Bentrovato, Korostelina, and Schulze 2016). What is included or excluded

from curricula is not neutral, but politically determined – shaping collective memory and identity formation, and thereby the boundaries of legitimate knowledge. The same is true for Kurdistan, where educational processes are also impacted by the inclusion and exclusion of competing narratives (Shanks 2017; Darweish and Mohammed 2018). In conflict-affected contexts, peace educators therefore need to examine how knowledge is authorised and institutionalised.

3.2 Critical and Emancipatory Approaches in Marginalised Communities

Critical and emancipatory approaches to peace education reframe learning as a socially situated and participatory process. Drawing on the ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’ (Freire 1970), these approaches position learners as active participants in the production of meaning rather than passive recipients of formal curricula (Freire, Freire and Barr 2014; Kirylo 2020). Knowledge production in this tradition is grounded in dialogue, reflection, and lived experience. Learning becomes a practice through which individuals and communities analyse power relations; they learn to identify different forms of injustice, and develop the capacity to act upon them (Johnson 2005; Mulvey, Hope and Vezzali 2023). Rather than treating education as separate from social life, as something that is institutionally bounded or confined to schools, these approaches embed it within everyday relations as a distributed and community-embedded practice. This enables the development of critical awareness through informal forms of knowledge transmission (Özlem Belçim 2015; Datzberger 2017; Zembylas 2025).

In Bakurê Kurdistanê (the Kurdish region of Türkiye), for example, collaborative learning practices, storytelling, and student-led knowledge production have been used to challenge authoritarian educational structures and generate critical consciousness (Kurt 2024). Similar initiatives based on participatory curriculum design and peer feedback demonstrate how educational processes can be reconfigured through collective agency, fostering resilience and relational forms of learning (Gill 2025; Sheremeti 2025). Consequently, universities in the KRI, such as the University of Duhok, have implemented peace and conflict resolution programmes that emphasise dialogue and mediation skills through participatory learning (University of Duhok 2022; Mohammed 2025). These aim to strengthen capacity for conflict transformation – with learning as a joint practice of meaning-making in which communities actively question dominant narratives and generate alternative forms of knowledge.

3.3 Information Literacy and Epistemic Justice

In contexts shaped by conflict and contestation, knowledge itself is a site of struggle – where what counts as evidence is unevenly distributed and politically mediated. The concept of epistemic justice captures the structural harm that arises when marginalised groups are denied credibility or the authority to interpret and speak about their own experiences (Medina 2017; Samaržija and Cerovac 2021). Such exclusions occur not only through overt censorship but also through more subtle hierarchies that determine whose knowledge is recognised and whose perspectives are treated as legitimate. These dynamics intersect with transitional justice concerns, where disputes over truth and accountability shape how societies understand violence. There, the misrepresentation or dismissal of attacks becomes part of the conditions through which injustice persists (Naqvi 2006; Bakiner 2015; Hassan 2024).

For Kurdish communities, these epistemic dynamics are historically embedded. The partial denial and delayed recognition of the Anfal genocide (Hiltermann 2008; Kfir 2022), the political instrumentalisation and contested remembrance of Halabja (Karim and Baser 2023), and competing narratives surrounding IS-era chemical attacks shaped by insecurity and media fragmentation (Strack 2017; Homan, Omar and Desurmont 2025) all expose enduring debates over violence and its interpretation. These processes do not only obscure accountability but also shape present-day conditions of trust and security (Ferman 2025). Within this context, peace education necessarily includes the development of information literacy and resilience to information disorder – enabling communities to critically assess sources (Natea 2023). Access to credible and contextually grounded information thus becomes both an educational resource and a condition for epistemic repair, allowing truth to be determined in situations where knowledge has been restricted.

3.4 Extending Peace Education Beyond Formal and Informal Divides

Based on the above, peace education in Kurdistan must be understood as a distributed epistemic system that extends beyond formal curricula. It encompasses informational, mnemonic, and community-based knowledge practices through which peace is actively negotiated and sustained. Peacebuilding scholarship is increasingly emphasising multi-level practices that operate across institutional and non-institutional spaces (Clements and Lee 2020), with knowledge production embedded throughout networks of families, educators, civil society actors, and community organisations (Morales *et al.* 2025). Furthermore, while new information and communication

technologies can intensify struggles over narrative control and expose marginalised actors to manipulation, they can also expand communicative access and enable participation in wider meaning-making processes (Tellidis and Kappler 2015).

Accordingly, epistemic recognition and grassroots knowledge practices – including the capacity of communities to produce, preserve, and contest knowledge about chemical attacks – play a central role in peacebuilding in Kurdistan (Mlodoch 2012; Majid 2023). Oral testimony and participatory knowledge-sharing function simultaneously as practices of remembrance and as forms of civic engagement and resilience (Sedikides and Green 2009; Eccarius-Kelly 2015). For example, efforts to preserve survivor accounts constitute an effective non-violent strategy for navigating insecurity and contested authority (Kurdistan Memory Programme 2026; Corbett 2011; Mayersen 2020; Coşkan and Şen 2023). These practices illustrate how knowledge production itself becomes an expression of agency – with peace not only a condition of security but also an outcome of ongoing struggles over interpretation and credibility.

Recent Kurdish and decolonial scholarship demonstrates how such efforts challenge entrenched knowledge hierarchies and evoke ‘epistemic disobedience’ (Kurt and Özok-Gündoğan 2024; Kurt 2024). Combined with participatory educational methods such as storytelling and collective imagination (Askari 2017; Askari 2023), these approaches extend peace education beyond pedagogical intervention and enable alternative social and political imaginaries to emerge (Pohlhaus 2020; University of Kurdistan Hewlêr 2023). Thus, by linking critical peace education with information literacy and epistemic justice, we can reclaim authority over knowledge production and create conditions in which accountability and resilience are produced from the ground up (Andersson 2021; Bajaj 2015).

4. Methodology and Research Design

4.1 Interview Approach: Qualitative and Participatory Knowledge Production

This study employs a small set of novel interviews to capture how individuals in Kurdistan articulate the informational and communicative dimensions of resilience in the face of chemical attacks. We selected this approach over a larger, quantitative survey because understanding peacebuilding dynamics requires qualitative insight (see Omeje 2020). By allowing participants to describe in their own words how knowledge

circulates within their communities, interviews make visible the grassroots practices that encourage social cohesion. As research on peace education and local peacebuilding has shown, qualitative approaches are uniquely capable of uncovering how communities negotiate everyday information practices that underpin collective resilience (Marzoghi, R. *et al.* 2017; Justino, Mitchell and Müller 2018). Beyond their relevance to peacebuilding, qualitative methods also deepen understanding of resilience as a contextually embedded process, highlighting the locally defined protective practices and interpretive frameworks through which people respond to disruptions and threats (Ungar 2003; Zelčāne, and Pipere 2023). This aligns with participatory peace research approaches, that co-produce knowledge with affected communities (Cremin 2016; Knott *et al.* 2022).

4.2 Analytical Approach: Integrated Thematic, Discourse, and Narrative Analysis

Our analytical approach combined inductive thematic analysis with discourse and narrative analysis within a single integrated interpretive framework, informed by critical realist and epistemic justice perspectives (Oliphant 2021; Hanna 2024; Reibold 2024). Rather than treating these as separate analytical phases or applying them to different subsets of interview questions, all three approaches were applied iteratively to the same dataset. This allowed us to systematically examine not only what participants said, but also how meanings were constructed and positioned across their accounts.

We deployed thematic analysis as the primary organising layer. We began with preliminary coding of the full interview dataset, involving familiarisation with transcripts and determination of possible themes grounded in participants' accounts (Humble and Mozelius 2022). This stage identified recurrent patterns relating to experiences of chemical attacks, collective memory, information practices, coping strategies, and community responses to information disorder and uncertainty. It also captured cross-cutting themes such as intergenerational trauma, mistrust in formal institutions, civil society knowledge production, and education as resilience-building. Importantly, this thematic coding was not treated as an endpoint but as a scaffolding device for deeper interpretive analysis.

Once initial themes were established, discourse and narrative analysis were applied within and across thematic categories where possible and relevant to refine interpretation. Discourse analysis was used to examine how participants constructed credibility and epistemic trust within their accounts. This included attention to how responsibility and blame were

distributed, how institutional actors were positioned, and how participants legitimised or questioned different information sources (De Fina and Johnstone 2015; Ochoa, Gadinger, and Yildiz 2021). This analysis revealed how particular themes – such as mistrust, verification practices, and civil society roles – were rhetorically constructed and socially situated. Alongside this, we also deployed narrative analysis to examine how meaning was made through storytelling structure, and how participants organised experiences temporally and morally. This included attention to the use of generational framing, and how collective memory of chemical attacks was narrated as both historical continuity and present-day identity formation (Abell, Stokoe and Billig 2000).

Triangulation at the interpretive level involved moving between thematic patterns, discursive constructions, and narrative forms to ensure analytical depth. In practice, this meant that a single response might first be coded thematically (e.g. mistrust in media), then examined discursively (e.g. how trust is assigned to international outlets versus local actors), and finally interpreted narratively (e.g. how mistrust is embedded in a longer saga of repeated institutional failure and historical trauma). This integrated framework draws from critical discourse and narrative scholarship that emphasises storytelling and discourse as active sites of meaning-making and political positioning, rather than neutral reflections of experience (French 2009; Filutowska 2022; Filutowska 2023).

Finally, our approach was supported by repeated reflection. Coding and interpretation were continuously discussed to ensure consistency while maintaining sensitivity to context and meaning. Given the interpretive nature of thematic, discourse, and narrative analyses, researcher subjectivity is an inherent feature of the analytic process and must be explicitly acknowledged here. Findings should therefore be understood as situated and partial, reflecting the perspectives of participants who chose to engage in the study. For example, other studies have assigned less significance to historical trauma and fear of future genocide (Muhammad *et al.* 2024). With that said, the research team's composition (a Kurdish and an external researcher) helpfully positions us within a dynamic of partial insider and outsider perspectives. This positionality enriches analysis by combining contextual and linguistic familiarity with critical distance, and surfaces awareness of privilege related to power and voice. Moreover, collaboration with local partners and engagement with participants as interpretive agents were central to mitigating extractive tendencies and ensuring that this work contributes to knowledge with communities rather than merely about them. In this sense, we treated reflexivity not as a limitation but as an ethical practice integral to peacebuilding research.

5. Findings

We interviewed a dozen people active in media and journalism, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and educational institutions ranging from elementary schools to universities.⁷ Their ages ranged between 25 and 55, all held at least a BA degree in their field, and they were based in Sulaymaniyah and Erbil (predominantly urban centres), Duhok (a city with surrounding semi-rural and mountainous areas), and Kirkuk (a diverse governorate comprising urban districts and extensive rural/peri-urban communities). All interviews took place in Sorani Kurdish, and about one-third of participants were female.

Participants were selected because these sectors occupy key positions in the production, mediation, and dissemination of public knowledge in the KRI. Journalists shape public narratives around security and historical memory; NGO practitioners are often directly involved in community resilience initiatives, including human rights advocacy and informal educational activities; and educators play a crucial role in shaping long-term civic understanding and critical media literacy. Their perspectives provide insight into how communities negotiate contested information and develop bottom-up strategies for epistemic resilience.

5.1 Historical Memory and Collective Trauma

The people we spoke to repeatedly emphasised that the history of chemical attacks continues to shape Kurdish identity and the way people perceive both security and peace. For many, these events are “not just stories from history – they are part of our daily identity.” One respondent explained that “every family in the region has someone who was affected, and this collective trauma has shaped who we are as a people.” This reflects how identity and security are tightly interwoven through shared historical experience. Another noted that “even today, when people hear news about chemical threats or war, old fears come back quickly.”

This collective memory instils both caution and a yearning for stability. As one educator put it, “The memory of Halabja makes us value safety and peace more than anything, but it also makes us cautious, sometimes even distrustful because we have seen how fragile security can be.” Others described how remembrance has become a source of strength and purpose:

⁷ We followed the King's College London ethical clearance 'Minimal Risk Registration' process. Participants were identified through our professional networks, partnerships, and community contacts – and invited via email/secure messaging platforms or in-person. An information sheet and consent form were provided before participation, including details on UK General Data Protection Regulation.

“The legacy of Halabja and the IS period inspires many Kurds to work for peace.” Museums, memorials, and survivor testimonies were seen as crucial in keeping this awareness alive. One participant reflected that the trauma “created a generational sense of loss, yet also a profound drive toward resilience and self-determination.”

Even younger generations who did not live through these events “have inherited this trauma through their families and communities,” carrying both pain and pride. This was consistently narrated as a communal continuity of memory, in which chemical attacks are positioned not as bounded historical events but as part of an ongoing collective life story shaping present-day identity.

5.2 Information Literacy, Media Trust, and Critical Thinking

When asked how they decide what information to trust – especially when news or rumours about chemical threats emerge – participants stressed verification through credible, official channels rather than partisan or unverified social media. Many expressed frustration at local media’s politicisation and lack of professionalism. One participant said “most journalists in Kurdistan are not qualified enough,” and another observed that many outlets “represent political parties’ interests” or “use threats to make themselves more viral or famous.” Local media were therefore frequently positioned as platforms where information is not treated as neutral but as embedded in competing affiliations. Some participants said they turn instead to international outlets such as the *Associated Press*, *BBC*, or *CNN* for confirmation.

Respondents recalled how misinformation spreads rapidly in times of fear. One cited rumours about an “atomic bomb” during the 2025 Iran-Israel conflict, while others mentioned confusion around alleged PKK (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, The Kurdistan Workers’ Party) chemical attacks in 2022 or IS assaults on Peshmerga (internal security forces of the KRI) in 2014. Community networks and social media were seen as double-edged: they could amplify falsehoods but also serve as spaces for collective fact-checking when users applied critical scrutiny. As one person reflected, “When I was in primary school, they used to hand us leaflets about mines... I trusted these leaflets, but this was the last time I remember I was warned about a weapon,” highlighting a gap in today’s risk communication.

Educators described how they address such challenges with their students. One teacher explained that “fear spreads faster than facts,” so their first goal is to help students “pause and think before reacting or sharing.” This was framed within a wider narrative of recurring information crises, in which

moments of conflict or uncertainty are repeatedly experienced as cycles of rumour, correction, and renewed confusion. The participant said they guide learners to ask, “Who said it? Is it reported anywhere else? Does the message want to inform you or scare you?” In class, they analyse real examples of rumours and WhatsApp messages to show how easily fear can be manufactured – and how powerful it feels “to find the truth themselves.” These examples illustrate how everyday communication platforms become sites where discourses of fear and credibility compete, shaping what is believed and acted upon in moments of perceived threat.

Across interviews, media literacy was linked to ethical responsibility: “Teaching (...) to verify facts isn’t only about critical thinking; it’s also about being responsible members of their community.” Participants described a desire for workshops that teach journalists and citizens alike to verify information, including how to consult official channels and avoid sensationalism, because “People need to be taught how to verify information, recognise manipulation, and question unreliable sources”. These practices help transform anxiety into collective resilience.

5.3 Reflecting on Formal Mechanisms

When asked about the role of the state or international actors in responding to chemical attacks, participants offered limited detail. Although we did not ask follow-up questions as part of this study, it reflects broader scepticism toward state and international mechanisms and a perception that these institutions are constrained or politicised. One participant emphasised political divisions within the KRI, noting that “Kurdistan is divided in two main political parties, PDK (*Partiya Demokrat a Kurdistanê*, Kurdistan Democratic Party) and PUK (*Yekêtiy Nîştimanîy Kurdistan*, Patriotic Union of Kurdistan),” a divide that contributes to the perception of inadequate official responses. They explained that PDK-affiliated outlets tend to downplay Turkish chemical attacks against the PKK, while PUK-aligned media exercise similar restraint regarding Iranian strikes on PJAK (*Partiya Jiyana Azad a Kurdistanê*, Kurdistan Free Life Party).

In our conversations, there was an evident lack of trust in the capacity of more formal bodies to act. This lack of trust was often situated within contexts of repeated institutional failure, where respondents linked present-day perceptions of chemical risk to earlier experiences of unresponsiveness or selective intervention. This links to more wide-ranging discourse of institutional absence and selective visibility, in which state and international actors are constructed as inconsistent or politically constrained sources of protection and information. Rather than elaborating on government or

treaty-based responses, most interviewees turned to civil society actors as key agents of awareness and accountability. Journalists, NGOs, and activists were described as essential for “making the issue the problem of the day,” ensuring that public attention remains on chemical security and justice. In this environment, civil society actors have become primary agents of visibility – they are responsible for sustaining collective attention in the absence of institutional reliability. Respondents provided concrete examples: journalists have organised awareness seminars and produced reports from villages once residents returned, while NGOs have organised workshops and trained community leaders to improve understanding of chemical threats. One participant highlighted Kurdish media coverage of the Iranian missile strike on Erbil in January 2024, noting that local outlets reported effectively even as local government struggled to respond.

5.4 Strengthening Civil Society and Media Capacity

Interviewees stressed that improving media and NGO capacity requires continuous training, with cross-sector collaboration and professional development. This points to a perceived capacity deficit, where expertise and institutional support are seen as necessary for resilience. “Most journalists and civil society workers in Kurdistan lack technical knowledge about chemical agents, health risks, and how to verify related information,” one participant said. Several recommended training programmes “led by scientific experts, universities, or international organisations” to build technical understanding and professionalism. Another mentioned a recent workshop on genocide reporting in Duhok, and expressed preference for “collaboration from international specialised organisations” that could lend experience and credibility.

Transparency and coordination between government ministries, media outlets, and civil society were viewed as essential for maintaining trust. Respondents suggested mechanisms such as regular press briefings and the inclusion of local leaders in communication processes, as well as more open access to data. At community level, awareness campaigns in schools and via social media were seen as key for preparedness. One respondent highlighted the potential of digital outreach: “I believe in the power of social media among the new generation, especially Gen Z.” This was also described in terms of younger generations being increasingly positioned as potential producers, rather than only consumers, of credible information. Instead of fearing new platforms, it was argued that empowering informed content creators and integrating media literacy into outreach could reduce panic and strengthen trust in verified information.

5.5 Education for Peace and Community Resilience

Educators were asked to imagine what a programme to strengthen information literacy and peace education in the Kurdish curriculum could look like – and what support it would need to last. One proposed a model built around three interlinked themes: memory and history, media and information literacy, and peace and resilience. Lessons on the Revolution, Halabja, Anfal, and the war with IS would include survivor stories, poems, and memorial visits to teach empathy and respect “not hatred.” Students would also learn to check news, recognise rumours, and share only verified information, using examples from Kurdish media and social platforms. Finally, activities such as community projects and volunteering with NGOs would “help young people see their (own) role in building peace.” This model reflects intergenerational transmission of both trauma and responsibility, where education is framed as a mechanism for transforming inherited memory into future-oriented civic agency.

Another participant described a concept they titled “Voices of Truth and Peace,” combining critical thinking, media awareness, empathy, and dialogue through interactive lessons, group projects, and reflection circles. “The goal,” they said, “is to raise a generation that thinks, that questions, and that builds peace with their words and actions – rather than just repeating what they hear.” This articulates epistemic empowerment, positioning critical thinking as a civic practice rather than purely as a cognitive skill.

Respondents agreed that such programmes would require collaboration among the Ministry of Education, universities, NGOs, and international partners – alongside sustained teacher training and access to digital tools. Embedding peace and information literacy across history, social studies, and civic education was suggested to ensure these values become part of everyday learning rather than a stand-alone module. Building on this, educators then identified steps to strengthen teachers’ and schools’ capacity to address CW issues and foster resilience. “We must help teachers feel confident and informed,” one said, noting that students often turn to them first when frightened. Suggested actions included regular workshops on basic chemical security and crisis communication; practical materials such as posters and clear communication protocols; and the appointment of an “information focal point” in each school to liaise with health and safety authorities.

Partnerships with institutions like the Halabja Peace Museum and survivor associations were seen as invaluable for grounding lessons in real experience. Respondents also stressed the need for emotional support: discussing war and trauma can be mentally demanding, and teachers require safe spaces for reflection and psychological care. As one participant concluded, schools

can serve as community hubs for trust and dialogue – “when teachers feel strong, they can help their students feel strong too.” This points to a relational understanding of resilience, in which individual emotional capacity is embedded within community systems of trust and support.

6. Discussion and Recommendations

6.1 The Right to Peace and the Right to Truth

Our findings conceptualise the right to peace in the KRI as a communicative process. Its realisation depends on the ability to recognise, verify, and sustain claims about violence in the public sphere. Within this framework, truth, accountability, and resilience function as interdependent conditions. Truth refers to the production and circulation of credible accounts of attacks; accountability to the ability to contest, assess, and demand responsibility for such claims; and resilience to the maintenance of social and informational systems that enable these processes in conflict-affected contexts. Together, these elements form a communicative infrastructure through which violence becomes publicly intelligible and actionable.

This infrastructure is enacted through everyday practices. Participants described questioning messages and sharing family stories as central to chemical security. In contexts where formal accounts are fragmented or unreliable, these practices support alternative forms of evidence and authority over CW narratives. Our analysis identifies this as a form of epistemic disobedience (Kurt 2024): participants challenge silences and distortions, and assert civic agency despite limited institutional protection. Moreover, these findings position the right to truth as a condition of the right to peace. The ability to produce, circulate, and defend credible accounts of violence can be foundational to the realisation of peace. In the absence of reliable institutions, community-led informational practices are not supplementary but central to the enactment of human rights.

6.2 Chemical Security as Human Security and a Human Rights Issue

The outcomes of our interviews underline how chemical insecurity extends beyond immediate physical harm. Participants often mentioned anticipation of danger, alongside a fragile sense of protection. Evidently, the memory of past violence combined with the threat of future attacks can affect individual psychological wellbeing as well as the stability of social trust – particularly in relation to institutions perceived as inconsistent or politicised, and

ineffective or unavailable in moments of crisis. As such, chemical insecurity has wide-ranging implications for human security: it undermines freedom from fear, affects public health, environmental safety, economic stability – and it erodes an already fragile information ecosystem where identifying credible sources and verifying threats is difficult.

From a human rights perspective, these findings demonstrate that chemical security is not limited to questions of weapons control or compliance with international treaties alone. Rather, it should be closely linked to the protection of fundamental rights, including the right to truth, the right to security, and the broader right of peoples to peace. In contexts such as Kurdistan, where historical chemical attacks have been experienced alongside limited institutional protection and contested accountability, uncertainty surrounding chemical threats itself becomes a form of harm. Ensuring that such threats can be understood and situated within reliable frameworks of knowledge is therefore integral to the realisation of human security and the protection of human rights.

6.3 Media Literacy as Infrastructure for Civic Empowerment

Participants consistently emphasised the role of media and information literacy in enabling people to navigate Kurdistan's fragmented and politicised information environment. When narratives about chemical attacks circulate rapidly through partisan media and social platforms, information disorder increases uncertainty and complicates risk assessment. However, respondents described locally grounded responses to this challenge – including community-led fact-checking, classroom-based verification exercises, and informal workshops aimed at strengthening critical evaluation of sources.

Across interviews, these initiatives were consistently linked to civic responsibility and collective agency – bridging the gap between institutional accountability and grassroots knowledge. Verification was not framed as a purely technical skill, but as a social practice embedded in dialogue and shared norms of credibility. Schools, NGOs, and civil society organisations were identified as key sites where these capacities are developed and transmitted, particularly through activities that connect media literacy with lived experiences of insecurity. Therefore, media literacy forms a crucial part of the broader informational infrastructure through which claims about chemical attacks can be assessed and contested. It can strengthen collective capacities of verification and coordination within everyday communication networks, better positioning communities to reduce vulnerability and assert agency.

6.4 Recommendations for Institutional Coordination and Capacity Building

A central question emerging from this research is: what comes next? How can CW information disorder in Kurdistan be proactively and sustainably addressed? Institutionalised partnerships provide one possible framework through which grassroots initiatives can access and share accurate information. Programmes could link government ministries – including the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Culture, and the Kurdish Directorate of Civil Society Affairs – with professional bodies such as the Kurdistan Journalists' Syndicate, universities, NGOs, and international organisations (see for example Pugwash 2025). This multi-level coordination would help ensure that resources and expertise reach communities that do not know where or how to begin, or do not possess the materials and tools required to develop and sustain such initiatives effectively.

Interdisciplinary collaboration is also important. Working groups connecting public health, media studies, and peacebuilding practitioners could co-produce verification toolkits in Kurdish or other (regional) languages. These toolkits could guide communities in interpreting scientific claims and navigating social media during politically sensitive periods. Crucially, they should be framed as shared practices of care, enabling Kurdish communities to exercise self-determination in assessing and sharing information rather than relying solely on external authorities.

At the same time, institutional coordination must contend with political and logistical challenges, including differing priorities across ministries and limited long-term funding for NGOs and universities. Incremental approaches, such as pilot impact projects and modular programmes, may therefore be more sustainable. These approaches would allow communities to gradually develop confidence and capacity in evaluating information, reinforcing trust between institutions and local actors. Lessons from initiatives implemented by international actors over the past decade can inform future programming (see for instance UNDP 2025, CNN 2025), particularly regarding the importance of targeted training in sustaining engagement.

Universities and NGOs could expand 'train-the-trainer' programmes, cascading skills to local communities so that accurate, contextualised information becomes a collective resource for decision-making. Industry stakeholders should also be engaged more systematically to receive and deliver training on responsible communication around chemical safety and security, enabling them to support communities with timely and accessible information (see for example Sandia 2025). Educators, meanwhile, should be

supported to expand trauma-informed pedagogical approaches, participatory peace education, and the integration of chemical safety and security into curricula.

6.5 Recommendations for Media and Civil Society Information Resilience

Journalists and civil society actors are key intermediaries in helping Kurdish communities access and share accurate information about chemical attacks and dangerous substances. Training in chemical hazard reporting, crisis communication, fact-checking, and ethical journalism ensures that communities receive reliable updates during periods of tension. Co-designed resources with local journalists and policymakers will help people interpret information more neutrally and less fearfully. Mentorship networks and capacity-building in grant-writing and stakeholder engagement will allow local actors to sustain these practices over time.

Digital storytelling and participatory media can provide communities with tools to document and share how accurate information reduces panic and supports collective security. Youth-led social media campaigns, community radio segments, and visual guides (such as infographics) explaining disinformation tactics can enable people to engage actively in resisting false narratives. Across these initiatives, emphasis on ethical information sharing – when to forward content, pause, or flag uncertainty – reinforces responsibility and reflection.

Local networks such as youth groups, NGOs, and community organisations should be trained to disseminate verified information – for instance through mini-workshops and community centres, and success has also recently been seen through podcasts (see Mousa and Sider 2025). Participatory fact-checking mechanisms, including ‘rumour verification sessions,’ can empower communities to verify claims collaboratively, strengthening both information literacy and civic agency. Simplified frameworks, such as tracing sources and consulting local experts, demystify fact-checking as a community-owned practice.

6.6 Recommendations for Peace Education and Grassroots Knowledge Production

Peace education remains the bridge connecting the central themes explored throughout this paper, from memories of past violence to concerns surrounding digital media ecosystems. Rather than representing a static transfer of historical knowledge, peace education functions as a civic practice through which communities strengthen social responsibility. Schools can integrate

lessons on the Anfal attacks and contemporary chemical threats with critical evaluation of information. Meanwhile, extracurricular initiatives, including collaborations with memorials, museums, and community organisations, can create spaces for participatory learning. Such activities connect lived experience with ethical reflection, allowing Kurdish communities to develop strategies for resisting inaccurate or malicious narratives.

Notably, participants in our study consistently emphasised the importance of fostering empathy. This requires pedagogical models that encourage students not only to remember past atrocities, but also to critically evaluate information, question manipulative narratives, and recognise their own role in sustaining peaceful social relations. Participants further highlighted the importance of creating supportive environments in which difficult topics can be discussed openly and constructively. Schools, universities, museums, and community organisations can all contribute to spaces that encourage dialogue and mutual trust. These environments are particularly important in contexts where trauma and institutional mistrust continue to shape public perceptions of security and information credibility.

Locally grounded ownership is essential to the sustainability and legitimacy of peace education initiatives. Educational materials and communication protocols should therefore be adaptable to local contexts and developed collaboratively between educators, journalists, civil society actors, and affected communities. Such approaches can strengthen confidence in locally trusted forms of knowledge while reducing dependence on external or highly politicised information sources. Importantly, they reinforce that communities themselves are active participants in shaping how chemical attacks are understood and communicated.

7. Conclusion

This paper has argued that access to accurate information can function as grassroots peace infrastructure for Kurdish communities facing CW information disorder. In a context characterised by a fragmented and politicised media environment, and where formal investigation and accountability remain limited, information practices themselves become a site of civic and epistemic agency. Through everyday acts of triangulating sources, assessing credibility, and comparing narratives, individuals and groups contribute to informal systems of verification that structure collective judgement under uncertainty.

Historical memory plays a central role in shaping these practices. The legacy of chemical violence in Kurdistan – from Halabja to more recent threats

– continues to inform how new risks are understood and communicated. Museums as well as survivor testimonies and intergenerational storytelling provide shared reference points that ground contemporary understandings of insecurity and support collective meaning-making. Across these contexts, media literacy and education emerge not simply as technical competencies, but as socially embedded practices enabled by educators, journalists, NGOs, and community networks. In doing so, they allow information to be critically engaged and responsibly shared, reducing vulnerability to panic and manipulation while supporting more coordinated responses to contested claims.

When communities have sustained access to credible information, they are better positioned to develop more reliable knowledge about security. In this sense, grassroots information practices can function as a form of peace infrastructure: they do not only mitigate uncertainty, but actively shape how chemical threats are understood and responded to in everyday life. The broader implication is that peace depends on more than formal security guarantees; it also relies on epistemic empowerment. The capacity to critically engage with information is not only a protective skill, it is foundational to shaping security.

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