Background
The Middle East is largely considered an unstable, violent region by the international arena and lacks proper capital to develop its technology and entrepreneurship scenes. Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq, in particular, is frequently overlooked—despite it being a frontier market with untapped potential.

Iraq boasts a GDP of $225 billion and is the world’s fifth largest oil producer as of 2018, yet trails against other economies in terms of technology, innovation, and entrepreneurship. For decades, the country has been beleaguered by corruption, economic crisis, and violence and instability in the region. Iraq now faces a jobs crisis of unprecedented proportions, especially in the private sector. Youth are disproportionately affected; the national unemployment rate is 16 percent, while youth unemployment sits at 36 percent. A 2018 World Bank report notes: “Without the hope for a better future...youth may give up on their ideas and aspirations, disengage from the project of building a better future for Iraq, seek to leave, or potentially become targets for recruitment by armed factions.”

With 60 percent of Iraq’s population under 25 years of age and the technology industry booming around the world, Iraq’s youth is at risk of being left behind. This project aims to prepare the youth of Iraq to take part in the technological revolution, with practical skills, future touchpoints for partnership, and a more innovative, collaborative, and empathetic mindset for leadership and entrepreneurship—thus promoting economic stability and discouraging the fomentation of violence and radicalization.

Objectives
This project aims to prepare refugee and conflict-affected youth in Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq to be well-rounded technology leaders who are equipped and empowered to think about human-centered solutions to global problems. From June 22 to 26, 2020, we will host a technology leadership program at Re:Code House in Erbil for 25 Iraqi and Kurdish youth to 1) learn practical skills for the job market and career development, 2) engage in deeper discussions about technology and global issues, and 3) present a human-centered design project that will benefit their communities.

This program is aimed at youth (ages 18 to 25) who are already involved in technology—be that students studying computer science or engineering, startup professionals, or entrepreneurs. However, the scope of this project goes beyond simply technology. This project is based on the idea that technology by itself is never a “panacea” solution. We must meld technology with business, leadership, and other soft skills to create a globally conscious, connected, and prepared community of young technology leaders. By “globally conscious, connected, and prepared,” we mean youth who 1) are sensitive to the needs of vulnerable communities like their own, 2) can work in cross-cultural, cross-functional contexts, and 3) are energized to think about solutions to global problems.

We will take applications from Iraqi and Kurdish youth in Erbil, paying special attention to those coming from refugee/IDP camps and providing travel reimbursement as needed. We aim for there to be a 50/50 split of male and female participants to fight against the underrepresentation of women in technology.

Project Implementation
The one-week program will be broken up into three components: skills development, seminars, and small-group projects. We will train the youth in crucial soft skills (like communication and goals setting) to complement their technical skills, thus preparing them to be well-rounded technology leaders. We will...
host lunch-time seminars on a wide range of topics, from what it means to be a leader in this digital era, to the implications and challenges of developing artificial intelligence in the Middle East—inviting local entrepreneurs and technology leaders to co-host the discussions and network with the youth. Finally, the youth will be divided into small groups (five groups of five) and work on a capstone project throughout the week, which they will present on the final day to a panel of judges. Projects will be based on IDEO.org’s human-centered design framework and seek to address any global issue. The winning team will be featured in Bite.Tech, Iraqi Innovators, and other global publications to create more recognition for young, aspiring technology leaders in Erbil.

The format and schedule of the program is outlined below:
Day 1: Communication + Teamwork, Lunch Seminar, Human-Centered Design Workshop
Day 2: Critical Thinking, Lunch Seminar, Human-Centered Design Workshop
Day 3: Public Speaking, Lunch Seminar, Human-Centered Design Workshop
Day 4: Values + Goals Setting, Working Lunch, Human-Centered Design Workshop
Day 5: Creativity + Innovation, Working Lunch, Human-Centered Design Workshop

Practical Considerations: We will leverage the facilities and resources of Re:Coded, a local non-profit, to assist with on-the-ground planning and send out calls for applications. While this program shares a similar mission as Re:Coded, it remains wholly separate from its programs. We are targeting a different demographic of Iraqi and Kurdish youth, and whereas Re:Coded is focused on technical skills training, we are focused on exploring technology’s relationship to local and global issues and how human-centered design can be leveraged to address any gaps in technology. Hal Miran (founder of TechHub, Iraq’s first co-working space) has agreed to serve on the panel, and I am in conversation with Zahra Shah (Founder of Iraqi Innovators) and several other people in the Iraqi technology scene. While Iraq currently faces heightened security risks, Erbil has long been a safe city that is friendly to Americans and shielded from much of the instability in the region. Erbil also has high levels of foreign investment, infrastructure development, and tourism and is home to several technology hubs/co-working spaces, making it an attractive site for a technology leadership program.

Background: I am passionate about the intersection of technology and refugee issues, having focused my research in this space while earning my M.A. in Global Thought at Columbia University. I have spent several years working in the tech industry, conducted research for UNHCR on the ethical implications of using blockchain technology in displacement contexts, written about the Syrian refugee crisis for UNDP, and designed a human-centered design project addressing refugee assimilation issues in New York City.

Results and Goals
The project’s short-term goals are to equip refugee and conflicted-affected youth with practical skills to prepare for the global technology job market; introduce the youth to future points of contact in the technology community; and push the youth to step outside their comfort zone and have challenging, cross-cultural conversations about technology in both a local and global context. The long-term goals are to promote peaceful relations between Iraqi and Kurdish youth; promote Erbil as a global technology hub, thus attracting greater capital and talent; and create a globally conscious, connected, and prepared community of young technology leaders who are open to collaboration and entrepreneurship.

Indicators of Success
- The youth will produce five “minimum viable projects” (MVP), which can be scaled into solutions to real-world problems
- The youth will be better prepared for the job market—60% success rate in finding jobs (of those unemployed) within six months of the program
- The youth will be equipped with new frameworks to think about peacekeeping issues in a global context—measured through quantitative and qualitative feedback
- Publication of five to eight press pieces about the program and/or winning team to generate attention for the technology scene in Erbil