

Charting Pathways: Navigating migration prospects among youth in the Kurdistan region of Iraq

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Irregular migration seems to be an increasing phenomenon in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, as more young individuals aspire to migrate. This increase is due to limited economic opportunities and future prospects for young people, poor governance and lack of socio-economic development. This policy brief examines the migration intentions and informational landscapes of potential Kurdish irregular migrants, emphasising the information gaps and needs, especially about migration pathways and risks. Recommendations include tailoring messages to cater to the diverse needs of potential migrants. Social media and traditional communication channels are effective, yet it is equally crucial to prioritise direct and engaging experiences. Personal experiences known to potential migrants and returnees significantly impacts the reach and resonance of awareness raising initiative. Concrete and tailored alternatives to irregular migration, achieved through policy changes and robust stakeholder engagement is required. Involving stakeholders from the beginning not only enhances its effectiveness but also ensures the provision of practical alternatives, in addition to awareness raising.

Introduction

Iraq, a country known for its rich history and diverse cultural heritage, has faced significant challenges including political instability, armed conflict, and economic hardships. Its socio-political landscape has influenced its migration patterns, especially from the Kurdistan region of Iraq (KRI). The KRI is an autonomous territory characterised by its distinct ethnic composition (6.2 million individuals, 80% of which are Kurds) and political status. Developed in the context of a prolonged armed resistance to the Iraqi Federal government, it was officially formed in 1991 and recognised as a federal entity within Iraq under Article 113 of the 2005 Constitution. The region has enjoyed a period of relative stability, solidifying its political and economic autonomy under the guidance of the international community.¹ The region has also been a destination for refugees from Mosul and Kirkuk to seek a safe haven, including Kurds, Christians, and Arabs. For instance, in Dohuk, Arabs constitutes a significant portion of the population, while Christians who fled Mosul and resettled in Ain Kawa district express reluctance to return to their former governorates.²

In recent years, the KRI has experienced significant social changes, transitioning into a more urban and developed society. This shift has had notable political implications, influencing the process of social organisation. This policy brief provides insight into the Kurdish population within the “MIRAMI Survey”

¹ Fabrice Balanche, ‘Iraq and Syria: Kurdish Autonomous Regions Under Threat’, 2023, <https://geopolitique.eu/en/2023/03/04/iraq-and-syria-kurdish-autonomous-regions-under-threat/>; Martina Ferro, ‘Iraqi Kurdistan: A Glimmer of Unity or an Element of Fragmentation in the Middle East?’, 2024.

² Balanche, ‘Iraq and Syria: Kurdish Autonomous Regions Under Threat’.

sample, examining their migration intentions, aspirations, and need for information. In doing so, it aims at 1) providing tailored policy recommendations to address such needs; 2) enhancing the work of the MRCs with the upcoming expansion into Erbil and Sulaymaniyah; 3) promoting the capacity building of local stakeholders and government institutions in addressing overall migration issues and supporting reintegration processes more specifically. The policy brief draws from the findings of the “MIRAMI survey”, which included 1,024 respondents, 618 of whom identify as Kurdish, encompassing both Muslim Kurds and Yazidis. Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of the Kurdish population of our sample across the three main governorates, with an equal presence in Dohuk and Sulaymaniyah and a notably smaller representation in Erbil.

Figure 1: Percentage of Kurds in the three Governorates



Governance scene in the KRG

The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) suffers from conflicting narratives. On the one hand, it distinguishes itself for its stability and economic growth, while on the other hand, it has agitated relations with Türkiye, Iran, and the Federal Iraqi government. Besides, the number of Kurdish migrants fleeing the region has increased.³ Governance in the KRI has been marked by a longstanding internal rivalry between the two most influential parties, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which alternated in power.⁴ In 2006, they were able to unify their two administrations with the start of the Fifth Cabinet, and since then each Cabinet has been carrying on this legacy. In 2013, the Ministry of Planning of the KRG developed a Regional Strategic Development Vision for 2020, to inform its citizens of how the KRG is working to improve its people’s well-being, to establish an overall plan for the new cabinet so that all parts of the government work together for a common goal, and to provide a framework under which the individual ministries could develop their policies and goals.⁵ Following this strategic plan, in 2020, the UNDP signed an MoU with the Ministry of Planning to provide strategic guidance and technical support for the development of KRG Vision 2030.⁶

Yet the political landscape in KRI is still marked by delays and uncertainties surrounding parliamentary elections. Initially scheduled for October 2022, the elections were postponed due to disagreements

³ Romain Lepla, ‘The Root Causes of Kurdish Iraqi Migration: Early Warnings of an Impending Youth Quake in the KRI’, Centre Français de Recherche sur l’Irak, 2022.

⁴ Megan Connelly and Mike Fleet, ‘Living Apart Together: Decentralized Governance in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq’, 2020.

⁵ Ministry of Planning, ‘Kurdistan Region of Iraq 2020: A Vision for the Future’, 2013.

⁶ UNDP Iraq, ‘The Kurdistan Region of Iraq to Develop Vision 2030 Supported by UNDP’, 2020.

between the two parties and subsequent legal disputes. Iraq also experiences notable pressure due to internal displacement and the return of refugees and IDPs. The country is encouraged to find durable solutions for IDPs and to address the humanitarian needs of returnees and repatriates from camps. Support by the international community is deemed essential to effectively manage these challenges. Governmental stakeholders seem to have a specific engagement on migration issues and dealing with potential migrants. This capacity is limited due to budget constraints⁷ and is has led to a gap between institutions and the population. Examples of their engagement in policy making and migration governance is the preparation of laws on combatting human trafficking and smuggling, the creation of an Inter-Ministerial Technical Working Group on Migration, and the drafting of the National Migration Management Strategy. Non-governmental stakeholders remain particularly critical of the government, especially in relation to addressing the root causes of (irregular) migration.

The state of irregular migration in the KRG and beyond – including push and pull factors

According to existing literature,⁸ among the key factors driving migration from Iraq are deteriorating security conditions and the economic crisis. These are also the main factors that pushed 8,000 Iraqi Kurds to find a way to Europe through irregular means via the Belarus-Poland border in 2021. These findings are consistent with the results of the MIRAMI survey and the views of relevant stakeholders, which identified lack of economic opportunities and governance issues, bad quality of life and well-being, political instability, and lack of personal freedom as main drivers of emigration. The decline in economic growth is due to the public sector inability to pay wages, and the private sector being non-functional. Additionally, corruption and poor governance practices aggravate the lack of development and equitable opportunities leading to people leaving. This came as no surprise since multiple sources also refer to corruption and governance related issues as the major challenges that the Iraqi economy has been facing.⁹ Furthermore, other drivers such as lack of education opportunities, family reunification, and climate change remain relevant, but did not seem to rank high on the list.

This protracted economic crisis has left the young increasingly hopeless and frustrated, as mentioned by one of the stakeholders, the youth are bearing a disproportionate burden, with all the conflict and displacement that have occurred in the past and has led to this crisis. Furthermore, the aftermath of ISIS has left regions like Sinjar in ruins, with ongoing security issues due to various armed groups and the fear of renewed ethnic violence, resulting in Yazidis being the largest group to leave. Even though the MIRAMI survey sample did not constitute a large number of Yazidis, stakeholders' interviews and literature do mention them. This emphasises the importance of focusing on their situation. Many

⁷ Ahmed Tabaqchali, Hamzeh al-Shadeedi, and Sarwar Abdullah, 'Breaking the Impasse: The Baghdad-Erbil Budget Divide', 2021.

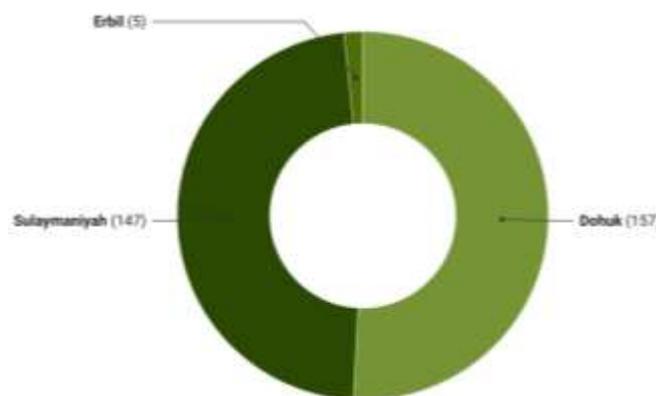
⁸ IOM Iraq-DTM, 'Migration Flows From Iraq to Europe: Reasons Behind Migration' (Baghdad, 2016). An IOM study highlights security concerns, lack of equality and social justice, and political and economic instability as primary reasons for migration.

⁹ European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), 'Country Guidance: Iraq', 2022.

young Yazidis are striving for education and better job opportunities, not only because of the ISIS assault but also due to the lack of services and jobs, especially in Sinjar where the majority originate from.¹⁰

Irregular migration is often perceived as a quicker, more certain, more common, and cheaper option compared to regular migration pathways. Respondents perceive regular pathways to be time consuming and unsuccessful: Applying for international protection and family re-unification is reportedly very slow, and it is possible that claims can also be rejected. However, the majority of Iraqis, initially leave Iraq legally, typically to Türkiye. Despite their knowledge of the risks of the journey, as was evident through the MIRAMI survey results, individuals still have the intentions to migrate irregularly. Figure 2 illustrates the intentions from the three different governorates, showing that the overwhelming majority stem from Dohuk and Sulaymaniyah, while only few from Erbil.

Figure 2: Intentions to migrate irregularly (N=309)



In recent years, the EU and its member states have adopted measures aimed at managing immigration more rigorously. These measures encompass stringent conditions for entry and legal residence, especially for third-country nationals, along with a focus on preventing and reducing irregular migration.¹¹ In this framework, there are several complementary pathways to avoid irregular migration and enter Europe in a regular and safer way, namely labour mobility pathways, education pathways, humanitarian pathways and other visas, private or community sponsorship pathways, programmes for extended family members, and these pathways are usually partnerships between a diverse range of stakeholders such as cities or host regions, civil society organisations, national authorities, embassies and so on.¹² Our survey data also revealed that individuals identified work visas as the most eligible option for legal migration, followed by student visas, and humanitarian admission. Family

¹⁰ Anouk Delafortrie, 'The Yazidis in Iraq: Between a Rock and a Hard Place', European Commission, 2023.

¹¹ <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/152/immigration-policy>

¹² Claire Rimmer, 'Pathways to Protection: Mapping Visa Schemes and Other Practices Enabling People in Need of International Protection to Reach Europe Safely', 2024.

reunification, resettlement process, and visit visa did not seem high on the list, while many also cited not being eligible to travel legally. Stakeholder interviews highlighted that some ethno-religious groups such as Yazidis and Christians have more alternatives to migrate from Iraq legally, as they can apply for international protection offered to refugees and asylum seekers. However, process of regular migration via employment or education is often perceived as limited and requires significant resources, skills, and networks to be able to achieve it, which many (especially young individuals) do not have access to.

Main Sources and types of information

As emerged from the MIRAMI survey, Iraqi Kurds rely on online channels and social media platforms to get their information on migration, followed by family and friends and TV and radio. Their trusted sources tend to be relatives who have already migrated, immediate families and their friends. This indicates how powerful social networks are on decision-making processes, as they not only provide information on migration routes and risks, but also on the situation in the destination country. As studies have shown, information gathered through networks is both encouraging irregular migration and discouraging.¹³ Other sources of information are networks and smugglers that they rely on for migration information, regardless of whether the information provided is incorrect and misleading. Asked about their information needs, potential migrants are well aware of the risks associated with irregular migration though lacking comprehensive and credible information about migration pathways, and related costs. They also highlight that they lack information on asylum procedures, accessible legal statuses, and information pertaining to obtaining identity documents. Potential migrants also highlight lacking specific information about organisations or entities that they could contact if they encounter any dangers during the journey. Returnees expressed that they had no knowledge about the formal reintegration support from governmental and non-governmental organisations, thus underscoring a significant gap in the provision of information about available services.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Given the considerable potential of migration information to improve and enhance migration experiences for potential migrants, it is important to ensure effective, accurate, accessible, and targeted information dissemination, thus addressing the multifaceted challenges of migration in Iraq and specifically in the KRI. The following policy recommendations aim at informing the design of impactful migration information activities targeted at potential irregular migrants and returnees, while also providing guidance to the government on measures it can deploy:

¹³ Mathias Czaika and Constantin Reinprecht, *Introduction to Migration Studies*, ed. Peter Scholten (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92377-8>.

- ❖ **Economic and social development:** Migration decisions in the KRI are influenced by the economic challenges. The public sectors' instability and the private sectors' underdevelopment, and the overall decline in economic growth are key factors pushing young individuals to consider migration despite their current engagement in the labour market. Since young respondents highlighted lack of economic opportunities and bad quality of life and well-being, as well as job scarcity, as the factors influencing their decision to migrate, addressing this economic challenge is fundamental. Economic programmes should be implemented to enhance skills development and job creation and improve the economic situation of individuals. Since individuals are willing to migrate irregularly despite their knowledge of the risks, and information on this alone is not effective, government efforts should focus on improving conditions for young people. Information on access to and availability of these opportunities is equally important. It is not just about creating the opportunities; it is also essential to ensure that people are informed about them.
- ❖ **Enhancing governance and institutional capacity:** Enhancing governance and institutional capacity is important for effective migration management particularly concerning the critical reintegration process for returnees. In our research, returnees highlighted that there is a significant gap in information and service provision, more specifically they expressed a distinct lack of awareness regarding available reintegration services or information. This notable deficiency in structured guidance and assistance has led to prolonged periods of adjustment and psychological distress, and difficulties reintegrating in their communities and establishing livelihoods. To address this, it is crucial to increase the reintegration services and improve the communication between governmental entities and returnees regarding available and potential reintegration services, such as counselling, advice and assistance related to employment, housing, education, and welfare. Furthermore, strengthening governance structures and institutions is important for effective migration management in the KRI. This includes enhancing coordination among government agencies, improving transparency and accountability, and building institutional capacity to address migration related issues. Efforts should be aimed at promoting good governance practices, fostering cooperation with international partners to enhance migration governance.
- ❖ **Enhancing collaboration with the national government and international partners:** It is important to enhance the collaboration with the national government and international partners to explore opportunities for legal migration pathways abroad, particularly with main migration destination countries. Hence, identifying and sharing information on available legal migration avenues would be a useful tool to reduce irregular migration, build trust and cooperation between governments and migrants and contribute to economic stability at large. One area would be to promote vocational training and match skill needs in Europe, by detecting labour market trends and anticipating skill needs in EU member states, which would

in turn widen opportunities for labour migration. Additionally, collaboration with the national government can improve the informational landscape, thus ensuring that individuals can rely on authorities when seeking information and reducing the institutional gap between authorities and both potential migrants and returnees.

- ❖ **Engaging communities and stakeholders:** Engaging with stakeholders is important, for example with the MRCs, as they offer a wide array of services such as counselling, skills development, psychosocial support, and other services for both returnees and potential migrants. Moreover, engaging community and religious leaders is crucial as they possess influential voices and play pivotal roles in community outreach efforts. Additionally, government officials, notably public servants, have also been identified in the survey as key influencers in migration decisions, primarily in encouraging migration, hence, leveraging them as messengers would be instrumental.
- ❖ **Targeted information dissemination:** Migration information should be tailored to the different needs of potential migrants and returnees, as well as their different backgrounds, age groups, and locations. It is recommended that the focus is on specific information needs, such as reintegration mechanisms and alternative legal migration pathways. Social media and traditional channels of communication (TV and Radio) are popular, but more focus on direct and engaging experiences such as counselling sessions and workshops could enhance the work of the MRCs and make them more visible to individuals, as mentioned above. Testimonies from individuals who have undergone migration journeys could be beneficial. Social networks (family and friends), as well as returnees emerged as messengers, and leveraging them would be effective, especially if they are part of the broad social network of potential migrants.
- ❖ **Enhance evaluation and monitoring:** There needs to be a continuous evaluation and monitoring of the identified priorities, focusing on assessing the long-term impact and effectiveness of initiatives addressing the economic challenges and the overall factors that drive migration. Moreover, the evaluation and monitoring of the reintegration mechanisms and support services for returnees is also essential to guarantee the sustained long-term integration into their communities. It is necessary to regularly update relevant information accordingly, using various tools, messengers, and platforms, and ensuring sustained stakeholder engagement over time.

The more targeted and aligned with the specific needs, the stronger its impact!

Related ICMPD Publications

Mogiani, Marco (2023). Displacement, emigration, and return: Understanding migration dynamics and patterns within, to, and from Iraq. Background Report. Vienna: ICMPD. [Download](#).

Khoury, Christina and Mogiani, Marco (2024). Engaging Return Migrants in Information Campaigns in Iraq: Challenges, Reintegration, and Prospects. MIRAMI Returnee Report. Vienna: ICMPD. [Download](#).

Khoury, Christina, Marco Mogiani, and João Reis (2024). Irregular pathways: Probing migration dynamics in Iraq and the significance of information campaigns. MIRAMI Final Report. Vienna: ICMPD. [Download](#).

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