INSECURITY IN AN ENDLESS CIRCLE

IRAQI - KURDISH MIGRANTS WITH INSECURE IMMIGRATION STATUS IN THE UK

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Acknowledgements

Introduction

This research project was commissioned by the International Organisation for Migration – Iraq (IOM - Iraq) to a research team from the Middle East Consultancy Services (MECS) to explore and analyse migration patterns from Iraq to the UK, with a particular focus on Kurdish undocumented migrants from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRoI).

The report aims to provide an overview of the flows, routes, networks and dynamics of migration from Iraq to the UK, and will subsequently focus on undocumented Iraqi-Kurdish migrants living in the UK.

Aims and objectives

The research study aimed to collect information on:

- Pre-departure views/attitudes towards migration to the UK, including hopes and expectations, understanding of immigration rules and restrictions, and knowledge of formal and informal routes;

- Experiences of the journey to the UK, including routes used, fees paid and risks faced;

- Experiences of life in the UK with an irregular immigration status, including positive and negative experiences, and expectations versus reality;

- Thoughts and ideas around return, including perceived difficulties and challenges.

Research methods and gaining access to participants

A range of research methods have been utilised to understand the pre-migration period, the journey to the UK, migrants' experiences of life in the UK and their future plans and expectations. These methods included:

1. Desk-based review of the available literature on Iraqi - Kurdish migrants in the UK, with specific reference to irregular migrants (including size, demographic characteristics, location, among others)

2. A questionnaire survey of 219 undocumented Iraqi-Kurdish migrants. The survey questionnaires was available online via Survey Monkey and was first published on 20

December 2012. It has also been widely distributed via the social media (including Facebook advertising tool) and to different community, political, religious and gender based organisations, networks and individuals.

Four focus group discussions were organised with Iraqi-Kurdish migrants living in different parts of the UK including London, Brighton, Birmingham and Derbyshire. These were conducted in two cafes, on the premises of an Iraqi-Kurdish community advisor organisation and in the home of one of the migrants respectively. In total, 14 Kurdish participants attended the focus groups. The focus groups took place with four Kurdish men in Brighton, three Kurdish men in Birmingham, three Kurdish men in Derbyshire and four Kurdish men in London.

In addition, nine key informant interviews were conducted with members of several Kurdish and Iraqi community organisations in the UK. They provided invaluable information about the livelihoods of people with insecure immigration status. We interviewed key informants from the following institutions and community organisations: the Refugee Council in London, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) representatives in the UK, the Kurdish Housing Association in London, the Gilgamesh Centre in Manchester, the Kurdish Association in London, the Iraqi Association in London, the Iraqi Welfare Association (IWA) in London, the Kurdish Cultural Centre (KCC) in London, one of the main Interpretation and Translation Companies in London and a community worker in Brighton.

Gaining access to participants

Access to participants has been widely discussed in social sciences, emphasizing the fact that conducting sensitive research with vulnerable populations poses potential methodological challenges over ethical issues (Benoliel 1984, Bloch 2007, Bloch et al. 2009a, Dickson-Swift et al. 2007, Düvell et al. 2010, Higgins et al. 2001, Renzetti and Lee 1993). Researchers have highlighted the difficulty of physical access to spaces used by the groups under study (Gummesson 2000), the difficulty of being an outsider/insider (Okumus et al. 2007). Many researchers attempt to gain access through gatekeepers, signposting and phone calls (Zulauf 1999).

In the attempt to gain access to undocumented Iraqi-Kurdish migrants, we sent out information about this research to community centers, political, religious and student networks, women organizations, in addition to contacting people through social media such as Facebook and

Twitter. However, the responses we received through social media and emails were significantly less than expected. Perhaps this was due to the sensitivity and nature of the questions asked in the survey and therefore causing many participants to stop taking part just after answering a few questions. We therefore changed our strategy, and decided that it would be best to communicate with these people either in person, or on the telephone. In order to gain access to the migrants, we contacted various people through Kurdish and Iraqi community organisations in the UK.

Our research team utilized established contacts with Iraqi and Kurdish migrants as well as their socio-cultural organizations. Therefore we had ready access to research participants within the community through community centers, political, cultural, religious networks and women's organizations. More importantly, we had contact with people beyond the reach of these collective organizations and spaces, who were avoiding them for certain reasons. Our knowledge of locality and contacts with groups and individuals in London helped to give us access to a range of different individuals without having to go through gatekeepers. We went to legal advice, cultural, social, political and religious community centers, women's organizations, student societies at universities, youth centers, communal spaces used by people from the same city, town or village, cafes, restaurants, minicab offices, and off-license shops to find participants to complete the survey and participate in the focus group interviews.

Many individuals helped us to reach the so-called "hart to reach" people with insecure immigration status. Many of them were willing to call their relatives and friends who also had an insecure immigration status, and e then able to carry out the survey with them over the telephone. Some also provided us with telephone numbers, in particular those who had attended our focus group interviews. We realised that the telephone was the most effective way to reach these "hard to reach" people. Firstly, because it was easier to gain access to people who had similar immigration problems and who had established their own networks of people with similar concerns, experiences and with whom they worked and socialized in the same areas.

Secondly, many migrants with insecure immigration status in the UK lack knowledge of information and communication technologies, and do not have regular internet access. Therefore, their main source of communication is through the telephone.

Thirdly, many of them do not visit community centres regularly due to unsocial working hours and fear that immigration officers might raid into community centres. In fact, many are even oblivious to the existence of such community centres and do not step out of the boundaries of their working place and accommodation, therefore making it more difficult to find them; they are essentially living in fear.

It is important to emphasise the fact that we were able to communicate, not just in the same language, but also in the same dialects within their language. We found that the majority of the survey participants opened up more when we communicated in their language. This may have been more time-consuming for us in terms of translating the research tools, but it was very rewarding in terms of accessing these people and receiving credible, trustworthy answers.

'Iraqi' migrants: problems of definition

It is crucial to emphasise that the term 'Iraqi migrants' or 'Iraqis' is problematic and in need of further clarification. Since its foundation, the state of Iraq has not recognised its multi-ethnic and multi-faith character, and the Iraqi governments have attempted, on numerous occasions, to assimilate and 'Arabise' ethnic minorities. As explained below, this 'Arabisation' policy and hegemonic struggle between the state of Iraq and the subordinated minorities has also permanently fragmented the country. Therefore, Iraq was never successful in creating a nationally accepted sense of 'Iraqiness'. The term 'Iraqis' has been perceived as a product of Arab nationalism. This perception is reflected by the Kurdish and Iraqi diaspora communities living in Europe. The studies conducted on migrants from Iraq show that Kurds from Iraq have distanced themselves from such a definition and emphasise their own ethnic Kurdish identity (Holgate et al 2010).

Moreover, displacement, exile and sense of belonging to 'Kurdishness' have created a strong sense of ethnic identity and diasporic Kurdish ethnic and or national consciousness among Kurds in the diaspora (Holgate et *al*., 2012) where for the first time Kurds from Iraq – together with other Kurds from Turkey, Iran and Syria, but not with 'Iraqis' – have established community organisations and networks (Keles 2011). For example, *Kurdiska Riksförbundet* (National

Kurdish Federation – KRF) in Sweden or *Kurdisches Zentrum eV* in Berlin became umbrella organisations for Kurds from different part of Kurdistan(s), living in Stockholm and Berlin. However, the Kurds from Iraq have avoided being part of the diasporic Iraqi community. Similarly, the Iraqi community does not consider the Kurds as members of their diaspora. For instance, many Iraqis from Shiite communities who attended the international conference on the Kurdish Genocide in Iraq stated that that they as 'Iraqis' condemn the genocide against the Kurds and pledge for recognition of the genocide against 'Kurdish people'(KRG conference 2013).

Furthermore, the Iraqi Assyro-Chaldean community has joined the ethno-religious networks in Turkey, Sweden, Australia and the USA to create a sense of belonging amongst Assyro-Chaldeans from Turkey, Iraq and Syria. They did not join the Iraqi Muslim or Kurdish communities in the diaspora. Therefore, it is important for migration policy, with regards to Iraqis, to acknowledge this conceptual and political issue, and avoid imposing unwanted identities.

It is crucial to mention that there is also a paucity of statistical data on Kurdish migrants, because the Kurds are not registered according to their ethnic affiliation but according to their nationality in the settlement countries (Keles 2011; Holgate *et al*., 2010; Westin 2003). 'For Kurdish migrants, their labelling [as Turkish, Iraqi, Iranian and Syrian] [sic] both at a daily, informal level by citizens of the host country, and formally, in terms of statistics, as members of the very states [Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria] from which they have escaped, reinforces a sense of invisibility' (Holgate *et al.,* 2012: 596).

 Moreover, the existing data on migrants from Iraq are collected and compiled mainly by NGOs and organisations in the field of refugee crisis in the neighbouring countries of Iraq, including Jordan and Syria, which are not the migration destinations of the Kurdish refugees from the KRoI (Chatelard 2009).

Our survey results show that only 70 out of 190 people indicated that their country of origin is Iraq. The rest of 120 people indicated that their country of origin is "Kurdistan", "Iraqi Kurdistan" and "South Kurdistan".

Brief background of migration from Iraq

Displacement and forced migration from Iraq has a distinct historical meaning in international migration (van Hear 1995; Al 1997). The brutal and coercive policies of the Iraqi governments, in particular Saddam Hussein regime, have caused permanent crisis and instability in Iraq (Keles 2011). The ethno-centric nation-building project in Iraq was based on the 'Arabisation' policies of the Iraqi governments (Batatu, 1978; Kaynak 1992; Sheyholislami 2011; Hardi 2011), which marginalised or excluded the Kurds and other ethno-religious groups. In order to maintain the Sunni-Arab hegemonic domination, the Iraqi governments used coercive and consensual methods. However, such policies have caused a hegemonic struggle between dominant and subordinated groups in Iraq. This permanent crisis led to the enactment of the anti-democratic state of emergency law, displacement, mass killing of Kurds from the Kerkûk region (Kaynak 1992; Day and Freeman, 2003), the Anfal campaign against the Kurds (van Bruinessen 1999: 5) and even the genocide in the Kurdish populated city of Halabja (Casey 2003; Hardi 2011). After the eight-year war with Iran (1980-1988), the chemical gas attack on Kurds (1988), the invasion of Kuwait (1991), the Gulf War (1990-1991), the UN Security Council's sanctions in the 1990s and the brutal response of Saddam's regime to Shiite and Kurdish uprisings in 1991, dramatically increased the migration influx from Iraq to neighbouring countries and to Europe (Taylor 2004). From Kurdistan, 'over a million, perhaps almost as many as two million Kurds fled from their home towns and villages in 1991' (van Bruinessen 1999:3). As a result of this tremendous migration influx, the Kurds became more visible in the Western European countries and the question of Kurdistan was internationalised, and went beyond the territories of Kurdistan, through the articulation and mobilization of the Kurdish migrants for the 'homeland politics' (Keles 2011).

The internal conflict (1994-1997) between the Kurdish political parties, in particular between the Kurdistan Patriotic Union and the Kurdistan Democratic Party, caused further migration influx from Iraqi Kurdistan to the Western countries of Germany, Sweden, Denmark, the UK and the Netherlands. Migration from Iraq reached its peak after the Iraq War, in 2003, following heightened insecurity and sectarian violence amongst religious groups. Persecution of

'othernized'[1] groups, poverty and deprivation became powerful 'push' factors for further immigration to other countries (Kaynak 1992; Chatelard 2002).

It is recognised that migration data from Iraq presents an unclear picture of the reality of the Iraqi mobility across borders (Waxman 2001). The data is compiled by NGOs and refugee organisations (e.g. UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Rescue Committee (IRC)). The existing academic literature is very limited (Chatelard 2002; Stansfield 2004) and some of it is already dated due to the rapid political changes in the Middle East – in particular in Syria, Egypt and Lebanon - to where thousands of migrants from Iraq fled before and after the 'Iraq War' in 2003. The IRC estimated in 2008 that the number of Iraqis displaced since 2003 as a 'result of war, sectarian violence and a complete breakdown of the rule of law' had reached four million (IRC 2008:1). Some of them remained in Iraq as internally displaced persons (IDP), others escaped to neighbouring countries (e.g. Jordan, Syria, Iran, Lebanon, Yemen and Saudi Arabia). The IRC report (2008: i) states that there is 'a remarkably wide range of estimates, from 1 million to 2 million, of the number of Iraqi refugees in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt and other host countries'.

Refugees from Iraq in neighbouring countries

Country	Estimated Iraqi Population	Total Registered Cases	Average	Case Size
Syria	1-1.5 million	165,000	39,096	3.5
Jordan	450,000-500,000	51,559	24,232	2
Lebanon	50,000	9,950	5,418	1.9
Egypt	20,000-40,000	10,633	4,129	2.5
Turkey	5,000-10,000	5,128	2,531	2

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[1] The term 'othernized' is used to denote the multiple levels of discrimination to which minority groups are subjected.

Total	1.5-2.1 million	242,270	75,406	2

Source: UNHCR (2008), available at: http://foreignaffairs.house.gov/110/joh022608a.pdf; IRC report (2008) 'Five Years Later, a Hidden Crisis Report of the IRC Commission on Iraqi Refugees'.

According to UNHCR data, in February 2009, the number of registered Iraqi refugees in neighbouring countries dramatically decreased, reaching 305,681 people (Syria: 225,530; Jordan: 52,656; Lebanon: 10,208; Egypt: 10,182 and Turkey: 8,292). IRC provides a different estimate and points out that 'the informal estimates that the IRC advocacy team heard in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon added up to a total of between 800,000 and 1 million refugees, but there is currently no way to rigorously check the number' (UNHCR 2009:20).

IRC has also published a report on refugees from Iraq living in the USA. The report indicates that refugees from Iraq are facing multiple difficulties and problems including access to the labour market and the health service. However, the report highlights that 'despite these difficulties, resettlement in the United States remains the only option for thousands of Iraqi refugees who are still in exile in the Middle East, primarily in Jordan and Syria' (IRC 2009: i) and who cannot return to their homeland because many of these refugees had worked for the US forces in Iraq, and had been targeted by extremist groups, their relatives, and the authorities.

As mentioned earlier, the majority of displaced people remained inside Iraq, and up to 2 million sought refuge in neighbouring countries (Chatelard 2002). A significant number of refugees were granted special visas (e.g. interpreters who worked for the British, Danish, American and Australian governments) and as asylum seekers to Western European countries (mainly Germany, Sweden and the UK), as well as to the USA, Canada and Australia.

Ethno-national networks and migration

Recent migration studies are based on multiple approaches which explain the macro, meso and micro levels of the migration process (Kritz *et al.* 1992). These levels look closely at political, economic and sociological reasons that lead individuals to make the decision to emigrate to another country (Chatelard 2009). The human mobility across the national borders and its

transnational (Basch *et al.* 1994; Portes *et al.* 1999; Faist 2000), 'multi-connected, multi-referential' (Soysal 2000 :13) relationships and ethno-religious networks (Vertovec 2001; 2005) and 'social capital' (Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1988; Putnam 2007) have become relevant theoretical concepts to understand the way in which migrants get access to resources and participate in social, economic and political life across national borders.

It should be noted that the surveyed literature below does not focus specifically on the Kurds from the Kurdistan Region in Iraq, but encompassed Kurds from different parts of the broader Kurdistan spread across Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran. This makes it difficult for some general assumptions on the Kurdish migrants from IKROI to be formulated.

In migration studies, some scholars (Portes 1998; Vertovec 2002) stress the importance of ethnic, social, linguistic and religious networks which provide access to labour markets, social orientation in the settlement country's society and the reproduction of cultural, political and religious spaces in the diaspora (Keles 2011). These networks also enable the migration chain from sending to receiving countries. Ethnic, social, linguistic and religious networks determine the routes of migration from Iraq, as is the case of many other migrants (Portes 1998; Vertovec 2002). For example, Iraqi Turcomans decided to migrate to Turkey due to ethnic and linguistic similarity (Mannaert 2003); Iraqi Arabs to Jordan and Syria; and the Kurds to the Western European countries where there is already a significant Kurdish Diaspora, networks and organisations, and where the Kurdish refugees believe that they can find a 'safe haven' without being confronted by ethnic discrimination (Holgate *et al.* 2012). Similarly, the Iraqi Assyro-Chaldean Christian community has moved to Sweden, Australia and Canada where there are longstanding Syriac Orthodox communities from Turkey, Iraq and Syria. These ethno-religious networks do not only provide a 'safe haven' for those who have been discriminated against their faith and who were forced to emigrate, but these networks also provide employment opportunities – as is the case of the Iraqi Assyro-Chaldean female migrants working in households of Istanbulite Syriac Orthodox (Danis 2007). The Assyro-Chaldean community shows that ethno-religious networks create an exploitative solidarity, trust, reciprocity and religious freedom amongst people from different geographical and political spaces. The offered domestic work in Istanbul within the 'ethnic niche' (Waldinger 1994) and/or 'religious niche' helps Christian female migrants from Iraq to find their social, religious and economic orientation

in the diaspora. According to IRC, approximately 50% of the registered Iraqi refugees in Turkey are coming from these communities (IRC 2008). However, Turkey signed the 1951 Refugee Convention with a 'geographic exclusion' clause and limited the provision of asylum to refugees from Europe as a result. This means that refugees from Iraq do not have any protection and rights for settlement in Turkey. Many of them are undocumented.

Other research studies have explored the position of the Kurdish diaspora in relation to its mobilising for homeland politics (Keles 2011), the ways in which it produces and reproduces Kurdish ethnic identity (Sheyholislami 2010 in Sweden; Westin 2003), the Kurdish participation in the labour market and the wider society (Westin 2003; Holgate *et al.* 2010), and issues related to gender (Erel 2012; Alina 2004).

The existing studies on migrants from Iraq in the Western European countries are mainly focused on Kurdish migration (Wahlbeck 1998; Griffin 1999; McDowall 2004; Holgate *et al.* 2010; Keles 2011). The main reason for this is that the majority of migrants from Iraq to Western countries are Kurdish. While many Iraqi Arabs have found 'safe haven' in neighbouring Arab countries including Syria, Jordan, Kuwait and other regional countries, Kurdish refugees have targeted destinations such as Germany, Sweden, Denmark, the UK and other western European countries – through Turkey and Greece – for two reasons. Firstly, they already had existing networks and family members there who could provide them with support. Secondly, Kurdish refugees felt that they would not confront ethnic discrimination and that they would be provided with relatively stable future perspectives by western European countries.

Facts about Iraqi-Kurdish migrants in the UK

Since the late 1940s, political dissidents from Iraq have been coming to the UK. However, the numbers of refugees increased during the 1980s and 1990s due to Saddam Hussein's regime of brutal policies against the Kurdish people. Therefore, today, the majority of migrants from Iraq in Europe, including the UK, are Kurds.

A limited number of those Iraqis who had worked for the British government (as interpreters in the military, media, for contractors and aid agencies) have been granted a special immigrant visa,

similarly to the USA, Denmark and Australia. The settlement scheme for those migrants (known as the 'Gateway scheme') was set up by the Ministry of Defence, and promised to grant more refugee status to asylum seekers from Iraq, but the Ministry did not keep its promises (Haynes and Evans 2007; Verkaik 2008).

The Iraqi Embassy in the UK estimates that the Iraqi population in the country is around 350,000 – 450,000 people (IOM 2007). However, it is difficult to verify this claim. The estimated population of Iraqi nationals, resident in the UK by nationality, is 34,000 people and the estimated Iraqi-born population, resident in the UK is 69,000 people, according to the Census of 2011. It should be kept in mind that these data are also not adequate because many people do not complete the census forms for various reasons. The majority of Kurds from KROI live in London, in particular west London. Birmingham, Manchester, Cardiff, Glasgow, Derby, Leeds and Plymouth are other cities where Kurds from KROI have settled. The Kurdish and Iraqi communities estimate the number of migrants from Iraq to be up to 150,000 people.

Irregular Iraqi - Kurdish migrants in EU including in the UK

The 'illegal migrants' (Engbersen and van der Leun, 2001) became research subjects of increased relevance to many European scholars. Van Liempt and Doomernik (2006) focus on the question of making decisions in the process of the migration route and explore 'to what extent do smugglers give direction to migration; and how much autonomy do migrants themselves have in deciding where they want to travel' (van Liempt and Doomernik 2006:166). They found out that in some cases migrants themselves can make their decision regarding the migration route but in other cases they follow the instruction of the smugglers (van Liempt and Doomernik 2006, also see Koser 1997), which causes catastrophic outcomes (Engbersen *et al*. 2002).

Strict visa and asylum processes have ironically contributed to the increase of undocumented people in many European countries (van Liempt and Doomernik 2006). In the official discourse, undocumented migrants in the UK are usually referred to as 'illegal immigrants'. However, scholars have avoided the use of such highly politicised terms which attempt to criminalise the most 'vulnerable', the 'othernized' and excluded social groups (Cohen 2003; Black 2003;

Paspalanova 2008; Bloch *et al.*, 2009; Sigona 2010; Keles 2011; Bloch *et al.* 2012), and which may cause further negative stereotyping and stigmatisation.

In the literature, undocumented or irregular migration has been defined as 'crossing borders without proper authority or violating conditions for entering another country' (Jordan and Düvell 2002:15). We should also keep in mind that being undocumented is used consciously as a strategy to enter and remain in a country for a certain period of time while attempting to obtain legal immigration status or work for a certain period of time to earn some money and then leave the country. Therefore, 'undocumentedness' should be considered as a complex process.

Some studies on undocumented people tend to consider migrants as 'vulnerable', passive actors (Salt and Stein 1997). However, other studies have found that undocumented people can also have long-term strategies, plans, hopes and motivations when they make their decision to emigrate and choose their destination in a particular country (van Liempt and Doomernik 2006). They then move forward towards securing legal immigration status and settling in the country where they live without papers. In our focus groups, research participants made it clear that they would stay in the UK until they could be legalised. They also made it clear that until they have been legalised, they would be unable to plan their future, and that they had waited for a long period of time and were willing to continue to wait rather than go back while having achieved nothing.

As mentioned above, the existing literature on migration from Iraq is very limited and research on irregular migrants from Iraq is nonexistent. However, in recent years, the issues of undocumented Kurdish migrants have become the subject of three different research projects in the UK. In their research, Bloch, Sigona and Zetter (2009:14) explore 'the lives and livelihoods of young undocumented migrants from their own perspectives'. This research takes a regional approach to understanding the complexity of being an undocumented young person from Zimbabwe, Brazil, China, Turkey (including Kurdish migrants) and Ukraine   in metropolitan or in rural areas, including London, the North West and the Midlands. They found out that being undocumented has multiple impacts on the constructed everyday lives of young migrants including their access to the labour market, the health services, housing and the justice system in the UK, as well as to social networks and friendships. The lack of legal immigration status causes social marginality and insecure future prospects. The Kurdish undocumented

migrants provided detailed information of their motivations for migration, which was ethnic discrimination in Turkey and ethno-national conflict between the Turkish state and the Kurds in Turkey. Moreover, 'among some young men, avoiding military service was also an important reason because they knew that if they were in the Turkish army they would be stationed in Kurdistan' (Bloch *et al.* 2011:1290). The conflict was also the main reason that Kurdish undocumented migrants from Kurdistan region of Turkey could not return to their homeland. The UK was their main destination because 'for Kurds, Britain was thought to offer safety, asylum, cultural and linguistic freedom and good human rights' (Bloch *et al*. 2011:1290). Apparently the British government has noticed that return was not a realistic possibility for the Kurds from the Kurdistan region in Turkey, and therefore many undocumented Kurds have been legalised by Legacy Cases, which refers to unresolved asylum and migration cases and makes possible who had claimed asylum before March 2007 but have not been granted asylum or indefinite leave to remain until 2011 to be legalised (ICIBI 2012).

Research focused on the undocumented Kurds from the Kurdistan Region in Turkey has found that they had developed different strategies to survive without papers with the help of networks and the ethnic community; and, had access to the labour market, mainly to sectors in the informal economy, which could be characterised by low pay, long working hours and labour exploitation (Bloch, Sigona and Zetter 2009; Holaget *et al.* 2011). Generally, undocumented migrants are deprived of basic political, social and legal rights in many western European countries because undocumented migrants "offer cheap and readily disposable supply of labour without social and welfare costs to the state. In consequence, there are increasingly large numbers of undocumented migrants, without civil or social rights, living in wealthier states" (Bloch *et al.* 2011: 1288).

While Bloch *et al*. (2009; 2011) and Holgate *et al*. (2010) provide some relevant empirical and conceptual knowledge of the Kurdish undocumented migrants from the Kurdistan region in Turkey, their findings are also very relevant to understanding the everyday life of the Kurdish migrants (feelings of displacement, sense of belonging, employment relationships, livelihood, social life and community networks) from the Kurdistan region in Iraq because they use similar routes, strategies – as well as networks – due to their co-ethnicity and their shared cultural, linguistic similarities and their sense of ethnic sentiments, different from the Iraqi Arabs.

Research on 'Undocumented Migrant Children in the UK' (Sigona and Hughes 2010), conducted by the Institute for Refugee Studies at Oxford University provides some useful empirical data on the Kurds, including the Kurds from KROI. The research focuses on the everyday lives of irregular migrant children in the UK and their families without legal status. It explores services and resources that are available to undocumented children, including access to health, education and employment opportunities for their families.

Displacement and wars have caused migration influx from Iraq to neighbouring countries including Jordan, Syria, Iran and Turkey. However, since 1980s this migration flow has been directed towards Western Europe, USA and Australia, where especially Kurds from the Kurdistan region of Iraq have created their own political, cultural and economic spaces and networks; this is particularly the case of the UK and the Nordic countries. These diasporic spaces and networks have triggered chain migrations from the Kurdistan region.

Preliminary summary of research findings

The sample: legal status

Three hundred and twenty four Iraqi-Kurdish immigrants participated in the questionnaire survey. The final sample comprised 219 respondents who were currently residing in the UK as undocumented migrants, including those with refused asylum applications (n=185) or migrants with pending asylum applications (n=34) (Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of respondents by their current legal status

Current legal status	Number of respondents	(%)
Irregular status	23	10.50%
Pending asylum application	34	15.53%
Refused asylum application	162	73.97%
Grand Total	**219**	**100.00%**

Demographic characteristics

The majority of the respondents were men and only nine were women. The sample comprised relatively young people, with almost 92% of them being younger than 34 years of age. The bulk of respondents was concentrated in the 25-29 age group.

Of the 186 immigrants in the sample who had reported on their ethnicity, almost all were Kurdish (n=182), another two were Armenian, one was Arab and another one was Turkmen.

Some 36 people had not attended school (20% of those who reported on their educational level), another 56 (31%) had completed only primary education and 71 (38%) respondents were high school graduates; 16 held University or post-graduate degrees.

Origin areas in Iraq / Kurdistan

The Iraqi-Kurdish migrants with insecure immigration status are mainly coming from Kerkûk, but also from other disputed areas in Iraq / Kurdistan. A significant number of them are also from Sulaymaniyah and Halabja. One of our key informants stated that:

> *Well, this is anecdotal evidence let's say, but I would say a lot from Kerkûk, the disputed territories, maybe we hear more about Sulaymaniyah people I don't know why that is, maybe because more people from Sulaymaniyah came in the nineties, so people who look to come abroad are looking here because they have relatives here (Janroj: 'chain migration'), yes is that what they call it? Ok, but I would have thought that it is more the disputed territories and maybe Kurds who are in Baghdad or other parts of Iraq that aren't Kurdish (Shayan, KRG, 26.03.2013)*

Reasons for leaving Iraq

Half of the respondents who answered the question on reasons for leaving Iraq (n=76) stated 'war/violence' and 'political persecution' as the primary 'push factors' for emigration, followed by those who had left the country because of economic and political instability (n=21); some 9 people reported social and honour issues as the main reasons for leaving.

The choice of the UK as an immigration destination

For most of the surveyed in the sample, UK had not been their intended destination. They just ended up in the UK as this was the smugglers' route.

> *SARK: UK was not a choice.*

ARA: This was the route that smugglers were operating.

JOO: Never planned. I was young and had no idea of anything. (Focus group interview, Brighton, 21 Feb 2013)

> *I just ended up here; It wasn't up to me where I went. The smugglers decided.*
*(*Online survey*)*

Some young men reported that they wanted to go to the Scandinavian countries (Norway or Sweden) but the lorry dropped them in the UK. Some had even started their journey to Sweden, Finland and Germany, but 'ended up here [UK]' due to the decision of smugglers.

I never wanted to come to the UK. I wanted to go to Scandinavia, because I had relatives there who told me those countries cared more about human rights, but the smugglers put me on a lorry that was bound for the UK.

For others, it really did not matter where they went for as long as it was a safe place where they would be taken.

> *HAMA: I just wanted to go anywhere. And even now that I am in the UK, if I do not get any support here, I will go to another European country. I am thinking actually of going to Sweden. (Focus group, Brighton, 21 February 2013).*

However, other respondents who completed the online survey indicated that the UK was always their intended destination because of family members and friends living in the UK, the relevance of the English language and their familiarity with the UK lifestyle acquired via Internet, TV and through stories of relatives living in the UK. Some participants described their choice of the UK as:

> *I had friends and close relatives in the UK, that's why I wanted to come here. My friends and relatives did tell me that it was difficult to be granted asylum, but they also said that quality of life and job opportunities are better than in Kurdistan.* (Sangar, Focus Group, Birmingham, 17.02.13)

> *My uncle advised me to come here and work for a better life in a safe country. He told me my English skills would help me survive.*

> *Yes, a better life in the UK.*

Yes, because of the language, I thought I would at least be able to survive better than in other countries. (ibid)

Contacts in the UK before arrival and familiarity with immigration rules
Almost three quarters of the sample reported of having no contacts in the UK before arriving in the country.

Almost 80% of the sample did not know about the UK immigration rules and had no familiarity with the asylum procedures before arriving in the country. Some were told by the smugglers that it "*would be easy to get asylum in the UK*" or that *"they will look after you there"*. In almost all cases, the route was decided by the smugglers.

Routes to the UK and sources of financing the journey
They would leave Kurdistan and travel to Turkey, by car or even on foot, where they would spend up to four months there; they may work for short while and then move on to Greece, Italy, France and finally to the UK. Some respondents stated that they had travelled hidden in tracks and others walked from country to country. Some of them also indicated that they had spent up to $20,000 to come to the UK, including being forced to pay extra cash to smugglers on the way in addition to the large lump sum paid in the beginning. Only half of the sample stated the sources for financing their journey to the UK. For them, 'own savings' or 'family savings' were predominant sources of the required finances. Some 24 people needed to sell family land to collect the required amount. Half of the sample arrived in the UK in 2007 and 2008, followed by those arriving in 2003 and 2005.

Participation in the UK Labour market
The survey respondents appeared to be amongst the most vulnerable in the informal labour market because of being undocumented or not having the right to work. The majority of them worked in the catering industry including cafes, restaurants and butcheries. Some worked as mechanics and in the service and sales industry including in garages, car wash and on markets. However, those who were skilled and spoke fluent English worked as accountants, interpreters and software developers. There were others who also owned their business under somebody else's name. They were forced to work excessive hours, at minimum of 10 hours a day, and, they got paid as little as £3 pounds an hour. The majority of them stated:

Well I worked for 3 years in the market, 12 hours a day. (Razaw: usually for most of the undocumented people when they work they work in fear, because for example maybe the person who gave them the job might tell on them, do you feel that in comparison to others, because you are undocumented, you are being paid much less?)

Yes it is much less, but you have no choice, you have to work. It's not like I can go to Sainsbury's or Tesco to work, it is not allowed, so I have no choice but to settle for little pay to save me from getting found out. But of course, this is expected, if you don't have a status and you don't have documents then of course whoever you work for is going to pay you much less. If you have documents and citizenship, it is different, maybe you will get paid ten pounds an hour, but if you are in my situation you get paid maximum four pounds an hour, most of the time less than that even.(Shaho, Focus group, Croydon, 28 Feb 2013)

Our respondents also explained what it was like to work in the informal market in terms of the conditions and the treatment they received from the employers. The majority were regularly mistreated but were unable to retaliate due to fears of getting into trouble and being caught. As two of the respondents said:

Shaho: *Sorry, I just wanted to also add, I am undocumented and I work, there have been many occasions where people have been very disrespectful towards me, treated me disrespectfully, but because I am undocumented and I am in need of a job, I have no choice but to accept this kind of treatment. There have been many times when people I have worked for have spoken to me not nicely, and I have had to just take it for the sake of surviving. If even try to defend myself, it will not only cause a problem for them, but also for myself as it is not even legal for me to be working there in the first place .*(Shaho, Focus group, Croydon, 28 Feb 2013)

Rohat: *Sorry to cut you off, I have something to add, if a situation arises and there is a problem, it could be an argument or fight or whatever, even if you have been granted asylum you would still be in trouble, but for someone who has been refused or is still pending asylum process, and the police turns up and says you're not even allowed to be working it would cause a very big problem for that person. That is why we all have to be very careful and take whatever comes at us. It is true that I work for my brother in his shop, but there are times when he is not there, and I have to manage the business, and an angry customer will want to start a fight, but I cannot say nor do anything because I could get into a lot of trouble.*(Rohat, Focus group, Croydon, 28 Feb 2013)

Plans for the future
When asked about plans for the future, the majority reported their desire to 'work in the UK' or to 'live and work in the UK', followed by 'having a family in the UK' and 'study in the UK'.

Almost 80% (n=140) of those who disclosed their plans for return to Iraq stated no intentions for return.

When asked about what life in the UK, most respondents liked the feelings of 'security' and 'freedom of expression and living in a democratic country'. Others praised the multiculturalism in the host society.

The majority of the respondents indicated that they would like to stay here until they have been legalized and then make their decision because: As one put it "*I want to have an UK passport and then go back, and start a life there. If anything happens though, I want to be free to leave again.*"

 Others said:

> *It is very difficult to go back if you don't have any financial aid or source, either here or there. Sometimes when I get quite tired of my life, I think about going back, but then I think it'll be a waste of my life and years if I go back after all this time, without an achievement* (Sangar, Focus Group, Birmingham, 17.02.13)

> Azad: *If it's for the sake of a job, a job is a job anywhere, so why leave your home for it. I'm an example of this, but I can't go back because I have spent so many years waiting. It will be hard to go back to square one* (Azad, Focus Group, Birmingham, 17.02.13)

Compared to 90s, the migration influx from Kurdistan region has dramatically declined. This has been mentioned by many key informants and also individuals interviewed for this research because of economic and political stability in Kurdistan, but also people have more economic opportunities to access education and health services in Kurdistan as well as in neighbouring countries. Staff from the Kurdistan Regional Government UK Representation (KRG UK) stated that:

> *I think the fact that people can travel, they can go to Iran and to Turkey for tourism, for health reasons and even for education and if they want for jobs, maybe jobs not so much, I think the temptation may be to come all the way to Europe and to Britain especially and to live rough for months while trying to get here maybe that temptation has declined. So I would have thought the numbers have dropped,* (Shayan, KRG, 26.03.2013)

The role of integration packages in the return decision

In terms of types of reintegration packages and repatriation, there are different views and it seems that it is a complex issue, because while some of them are interested in cash grants or business starter grants, the majority of them intend to wait to be legalized and then make their decision.

One hundred and twenty six people shared the opinion that integration packages will not be a reason for them to return to Iraq.

Some of them indicated that they cannot go to Iraq and Kurdistan because of on-going problems in Kerkûk, Mosul and other disputes areas; other indicated that there is still lack of opportunity in term of employment, education in Kurdistan.

Moreover many of them had left their homeland because of conflicts between families or to receive better education in Europe as well as to join their family or relatives living here. Even when we asked them what kind of packages would attract them to go back, the majority expressed their lack of trust in the UK and Kurdish authorities, institutions and believed that these packages would either not happen or would not last. A key informant from the Refugee Council expressed his concern about the need for a well revised re-integration package for returnees. He stated:

> *People are not aware of legitimate ways of returning. There are those who have been here for years and aged and want to return home. There are those who have spent all they had to reach here on the promise of a better life, and £3000 would not suffice in aiding them to rebuild their life after so many years. There's also a lack of trust in those organisation that carry out assisted return programmes, in going through with their promise. They may have one member of staff in the relevant country that hands over a meagre amount of money and provides no support to that person. It is necessary to establish a better organised system for voluntary returns. In addition to making people here aware of the existence of such a programme, there must be a support system for those who go back and need to readapt to life and society there. In a country like Iraq, charities and organisations that have European links are scarce and inaccessible. This will make a person, who has returned after 10 years in Europe, feel lost. There must be evidence of success of this system in order for others to trust and take part in the voluntary return programme.* (Necirwan, Refugee Council)

In terms of resettlement, Necirwan expressed the need of recognising the challenges and complexity of resettlement for those who return. He mentioned:

> *This is not easy for all. Some may have a big family, and others probably have no family. It is very important to consider whether this person being forced to leave has a future or not there. It is not just a matter of money, but rather it must be considered whether this person will be successful and have enough support in readapting and making a life there.*

There must a collaboration between the government there and the Home Office here, so make the process of making a life for one self there once again easier and better supported on both sides (Necirwan , Refugee Council)

A large proportion of them had no intention to go back because their family had spent huge amounts to finance their coming to Europe. Their families considered this as an investment. Therefore many of these migrants with insecure immigration status were working hard in the informal economy in order to save the money that their family had spent for them. The key informants discussed other possible reasons *I think a lot of them maybe are embarrassed that they have invested so much money to come all this way and have ended up doing a job in a factory or in a take away shop or maybe something even worst, you know the kind of slave labour that you hear about, and maybe they have lied to their families about their jobs. So I think for a lot of them there would be a shame factor to go back as a failure, so I think no matter how hard their life is in Britain they wouldn't want to face the embarrassment of going back until they have saved so much money that they could go back and buy a piece of land and look big when they can go back, they achieve something* (Shayan, KRG UK, 26.03.2013).

Another important reason that has been mentioned by focus group participants is that they would like to wait to be legalized and get British citizenship, and then they will return to home. Citizenship has been seen as a guarantee for returning back in case they are faced with an insecure situation in Iraq or Kurdistan. As Sark, one of the focus group participants, put it:

I've thought about going back but I want to have a British passport. If anything happens there and I want to go away, I want to be able to do it safely. I worry also about finding work there but I am more worried about safety. Kerkûk is not safe, for example. It is even worse for Kurds in Turkey and Iran (Sark, Focus Group, Birmingham, 17.02.13)

Moreover, having a European citizenship is related to having a social status in Kurdistan, because many see getting citizenship *"as an achievement", as a "reward for all of the investment and the hardship and years of separation from family and friends, so they have done something* (Shayan, KRG UK, 26.03.2013).

During focus group interviews, many participants seemed to have an issue with trusting who they spoke to. We found that as the interview went on, a lot of what was said at the beginning

was elaborated later on. Some stated that they had been victims of dishonesty and fraud by their solicitors. They explained that they felt taken advantage of and as a result, many did not see their solicitors again for a long time. Rebeen stated that:

> *In order for me to appeal, I had to provide some further material proof. I faxed the paperwork to my solicitor but he had neglected to put my appeal forward and gave my case up all together without even telling first or referring me to someone else. He had done the same to three hundred other people. This, of course, lead to my second refusal and I was banned from appealing against it.* (Rebeen, Focus Group, Birmingham, 17.02.13)

Others refused to go through with some suggestions that their solicitors had because they found them not to be honourable.

> Sangar: "*I want to get married and set up my family here. My solicitor suggested it as the only route left available to me, but I want to get married for the sake of having a family, not just to use it to appeal against my refusal.*"! (Sangar, Focus Group, Birmingham, 17.02.13)

An issue that kept reappearing, and played a major role in the complication of cases, was the lack of information or the amount of wrong advice that these refugees receive through friends and persons they trust. It often alters the outcome completely.

> Farhad: *When I stated my case here, I didn't tell them the truth of why I had left. Instead I told them I could not live in Kurdistan because of having cultural issues related to honour. I have evidence of having worked with the American forces; I even have their contact details, my access ID, and my gun permit. When I came here the second time, people told me not to state that case, but to tell a different one* (Farhad, Focus group, Derbyshire).

Returnees

Refugees from Iraq have crossed the Syrian and Jordanian borders, on numerous occasions, to escape war and violence. However, the same refugees also return for short or longer periods to their homelands to meet their families, attend important family events and carry out their business, and then return back again to Syria and Jordan. Those who return to Iraq for longer periods, often are forced back to Syria and Jordan to seek 'safe heaven' when the violence in the

country escalates. This means that returnees Iraqis 'circulate' between the three countries at times of stability and times of increased violence in Iraq. This 'in-out' and 'out-in' strategy ('getting out from Iraq and coming in to Iraq approach') has been widely used by Iraqi migrants. This 'circularity' of migratory movements also exists in regions with 'flexible' visa policies. Although both Jordan and Syria have long traditions in receiving Palestinian refugees, neither of the countries is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and has not developed a policy dealing with asylum and refugee issues. Both countries, however, have considered refugees not as 'illegal migrants' but as "'temporary guests' with no legal residence rights, nor the right to work" (Chatelard 2010:60). However, migrants from Iraq have access to the health and educational system and, can also work in the informal economies in these countries. Moreover, those who had crossed the Syrian and Jordanian borders to return to Iraq have a legal right to come back as both Jordan and in particular Syria have provided them with return visas. The cross-border mobility of migrants and the flexibility of the Syrian and Jordanian governments to grant visas to migrants from Iraq have made it possible for refugees to go back to their homelands, to re-establish their livelihoods and prepare for their eventual return from Syria and Jordan (Chatelard 2010). The easy granting of visas by both governments has given a feeling of a 'safe haven' to which the refugees can return in case of any instability and war in Iraq.

One year after the Iraq War, the British government had started to actively encourage migrants from Iraq to return to their homes. This policy has pushed migrants without a secure immigration status – being scared of deportation – into clandestine situations, including being undocumented and working in informal and exploitative labour conditions.

Iraq is a country of immigration as well as county of returnees and emigration (Russell 1992; Poku and Graham 1998; UN 2003). After each war, thousands of Iraqis, including Kurds, returned to their homes from Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Kuwait and other neighbouring countries. After the Iraq War and following the 2005 election, many migrants returned to Iraq. Anecdotal evidence collected from Kurdish community organisations and gatekeepers shows that there is a significant number of elderly, as well as highly skilled second-generation Kurdish migrants – in particularly those who were born and educated in the UK, Sweden, the Netherlands, Germany and the USA – who have returned to Iraq and Kurdistan. Nonetheless, there are no research

accounts about their journey back home and their settlement, about finding jobs or establishing their own businesses, their productivity, or their transmission of knowledge, habits, culture from Europe to Iraq and the Kurdistan region. This needs to be adequately researched in order to develop policies for other Iraqi and Kurdish migrants. It is evident that those who have returned to Kurdistan and Iraq are either British citizens or have been granted Indefinite Leave to Remain in Britain. The permanent legal status in Britain provides them with a sense of protection and an opportunity to leave Iraq/Kurdistan to the UK if and when needed.

The economic boom and stability in the Kurdistan region of Iraq might have a significant impact on migrants' intensions to return. However, anecdotal information shows that migrants from the KROI believe that the ongoing dispute between the Iraqi central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government over the 'disputed territories' (the Kurdish-populated areas) might cause war. Therefore, they intend to wait and see how the situation develops.

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