

Syrian Refugees in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Situation Report

January 27, 2018

This report highlights the legal, economic and educational status of Syrian refugees in the Kurdistan region of northern Iraq, providing a framework to propose solutions which could alleviate their suffering.

I. Introduction:

The Kurdistan region is one of the three regions of the Federal Republic of Iraq. It is one of the main destinations for Syrian refugees fleeing the war, which has been ongoing since 2011, and the main destination for Kurds as a result of the geographic proximity to Kurdish areas of Syria as well as historical and national relations with its residents. The majority of refugees who moved to the region are mainly from the northeastern parts of Syria; from Hassakeh province including the cities of Qamishli and al-Malikiyah (Derik), in addition to refugees from the towns of Kobani and Afrin in Aleppo province, with a small percentage from other areas in Syria.

II. Distribution of Syrian refugees in the Kurdistan region:

As of the beginning of 2016, the number of Syrian refugees in the region exceeds 241,000. They are concentrated in nine camps as follows:

- Four camps in the city of Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan. These camps are: Kushtaba, Korkosik, Darashukran (12,327) and Basirma (3,078).
- Four camps in the city of Dohuk: Dumiz 1 (25,690), Dumiz 2 (6,688), Quwailan (6,221), and Akra (1,136).
- One camp in the city of Sulaymaniyah: Barakeh (10,000).

While 60% of refugees in the Kurdistan region are concentrated in its cities and towns, a small percentage of Syrian refugees live in other cities outside the region, such as the city of Kirkuk.

In addition, there are a proportion of refugees that are not registered by UNHCR, and therefore are not included in statistics. However, according to unofficial statistics from organizations operating in the camps, by the end of 2016 the number of refugees exceeded 300,000, the vast majority of whom were Kurds who moved from the al-Jazira area as well as Kobani and Afrin.

More than 40 local Syrian organizations operate in the region to provide assistance and services in the areas of education, culture, development, relief, women, children and people with special needs.

III. The overall situation of Syrian refugees in the Kurdistan region

i. Legal status

The majority of refugees in the region are asylum seekers who have applied for asylum at UNHCR. Asylum applications- a form of registration- are given to refugees so they can reside legally in the region. However, registered refugees are not allowed to move freely within the region if no refugee identity certificates were obtained or are not renewed each year.

In addition, there are legal barriers to some professions such as dentists, pharmacists, lawyers, and taxi drivers. Refugees also face many challenges as they are unable to obtain identity

documents and other personal documentation, such as marriage registration, identity cards, passports, as well as school and university papers and registration records. The reason is the absence of official offices of the Syrian government or the Syrian opposition to issue these documents.

ii. Humanitarian situation

The lack of jobs, the war on ISIS as well as the political crises with Iraq's central government in and around the Kurdish region of northern Iraq since October 15, 2017, shortly after the Iraqi Kurdistan referendum on September 25, 2017, have further destabilized the psychological and humanitarian situation of refugees in the region.

Health services are provided in refugee camps through dispensaries and medical clinics. These dispensaries often lack specialized medical staff and suffer from a shortage of medicines as well as drugs for chronic diseases, in particular cancer. Refugees living outside the camps have the greatest share of hardship, as they do not have health insurance and they have no access to health services except medical examination provided in public clinics and hospitals.

“There is a failure on the part of international organizations, donors as well as OCHA in supporting refugees in the region. In addition, the interim government or any organization affiliated with the Syrian opposition has no role in supporting the local government to provide the necessary assistance to camps and refugees.”

A Syrian refugee in Kurdistan

iii. Economic status

Syrian refugees in general suffer from a difficult economic situation. The majority are either self-employed or they work in private enterprises such as restaurants, hotels, shops, construction work, and small workshops, among others. Some also work in agriculture. Syrian refugees who live in cities and outside camps suffer from additional burdens due to the lack of jobs as well as the high cost of living, housing and medical fees. In addition, the political crises with Baghdad has affected the humanitarian situation of refugees, as Iraq responded to the region's independence vote by carrying out collective punitive measures against Kurdistan, including an international flight ban and the use of military force to control most of the disputed territories. This has adversely affected citizens of the Kurdistan Region in general, and the refugees in particular, because many organizations have stopped operating in the area as well as the difficulty of providing humanitarian relief.

iv. Educational status

Education is relatively accessible. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) as well as educational institutions in the region facilitate the admission of refugee children in schools. In addition, the KRG has opened schools for refugee in different parts of the region or in the camps.

“We enjoy the right to education without discrimination and equally with the majority of Kurdistan citizens. The KRG and educational institutions in the region facilitate the admission of refugee children in schools. In addition, the KRG has opened schools for refugee in different parts of the region or in the camps.”

12th grade student

However, education faces several challenges, summarized as follows:

- The inability to establish free of charge schools in areas near the refugees' place of residence, thus burdening the refugee with additional transportation expenses.
- UNICEF refugee school teachers complain of insufficient income.
- Only a limited number of students are admitted to the region's universities. The admission rate is low compared to the large number of students with a secondary school diploma (pre-university degree). Public universities have no ability to accommodate all students, and private ones are very expensive. This prevents many students from continuing their education. Language is also a challenge for Syrian students, as the official language in the region is Kurdish (Sorani).

“Only a limited number of students are admitted to the region’s universities. The admission rate is low compared to the large number of students with a secondary school diploma (pre-university degree). Public universities have no ability to accommodate all students, and private ones are very expensive. This prevents many students from continuing their education.”

A student who tried to register at a university

IV. Recommendations

- i. Open an OCHA office in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, and activate the role of the UN in providing services to Syrian refugees.
- ii. Encourage international organizations operating in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan to increase their rehabilitation programs for women and youth, and ensure that widows receive adequate allowances.
- iii. Allocate a proportion of international assistance to the KRG as well as the Syrian opposition to provide assistance to camps and refugees in the Kurdistan region.
- iv. Support the health sector by providing health care to refugees and by building hospitals for chronic diseases and tumors through the UN.
- v. Support education by building the capacity of teachers and improving their income.
- vi. Urge the international organizations operating in the Kurdistan region to increase their projects related to post-secondary education, in cooperation with the KRG. This could be achieved by establishing educational facilities annexed to public universities for Syrian students in public universities to accommodate all students.
- vii. Encourage the voluntary return of refugees through a set of measures:
 - Cancellation of conscription imposed by the Kurdish self-administration in Syria.
 - Boost the economy and eliminate high taxes and fees imposed on people.
 - Ensure security and safety, and prevent human rights violations.
 - Ensure the release of all political detainees and disclose the fate and whereabouts of those who have been forcibly disappeared.
 - Ensure freedom of political association, the safety and freedom to operate of non-governmental organizations and the freedom of movement, travel, residence and employment.
 - Ensure freedom of information, opinion and expression.



- Prevent the confiscation of private and public property, and ensure the restoration of property confiscated with compensation for damage.
- Hold perpetrators accountable for crimes committed against individuals and institutions.