

Syrian Refugees in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Harsh Conditions and Marginalization

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This report casts light on the poor conditions experienced by Syrian refugees in the Kurdistan region of Iraq and the response of international organizations to their needs over the past seven years.

I. Introduction

The war in Syria has led to a severe humanitarian crisis, which has prompted millions of Syrians to flee to and seek asylum in Syria's neighboring countries: Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The number of Syrian refugees in countries of asylum, as well as the international response to their needs have been varied. There are roughly 250,000 Syrian refugees in the Iraqi Kurdistan region, 37% of whom live in nine camps located around the cities of Erbil, Dohuk, and Sulaymaniyah, while 63% live outside the camps. In addition, there are 81,000 registered Syrian families, 32% of which include a person with special needs.

II. The overall Syrian refugee situation in the Kurdistan region

i. Legal status:

The majority of refugees in the region are asylum seekers who have applied for asylum through UNHCR. Asylum applications- a form of registration- are given to refugees so they can reside legally in the region. However, refugees must renew these identity cards every year. Registered refugees are not allowed to move freely within the region if refugee identity certificates were not obtained or renewed. In addition, there are legal barriers preventing refugees working in some professions, such as dentists, pharmacists, lawyers, and taxi drivers. Refugees also face many other challenges, as they are unable to obtain identity documents and other personal documentation, such as marriage registration, passports, as well as school and university papers, and registration records.

ii. Humanitarian situation

Syrian refugees in the region (37%) are concentrated in camps established by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), though the majority prefer to live and work in major cities. However, the psychological and humanitarian situation of refugees in the region has been further destabilized as a result of the lack of jobs, the war on ISIS, as well as the political crises with Iraq's central government that began shortly after the Iraqi Kurdistan referendum on September 25, 2017.

Despite the deteriorating living conditions of Syrian refugees in the region, there have been no emergency response plans by the UN or other international organizations, and services and humanitarian assistance provided by these bodies have not been increased. Furthermore, the Federal Government of Iraq has not complied with processing asylum applications, neglecting its internationally duties toward Syrian refugees.

Syrian refugees living in the camps don't receive food aid on a monthly basis, while those who live in cities and outside camps suffer from additional burdens due to the high cost of living, housing, and medical fees, as well as the lack of jobs and material or in-kind aid.

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.

“It is the KRG that support Syrian refugees, but international conferences are generally sponsored by the Iraqi central government, so refugees are denied access to these conferences. However, 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 Iraqi 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.”

Mahmoud Ayoub, a Syrian refugee and member of a human rights organization in the Kurdistan region.

Refugees living outside the camps have the greatest share of hardship, as they do not have health insurance and have no access to health services except medical examinations provided in public clinics and hospitals.

“I have undergone several medical procedures to treat cardiac catheterization, the last of which took place in July 2017. The cost of the medicines I need is 250,000 dinars per month (\$210 USD). I checked with the UN several times and they made appointments with me but I haven’t received anything yet.”

Fadel Ibrahim Abdi, a refugee originally from the town of Kobani, Aleppo province.

Education is relatively accessible. The KRG, as well as educational institutions in the region, facilitate the admission of refugee children in schools. However, the difficulty of accommodating new Syrian students in Arabic-language schools remains a concern for families, as well as for schools supported by UNICEF, which is planning to terminate their education projects in the region at the end of this year. In addition, several challenges lie in accessing university and higher education. Syrian students face many difficulties related to registration in the universities located in the region such as high costs, as well as universities’ inability to accommodate the increasing number of Syrian students. It should also be noted that the number of scholarships granted to refugee students in the region is limited and varies from one year to another.

“The situation for Syrian students inside Syria and abroad is deteriorating, as is their home. For Syrian students in the Iraqi Kurdistan region, there is a state of indifference and neglect. However, thanks to the KRG and international organizations, some Syrian students have been able to pursue their education, but their numbers are very few.”

D.S. A Syrian student received a university scholarship in the region.

There are a number of negative things highlighted by refugees and activists in the Iraqi Kurdistan region regarding humanitarian organizations and actors. These are:

- Some humanitarian organizations are only providing lectures and implementing awareness trainings, ignoring the need to empower Syrians to join the workforce. This indicates that the work of the UN agencies and humanitarian organizations in the Iraqi Kurdistan region does not address the most critical needs of refugees.
- The UN-administered resettlement program in the Iraqi Kurdistan region is not as effective as it should be, despite the urgent need for such a program.

Syrian refugees' participation in the Syrian solution

Syrian refugees in the Kurdistan region feel neglected by UN agencies and international organizations with respect to services. In addition, their participation is virtually non-existent in the Civil Society Support Room (CSSR), which has taken on the consultative role to the former UN Special Envoy for Syria Mr. Staffan de Mistura. Syrian civil organizations operating inside Syria and in the neighboring countries are represented in the CSSR, while Syrian civil organizations operating in the Iraqi Kurdistan region have been excluded, despite the region hosting more than 60 Syrian organizations working in various humanitarian fields.

III. Recommendations

- i. The Federal Government of Iraq must decide on asylum applications and fulfill its international obligations in accordance with the international conventions and charters it has signed. This includes securing appropriate living conditions, jobs, housing, as well as ensuring freedom of movement, health care, education, and fair legal protection for refugees.
- ii. The UN and international organizations operating in Iraqi Kurdistan must reassess the humanitarian situation in the region and take the necessary measures to alleviate the humanitarian crisis.
- iii. There must be provision of scholarships for Syrian students.
- iv. International organizations should provide grants and financial assistance to establish small and medium enterprises to enable Syrian refugees economically.
- v. All types of support for Syrian refugees in the region should be allocated by the Syrian Interim Government, since it is considered the official body by many international parties.
- vi. The UN should ensure the participation of representatives of refugees and Syrian civil society organizations in the Kurdistan region through consultations, forums, and conferences on the Syrian issue, in particular the Geneva conferences as well as the CSSR.