

Kurdish Diaspora Issues**Dr. Mohammad Salih Mustafa**

Department of International Relations and Diplomacy,
Faculty of administrative Sciences and Economics, Tishk International University,

Erbil, Iraq

Correspondence: mohammad.salih@tiu.edu.iq

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Abstract

The plight of Kurdish refugees and asylum seekers in the United Kingdom is highlighted in this paper, focussing especially on those whose asylum applications have been refused by the Home Office. Possible solutions are suggested that satisfy the asylum seekers themselves, the UK Home Office, and the Kurdistan Region and Iraq – their home country. These include the way in which the Kurdistan Region and Iraq can benefit from the presence of asylum seekers while they are in the UK and how it could invest in them on their return. Although this paper concentrates on the Kurdish diaspora in the UK, it applies, too, to the wider Kurdish diaspora in Europe and elsewhere in the western world. Also addressed in this article are some of the ongoing issues that affect the Kurdish community, and have the direct consequence of supressing them and preventing them from realising their future potential. Equally, a continuation of these problems without resolution will affect future generations and their loyalty to the home country. Resolving these troubles would, without doubt, be considered an achievement both for the region and the Iraqi government. For this study, the researcher has adopted a qualitative method of naturalistic observation through living in the UK and engagement as an activist among the Kurdish community in London for many years.

Keywords: Kurdish Diaspora, British Kurds, Kurds in the United Kingdom, Kurdish Refugees, Kurdish Asylum Seekers, Kurdish Migrants

1. Introduction

Background of the Study

Whatever its political philosophy, the *raison d'être* of any government is to keep its citizens safe and look after their interests. Of course nowadays, a state's community in the diaspora is included in any privileges that fellow citizens of that particular country enjoy. Disregarding the diaspora could provoke potential danger that could harm the community and endanger the state itself in the long run. Thus, the Kurdish diaspora and their problems are a responsibility of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Iraqi government. The Kurdish diaspora has already proven how effective it can be in advocating Kurdish and Iraqi rights. It also had a real impact on distorting the image of the former Iraqi regime.

Hence, this study is an attempt to highlight the major problems of the Kurdish diaspora and suggesting solutions for them. Its importance lies at the heart of the current and future obligations of the KRG towards its fellow citizens in the diaspora. It also falls under the framework of the Parliament of Kurdistan Region's bill: on which the researcher participated in discussions on 17 November 2019 in the Parliament's Committee of the Relations and Kurdish Diaspora.

2. The Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to get the Kurdistan Region's Parliament and government on board to adopt the issues and find fundamental solutions for the major problems of the Kurdish diaspora. One point in particular, unifying the dual date of birth, would solve an ongoing dilemma that in the long run, would guarantee the loyalty and continuous support of the future generations of the Kurdish diaspora. Leaving this issue without a solution, would be the straw that breaks the camel's back: they would be lost forever. Thus, this study, considered as a lobby for the Kurdish diaspora, must reach all-party parliamentary groups of the Kurdistan Parliament, in the hope that its suggestions are incorporated in the proposed bill for the Kurdish diaspora. Passing the bill without solving the issue of the dual date of birth, will worsen the situation and may require further follow up and rectification of the law in the future.

3. Literature Review:

Kurdish Diaspora

Like many other terms, the word diaspora is quite new in the Kurdish dictionary: the primary factor is that the Kurdish media makes such jargon widespread and it needs to be understood by the Kurdish people. After the Kurdish media, Kurdish academics and journalists too play an important role in using and publishing such terms. Finally, the Kurdish diaspora itself has a role in bringing new terminologies into the Kurdish language. As for the word diaspora, it is relatively new in the English language too. (Kenny, 2013) remarks as follows: “Until quite recently, the word [diaspora] had a specific and restricted meaning, referring principally to the dispersal and exile of the Jews. In the twentieth century, the meaning of the term gradually expanded to cover the involuntary dispersal of other populations, especially Armenians and people of African descent. Since the 1980s, the diaspora has proliferated to a remarkable extent, to the point where it is now applied to migrants of almost every kind”.

3.2 History of the Kurdish Diaspora:

The Kurdish diaspora in the western world, particularly in Europe, goes back to the nineteenth century, when “in the early 1840s Bedir Khan Pasha led a rebellion against the Ottoman empire, seeking an independent Kurdistan; however, the rebellion failed, and Bedir Khan Pasha and his entire large family were banished from Cizre-Botan first to Istanbul and then to Crete” (Iranica, nd). Then, after publishing the first Kurdish journal, Kurdistan, in Cairo in 1898 the editor Abdulrahman Dedir Khan started publishing the journal in Geneva and later in London (Bruinessen, 2000). Thus, this at least indicates the existence of a journalist from a prominent Kurdish family in Europe during the abovementioned time.

In the twentieth century, especially, Kurdish migrants from Iraq have migrated to the west after various political and humanitarian disasters. Examples of such migrations include the 1975 set back, the 1988 ethnic cleansing and in the 1990s, economic sanctions. However, there is no precise number for the Kurdish diaspora. For the first time, the UK Office for National Statistics (ONS) in its 2021 census asked about ethnic background. However, at this moment the results have not been released. “The ONS is planning on publishing the initial findings from the Census a year later, in

March 2022. However, the full results covering all Census data will be revealed a year after that, in March 2023” (Hassan, 2021). Yet, there are speculated numbers by the media and some researchers such as (Zalmi, 2017) who states that “Kurds in the United Kingdom are the second largest Kurdish migrant population after Germany in Western Europe. The figure ranges from 200,000 to 250,000 with most Kurds originating from Iraq”.

3.3 The Significant Role of the Kurdish Diaspora in Advocating the Kurdish Cause

The Kurdish diaspora has already proven at various times that it has been effective in serving the Kurdish cause in different political and economic situations. (Bahar Baser and Mari Toivanen, 2019) argue that “the Iraqi Kurdish diaspora has been investing significant amounts of money and energy into achieving recognition of Saddam Hussein’s Anfal campaign as a genocide in various European parliaments”. All Kurdish political parties are aware of how effective the Kurdish diaspora was, and still is, in this regard. When, Halabja was poisoned and the former Iraqi regime’s ethnic cleansing occurred in 1988, the Kurdish diaspora was almost the only supporter that influenced the western world’s public opinion, which led to all the support that followed, especially after the 1991 exodus. Thereafter, the Kurdish question in Iraq became an issue for the media and policy makers of the super powers such as the US, Britain and France, and everything else then followed.

When the Kurdistan region became semi-autonomous after the 1991 uprising, and again after the 2003 regime change in Iraq, the Kurdish diaspora in Europe and the western world generally become a rich resource for the KRG and the region in many aspects. For the sake of this study, the researcher will briefly highlight the aspects that the Kurdish diaspora has actively played a major part in:

Politics

The existence of the Kurdish diaspora in big numbers in Europe and the western world itself has its own significance in highlighting the Kurdish issue. This is especially so when it is proactive in advocating Kurdish rights when the Kurds in Kurdistan have gone through political and humanitarian disasters, such as they

suffered at the hands of the former Iraqi regime. “The Kurdish diaspora has also played a major political role in making known, to Western public opinion, the fate of the Kurds in the various countries where they are persecuted” (Paris, N. D.).

Despite, all the differences, the Kurdish diaspora, especially with the emergence of the second generation, can be well utilised by the KRG, or could be used otherwise. The Kurdish Institute in Paris has observed the evolution of the Kurdish diaspora, and assesses it as follows:

“After a period of indecision, the Kurdish diaspora, following the example of other peoples, gradually set up its own institutions, both to preserve the Kurdish language and culture, to popularise the Kurdish cause and to contribute towards a better integration of the Kurds into their host countries. A number of Kurds now take an active part in the political and cultural life of their host countries as writers, journalists, artists, musicians and even as Members of Parliament”.

Diplomacy and Lobbying

In discussing the importance of the Kurdish diaspora, Ms Bayan sami Abdul Rahman, the KRG representative in the USA, prior to the Kurdish referendum wrote a book chapter entitled *Keeping the Kurdistan Flame Alive Abroad, in Iraqi Kurdistan Region: A Path Forward* (Rahman, 2017) (Abdul Rahman, 2017: 11-22). The more the Kurdish diaspora has felt that the Kurds in Kurdistan are under pressure, the more it has become involved in lobbying and practised public diplomacy. “They also made a more systematic effort at lobbying on behalf of the Kurdish cause, establishing contacts with European political parties, churches and various non-governmental organisations” (Bruinessen, 2000).

If we look at the Kurdish referendum of 2017 and its aftermath, as a major issue that the Kurds in the Kurdistan region have faced in recent years, we can see how important a role the Kurdish diaspora can play. This role is trusted by the Kurdish leadership at the highest level. “Kurdistan Region President Masoud Barzani has called on the international community and Kurds in the diaspora to help Kurdistan, now “facing threats, blockades and collective punishment” for exercising their peaceful right to hold a referendum” (Rudaw, 2017). At different historical junctures,

the Kurdish diaspora has had an important role that cannot be forgotten. “Diaspora Kurds also engaged in sustained public relations and social media campaigns to pressure national governments into articulating sympathetic positions regarding Kurdistan” (Eccarius-Kelly, 2018).

Remittances

Throughout the 1990s and until the regime change in 2003, the region’s economy and market liquidity was heavily reliant on monthly remittances from the Kurdish diaspora: “the majority of local populations lived in economic precariousness and depended upon the extended family system of diaspora remittances to gain much needed income” (Natali, 2007). Due to the fact that the overwhelming majority of those remittances were transacted on the black market, it is impossible to estimate the precise amount. It is believed that remittances to the region still continue, maintaining a good market liquidity, especially when from time-to-time civil servants are not paid, creating a shortfall in the cash market.

Charitable Funds

Charitable funding from the western world has been, and still is, another source of financial aid to the region. In particular, the Kurdish diaspora in the UK and other European countries have contributed generously.

Emergency Relief

Another form of charitable contribution from the Kurdish diaspora is when the region and wider Kurdistan suffers from natural disasters and wars. Examples of such catastrophes are the Halabja chemical bombardment in 1988, the 1991 mass exodus, the ISIS offensive which drove millions of refugees and displaced people into the region from 2014 onwards, the earthquake of 2018, and so on. In all those instances, the Kurdish diaspora has given open-handedly.

Journalism and Academia

There are many avenues through which the Kurdish diaspora has continuously boosted the profile of the Kurdistan region. Journalism and academia are among the most important agencies: whether through direct cultivation of prominent journalists

and academics, or indirectly by helping those who have come to study in Europe. Just by asking students from the Kurdistan region, one can detect the kind of help that they have had from the Kurdish diaspora.

4. Methodology

A qualitative method of naturalistic observation is used, drawing on the researcher's experiences in the UK and contacts as an activist for many years among the Kurdish community in London. On many occasions the researcher became involved in Kurdish community issues, and closely observed the problems of Kurdish refugees and asylum seekers. In some cases, he visited some of those whose asylum applications were refused by the Home Office while they were in detention centres awaiting deportation. His observation of the Kurdish community in London and the wider UK spans many years. However, all his attempts and those of other activists to seek a fundamental solution for the major Kurdish diaspora issues have not yet come to fruition.

Among the researcher's attempts, especially regarding the issue of dual date of birth, the following are worth mentioning:

Participating in the third conference of the Iraqi Ministry of Displacement and Migration in London, which took place from 4 to 6 October 2013. He presented a paper concerning the problems of the Kurdish Diaspora in a workshop on Migration and Development on the third day of the conference.

Meeting the Iraqi Ambassador to the UK in this regard.

Emailing a special letter to the Iraqi Minister of Displacement and Migration on 10 July 2011 in regards to a group of Kurdish asylum seekers who were facing deportation.

Submitting special reports on the problematic issues of identification in the Kurdish Diaspora to the London office of the Iraqi Independent High Electoral Commission before the 2010 and 2014 general elections.

Meeting and speaking to Ministers of the KRG and the Kurdish and Iraqi political parties' representatives on their visits to London.

Meeting and speaking to the vice-speaker of the Iraqi Parliament during his visit to London in 2009.

Presenting a special report in this regard to the KRG representative in London.

Participating in the Kurdistan Parliamentary Committee for Relations and Kurdish Diaspora while discussing the Kurdish Diaspora bill on 19 November 2019.

Meeting the International Federation of Iraqi Refugees (IFIR)'s secretary in London and discussing the Kurdish asylum seekers' issues, and participating in their advocacy activities.

Consulting lawyers, judges and academics in the Kurdistan region.

Reasons that Have Led to Pending Solutions:

Fragmentation of the Kurdish Diaspora

The main reason that divides the Kurdish diaspora is its fragmentation between political parties and the nature of life in the new society. This has caused citizens to not integrate well into the new society nor to have a unified package of demands towards the KRG when it comes to their rights and the problems that the KRG needs to resolve. Thus, "the major issue holding back the Kurdish voice is an internal one: the lack of a single cohesive narrative that articulates their demands" (Dag, 2020).

Political Parties

Whenever it comes to the Kurdistan region's interests, the political parties have theoretically praised the Kurdish diaspora. They all have organisations among the Kurdish diaspora, and incite them to demonstrate whenever they want. Political parties at different levels have benefited from the Kurdish diaspora. They have asked political figures among them to join them as Parliamentary candidates, cabinet

members and so on. However, when it comes to the Kurdish diaspora's rights, not only they have not been seriously considered, but also on many occasions (as the researcher has personally witnessed) some Kurdish officials have described the Kurdish diaspora as a burden on the KRG. The researcher has also heard shameful and disgraceful descriptions by a minister of the Kurdish diaspora. The simple reason behind such a stance by some officials comes from the differences between the political parties that has made some of them depict the Kurdish diaspora as hostile to them.

The KRG Representatives

Though there are good and sincere individuals among the KRG representatives, the whole mission yet revolves around the same policy in regards to the rights of the Kurdish diaspora. Furthermore, for the same political differences, the issues of the Kurdish diaspora has not been advocated by the KRG representatives.

The Iraqi Embassy

Due to the fact that the Kurdish diaspora mainly refers to the KRG representation, the Iraqi embassy has no interest in its issues. On the occasions that the embassy is made aware of an issue, it does not want to become involved. This reservation has its technical and political reasons, which are mainly due to the relationship between the KRG and the Iraqi government.

5. Categories of Problems within the Kurdish Diaspora:

In general, the Kurdish diaspora suffers from many problems that need to be solved. Many issues are related to being an asylum seeker or refugee, in common with those suffered by others from different places around the world. Some issues are unique, related to being Iraqis or Kurds. These may be addressed through the KRG representation in the UK, others can be solved through the Iraqi embassy in London, but some of the problems can only be resolved by the KRG and Iraqi government. In this study, I only highlight two of the main issues, as follows:

5.1 First: Those who are threatened by deportation

5.1.1 Background:

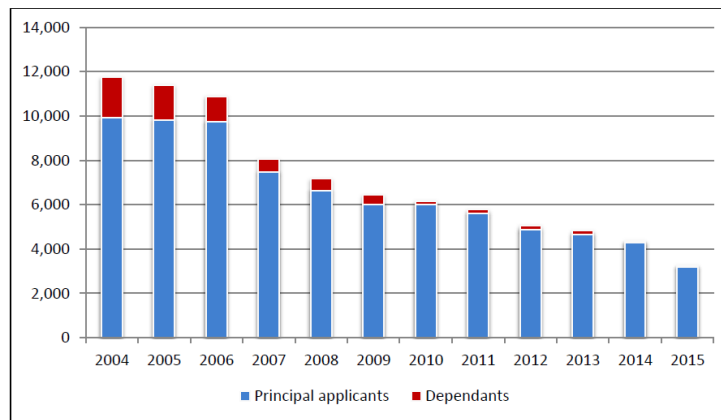
This category is thought to number thousands of single youths, as well as a smaller proportion of families. These people have arrived in the UK after a very long, exhausting and costly journey. Then, after being in the UK for many years, in some cases for more than ten years, their asylum applications have been rejected. Thus, they are not allowed to work, study or have equal rights to their fellow countrymen and women. Currently, many are facing deportation. Deep depression and economic hardship, coupled with continuous social and family pressure, is rife. In some cases, some deported asylum seekers are committing suicide. In many instances, forcibly deported asylum seekers are facing physical mistreatment.

5.1.2 The Problems:

The researcher spoke to many deported asylum seekers and monitored their problems, and reasons for them. Forceful deportation can lead to psychological disorders. There is also the possibility of becoming a social and family burden, for many reasons. One is the disappointment many have that they have failed to complete their study before leaving the Kurdistan region. Another problem with which they are obsessed is the failure to find reasonable work and have money to live on after their deportation. Thus, they fear being trapped in a similar situation to the one they tried to escape by travelling to seeking a better life. Hence, their dreams remain unfulfilled, with no prospects of a decent life, with marriage and a family. In many cases, the long process of seeking asylum, and the subsequent rejection, has delayed plans for marriage and having a family, thereby costing them many years of their life.

The worst feeling for these people is fear of the consequences that they might face following their forceful deportation. They fear they could be mocked by their friends, family members and the wider society. Therefore, it is no wonder that we see instances of psychological breakdown. Furthermore, in this category there were cases of suicide after their deportation, and sometimes even before deportation. These were all brought on by their fear of the future and psychological and nervous breakdown. The nightmare of asylum seekers is their ongoing terror of deportation, which makes

their lives hell and they are under constant psychological threat. The table below shows the ratio of deportations of refused asylum seekers from the UK, from 2004 to 2015:



Source: (Tyler, 2016)

5.1.3 Solutions

In the spirit of the new Iraq and the democratic belief of the Kurdistan region in human rights and looking after its citizens in the region and diaspora, special attention must be given to these people. In order to help them out of their dilemma, and even turn them into a strength for the wider society, we need to give them a chance to participate in rebuilding the nation from its most important aspect, which is infrastructure. This can be done by:

Signing agreements with those states that refused their asylum applications, with a guarantee to continue helping them and providing them with housing for a period that both countries agree on. The required period would be as long as needed to qualify these returning asylum seekers through training and vocational courses.

Contacting all the Iraqi ministries, the ministries in the Kurdistan region, as well as private sector businesses to ascertain how many technicians and relevant employees they need, especially those skilled in areas where there is no well-trained workforce. In many instances, such skills can be acquired on highly intensive vocational courses over six to twelve months, or a maximum of two years.

Launching special colleges or sponsoring relevant courses in colleges for the above purpose. There could be agreements with such colleges to train immigrants, the government signing contracts with options to continue their courses. These skilled citizens would then be obliged to return to their region and work in their specialist fields. Normally, such courses are practical and lead to work directly, for instance electricity, gas and safety, carpentry, joinery, communications, internet, transportation, road building, paving and bridge construction, elevators and glazing courses. Also, the ministries could require that other skills are covered in courses.

Launching similar workshops in the region for sustainability and development. These would need to be under the direct supervision of the instructors of the abovementioned colleges. This would lead to the possibility of opening colleges for teaching similar specialities and courses, under the supervision of the same instructors and coaches, but using the brightest and most outstanding students from the returned trainees.

Undertaking work and continuing education in light of the above mentioned clause (D).

5.1.4 Feasibility

Finding a solution for difficult cases of this category will avoid the Kurdistan Region and Iraq from gaining a reputation in Human Rights reports which implies violation of human rights in the region and the country as a whole.

It is possible to turn these returned asylum seekers from a weakness to a potential strength, in that they will become positive elements to fill the vacuum that the Region and Iraq have in certain professions. Especially, those individuals, due to their language and cultural acquisition, will be more qualified to undertake certain vocational courses compared with their fellow countrymen and women back home.

The possibility of continuing vocational courses in the region and Iraq under the instruction of the bright students among this category, to train and qualify other young men and women.

This proposal is an important resource for solving the issue of unemployment and turning unemployed manpower into a flourishing prototype of reconstruction. Moreover, from consumers to producers, it would create an infrastructure and advance it.

The proposal would show cooperation with European countries, which had generally become refuge for Kurds and Iraqis in the past in their struggle against the dictatorial rule of Iraq. The scheme would present to European countries how Iraq and Kurdistan region are caring about the Kurds and Iraqi citizens and preserving their rights wherever they were. Consequently, this would lead to the region and the Iraqi government being seen more favourably by human rights and other relevant international organisations.

More importantly, this solution would make those migrants and their families feel that the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Iraqi government care about them, which would boost their loyalty to their original home. Without doubt, this is their right and the state's obligation towards its citizens.

5.2 Second: the Issue of Changing Names and Date of Birth

5.2.1 Background:

This problem basically has three aspects:

First, politically, to avoid retaliatory violence from the former Iraqi regime to the political asylum seekers and their family members in Iraq;

Second, due to their asylum applications in more than one European country. The asylum seekers changed their names, and in many cases, even their dates of birth, in order to avoid being recognised as failed asylum seekers if their application had been refused in another European country;

And the third issue stems from the first day of the asylum application by unmarried asylum seekers who gave an assumed name and date of birth for their future wife, in anticipation that when granted refugee status, they would be able to marry someone

from Iraq, and would be eligible to be joined by their wife under the specifications of reunion of families of refugees by those countries.

5.2.2 The Problems:

There are many potential problems in the continuation of this situation, including: Duality of their identification, and instability through not having a unique identity and/or date of birth.

Inability to hold an Iraqi passport or any other Iraqi identification. If asked to provide both their European and Iraqi identification or passports there is a contradiction in the personal information that immediately flags a problem. For instance, Iraqi identification cannot be used in Britain, and vice versa, British documents cannot be used in Iraq.

This problem continues for future generations. Children are ineligible for Iraqi documents, because their parents only hold British documents, which are invalid in Iraq. Thus, they are not recognised as Iraqis.

Denial of the Kurdistan Region and Iraq of future generations of such Iraqis, even from the most talented individuals among them. Consequently, these generations would develop no loyalty to their parent's home country, simply because there is no single document that ties them to the Kurdistan region and Iraq.

There is an ongoing problem due to a mismatch of both countries' identifications and documents. This surfaces every four years during general elections when Iraqis abroad vote. A group of Iraqis is deprived of voting. The problem leads to thousands of people gathering around polling stations, which ignites fights such those in 2010 in London.

5.2.3 The Solutions:

In regards to changing the names back, this is no big deal. It can be done through the deed poll and can be rectified by the individuals themselves. However, the dilemma of the changed date of birth remains impossible to rectify in those countries where the individuals have sought refuge. Thus, the solution must come from Iraq. The refugees

would need to verify their identity to prove they are Iraqis; then, their date of birth could be unified according to the one that they are using in the host countries. Hence, the biggest problem for this category of Iraqis would be solved. Subsequently, there would be many benefits for them and their future generations would not face this ongoing problem.

(Faraj, 2020) refers to the number of Iraqi refugees' passports that have been suspended as 8000 in the UK. This is a growing figure, and has arisen for the abovementioned reasons. Unless the UK Home Office decides otherwise, they can no longer obtain their UK passports. This means, they cannot travel, provide their UK passport for any potential transactions, and consequently, will be deprived of many privileges. Yet, even if their passports are returned, all their ongoing problems and their effect on their children will continue.

6. Conclusion

The Kurdish diaspora's significance is undeniable, and rhetorically, they are appreciated at the highest political level in the Kurdistan region. However, when it comes to their ongoing problems, which are solvable by the KRG and the Kurdistan Parliament, their most serious issues are still pending with no resolution in sight. The reason for this goes back to various factors, such as the fragmentation of the Kurdish diaspora itself. Other reasons concern their political parties, the KRG representatives and the Iraqi embassy, which have no serious intention of adopting the Kurdish diaspora's issues. This study is an attempt to highlight the two main problems among the Kurdish asylum seekers and refugees in the UK, which apply to the rest of the European countries and the western world alike. The researcher has adopted a qualitative method of naturalistic observation through living in the UK, and being engaged as an activist among the Kurdish community in London for many years.

The Kurdish diaspora is actively advocating the KRG at many levels. This study highlights its main aspects, such as: politics; diplomacy and lobbying; remittances; charitable funds; emergency relief, and journalism and academia. Nevertheless, it is suffering from two deadly problems, which without finding solutions for, would lead to loss of this kind of advocacy, and loss of the loyalty of future generations. One of

the issues is in regard to the refused asylum seekers among them, and the other is in relation to dual birth dates. This study, has proposed a realistic solution for the first category, which leads to the satisfaction of the refused asylum seekers, the UK Home Office and the KRG. An economical solution is proposed in regards to the second category among the refugees with UK citizenship whose date of birth differs from that in their Iraqi documents.

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