

## **Viewed From the Other Side Media Coverage and Personal Tales of Migration in Iraqi Kurdistan**

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**Abstract:** *This report analyses the discourse on Iraqi Kurdish migration. It explores the media coverage of migration in Kurdish mass media in Iraq as well as the beliefs among media professionals, their key sources and the perceptions among people with different types of personal migration experiences.*

*Knowledge is very sparse regarding the arguments evoked and the frames used in migration debates in countries with large -scale emigration to the west. Addressing this lacuna, this Study sheds light on perspectives, arguments and experiences related to migration in a region dominated by waves of emigration to Norway and other European countries in the last decades. The study further gives voice to the untold stories –to the experiences and perspectives appearing in neither the Norwegian and Western media debate on immigration nor in the Iraqi Kurdish media.*

*The main focus of this study is on irregular migration; that is, we explore the media coverage and the personal stories pertaining to undocumented emigrants and, subsequently, the discourse on European return policies pertaining to rejected asylum seekers. In accordance with the call from the Norwegian Ministry of Justice, we have a Norwegian bias: we have looked for references to Norway in the Kurdish news and a substantial portion of our informants have migration experiences from Norway.*

*News media analyzed in Iraqi Kurdistan includes news reports, related to migration in six newspapers and four TV channels from May to September 2011. A total of 48 informants participated in this study.*

*There were 36 interviews with Iraqi Kurds in Norway and Iraq with migration experiences of their own or within their family. Another 12 key informant interviews were conducted with government officials, NGOs and media professionals.*

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### **I. Research Questions And Research Design**

The overarching main research question behind the project is the following:

-What are the dominating characteristics of discourses and narratives related to migration in Iraqi Kurdistan?

This discourse is researched from three different angles. We first ask what are the central topics and frames of the media coverage of migration in Kurdish media.

Second, we ask why the media coverage is as it is, through elite interviews with media professionals and their key informants. Third, through interviews with people with different types of migration experiences in Kurdistan and Norway, we explore what people's knowledge, experiences, and perceptions are regarding emigration to Europe and the West, what type of media they use, and how they regard and experience the return and repatriation of former emigrants

### **II. Research methodology**

The methodological design for this project is derived from our research questions and theoretical framework. We build our analysis of two main types of data pools: Media texts and interview data. The first data pool includes data from a content analysis of the media coverage of migration in Iraqi Kurdish newspapers and television and data from a content analysis of Norwegian news on immigration. The second pool includes two types of interview data.

The first are opinions and stories conveyed by people of Kurdish origin with different types of migration experiences. The second subsumes elite interviews with journalists, editors and their key sources: representatives from NGOs and the regional Kurdish Government in Iraqi Kurdistan. Additionally we rely on new survey data, reviews of documents and statistics describing overall migration and return patterns from Iraq to Norway and Europe, and literature on media, migration and return policies in general.

### **Qualitative interview data**

The interview data consists of semi structured qualitative interviews.

The most of them were recorded and transcribed in full. When recording was not possible, or when the informant preferred it, we took notes that were later typed. A total of 48 informants participated in this study.

### **Social context:**

The legacy of tribalism Traditionally, Kurdish society has been organized into tribes, often subdivided in clans (Bruinessen, 1992). The tribes are patrilineal, and there was traditionally a strong social pressure to marry within the lineage. Although the tribal system partly declined in the last part of the twentieth century, marriages between close kin are still common (COSIT, 2005; Gran, 2008). Marriage as a way of settling conflicts or strengthening ties between families has also been part of tribal society.

Closely linked to the tribal system is the concept of honor. Honor in this context is a collective social capital that is achieved through courage, generosity and control of female sexuality (Bruinessen, 2003). Honor is a collective entity that everyone has a part in and is obliged to defend. Most interesting in this context is the type of honor that is linked to the female body, most significantly to virginity before marriage and chaste behaviour throughout the life cycle. It is the duty of men to look after the chastity of the women in their family.

Another legacy of the tribal system is to be found in the prevalence of nepotism in all parts of Kurdish society. Most resources, both political and economical power, have been controlled by people linked to the two dominant political parties: the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party) and the PUK(Patriotic Union of Kurdistan).

### **The coverage of migration in Iraqi Kurdistan**

The analysis of media coverage of migration in Iraqi Kurdistan reveals that migration policies do not attract heavy attention in Kurdish media, although migration is a central experience for large parts of the population, and migration is a topic much talked about in society. This research found almost 300 items related to migration over a 5-month period, which is an indicator that the topic is significant, but not at the forefront of media attention.

Migration coverage in Kurdish media focuses predominantly on South-South migration. Although the focus of this report is on South-North migration – on emigration from Iraqi Kurdistan to Western countries – a main finding is that half of Kurdish media articles identified focus on immigration, from within Iraq (IDPs), and from neighboring countries.

The topic of migration is not a subject that provokes open political disagreement in Kurdish society; rather, it seems that the overall discourse is dominated more by consensus than conflict. Despite the contested situation of the press in Iraqi Kurdistan, the analysis did not

reveal any systematic difference in the coverage of migration between independent and party-aligned media outlets.

The coverage of irregular migration in Kurdish news has two main focuses. The first covers the destinies of irregular immigrants to Europe, focusing on the travels and sojourns of irregular immigrants in Europe. Some focus on the hazards and dangers awaiting those helped by smugglers, while others describe the unbearable situation for those who live in reception centers and detention camps without having achieved legal status in their destination country.

The second focus of the irregular migration coverage in Kurdish news pertains to deportations. The deportations of failed asylum seekers back to Iraq attract relatively substantial coverage in both newspapers and television. The coverage is, predominantly, very critical. There are reports of families with small children that are sent back to unsecure conditions in Kirkuk, about deportees who have gone missing or who have committed suicide after their arrival in Iraq. The coverage presents the views of actors advocating the halting of the deportations or the perspectives of people risking deportation in different European countries and in Australia.

Many articles and TV-reports refer to the fact that the Kurdish Government is against deportations, that they regard them as a violation of human rights and that, hence, no planes carrying deported people will be allowed to land at international airports in Kurdistan.

Whereas there is a significant focus on deportation, there is no systematic or specific media coverage of the underlying premises of Western migration policies in Iraqi Kurdistan. Kurdish media is not only ignorant of the reasoning behind Western migration policies, and in particular western governments' arguments for deportation, they evoke normative arguments that run directly counter to the perspectives dominant in European, Australian and American immigration debates.

Most of the findings from the content analysis of the coverage of migration in Kurdish media were confirmed through the interviews with government officials, NGOs, and media professionals.

Interviews with officials confirmed that the Kurdistan Regional Government is against deportations of failed asylum seekers back to Iraq. Their position seems to be based partly on a belief that the freedom to move is part of indispensable human rights, and partly that Western governments need to deal directly with the KRG,

not only GOI, about the return of citizens from the Kurdistan region. They also called for encouraging voluntary returns to Kurdistan.

The majority of media professionals said that they were against the deportations. They followed a line of argument about fairness: emigrants to the West have sacrificed a lot, sold everything before leaving; many are now in debt to relatives and friends, have suffered harsh conditions in Europe and simply do not deserve to be sent back by force after many years in Europe.

All media professionals were, however, critical of the coverage on migration by the Kurdish media, in particular the coverage of irregular migration. In their view, the Kurdish mass media had not sufficiently covered the real conditions that meet emigrants on their journey to Europe, or the situation for Kurds living in Europe without legal status.

The lack of any systematic difference in the coverage of migration between independent and party-aligned media outlets was confirmed in the interviews with media professionals. The issue of emigration seems, unlike topics related to corruption and power abuse, not to be a subject provoking censorship from the ruling parties and, as such, not a politically delicate subject.

The critical media coverage of deportations to Iraq relies heavily on one source: the Iraqi Federation of Refugees (IFIR). This organization launched a campaign in 2011 with the aim of stopping deportations from Europe and Australia. The campaign involved networking and lobbying of the Government of Iraq in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government as well as Western governments, NGOs and Kurdish and western media. The content analysis of Kurdish media and interviews in this report confirms that the campaign was largely successful with regard to influencing Kurdish media and the Kurdistan Regional Government.

Most of the reports on the dangers of migrating with the help of smugglers, and the unbearable situation for asylum seekers living in reception centers and detention camps in western countries, seem to be the direct result of a campaign in 2011 carried out by a Hong Kong-based company called STATT. Research showed that western governments clandestinely sponsored the campaign. The stated goal with this media campaign was to prevent people from going to Europe and Australia. In cooperation with a local organization, the company trained journalists, translated articles from western media, and arranged interviews with smugglers, people who had embarked on unsuccessful journeys to Europe, as well as people who regretted going to Europe. The campaign was a success insofar as it managed to get through to Kurdish journalists and resulted in a number of articles and videos.

### **The main motivations of migration in Iraqi Kurdistan**

This study shows that mass media, especially TV, have been decisive in shaping people's impressions of life in Western countries, and for people's motivation to migrate from Iraqi Kurdistan. The influx of Western popular culture such as fiction in the form of films and TV serials and pop music, is paramount, and also influenced popular long-running Kurdish TV productions focusing on the life of Kurdish people in Europe. This was revealed through qualitative interviews with Kurds with or without migration experiences, both in Iraq and in Norway.

Despite the improved security situation and economic development in the Kurdistan region after 2003, the interviews in this study revealed at least three factors that were decisive for, in particular, young people's continued urge to leave the region:

1. Nepotism, the perceived lack of possibilities for those without contacts and influential networks in Kurdish society.
2. Political oppression, including power abuse and the lack of equality before the law.
3. Lack of individual freedom, especially for young people in regard to love relations.

The lack of individual freedom in particular was a recurring topic in many interviews. Young people describe Iraqi Kurdistan today as a place widely exposed to other lifestyles, values, and ideas through transnational and global communication, but where the actual access to this type of life and these values is highly restricted.

The experiences of those who have returned from Europe – expectations and

Disappointments. The European experiences of those who managed to receive protection in a European country and those whose applications were finally rejected are distinctly different.

Those who received protection in Europe and have returned with a European citizenship have generally positive stories to tell about Europe. European citizenship stands out as a distinction in Kurdish society, providing possibilities of choice, the freedom to move, and the entitlement to resources.

Many of those who did not receive protection and who were required to repatriate express great disappointment over a Europe different from what they had envisaged before leaving. Their stories centre on humiliation, psychological problems, idle waiting, fear, and despair.

Amongst those who had signed agreements of return with the IOM, it became apparent that this type of agreement is not regarded as voluntary. It is, in fact, often referred to as deportation and surrounded by stigma and shame.

To some extent, the interviews confirm the notions conveyed by the media professionals that to come back empty-handed from Europe is related to shame and social stigma. Some report that they have not been able to take up their life in a good way when back, and many report problems with readapting to Kurdish society. Others report that they live in isolation from their former network and families. The picture is complex, however. Quite a few of those who were denied asylum in Europe also report that they are content with their present life in Kurdistan and that they were welcomed by their families.

### **Knowledge and evaluation of European immigration and return policies**

Knowledge or actual understanding of the European asylum system among the people interviewed for this study is very poor. This finding is somehow parallel to the finding from the media analysis of there being no systematic coverage of the underlying premises of European migration policies in Kurdish media.

There is, however, a very clear perception by most interviewees that the system for accepting and rejecting migrants in European countries is arbitrary and unjust. This perception is partly based on their observation of how people with similar backgrounds can have a totally opposite outcome to their asylum cases. This is based in part on what are perceived as unpredictable and constantly changing policies.

This study also shows that trying to deceive migration authorities with incorrect information seems to have been a common practice; most of the people interviewed for this study talk about this as something almost everyone, including themselves, have been doing. As long as people see that some are successful in tricking the system, it will motivate others to try. The underlying discourse in many of the accounts is not about right or wrong but about being lucky or unlucky and about taking a chance.

### **III. Main Conclusions**

The main empirical findings from this study are as follows: Media coverage of migration-related issues is limited in Iraqi Kurdistan. When covered, it is predominantly related to internal migration inside Iraq or migration from neighboring countries.

The limited but existing media coverage of Western migration policies focuses primarily on return policies and their consequences.

. Coverage of deportations to Iraq from Western countries is predominantly very critical. It is mostly described as a humiliating practice, and as a violation of the right to the freedom of movement. The Kurdistan Regional

Government also shares this view.

The communication revolution in the last two decades, especially the influx of western popular culture through satellite TV, has been decisive in shaping people's images of life in the west, and has, as such, been a major pull factor for migration to western countries

. Iraqi Kurds have very little understanding of the policies behind rejection decisions in the West, despite a prevalent realization that rejection rates for their compatriots have risen since 2003. Generally, knowledge and understanding of western migration policies seems very poor among Iraqi Kurds. . There seems to be a clear perception among the interviewees that the system for accepting and rejecting migrants in European countries is arbitrary and unjust. Gaining the right to stay in a European country is perceived as a question of luck, not of justice or complex policy-making with domestic and international considerations.

### **IV. Recommendations**

The following recommendations are based on the findings from this study:

1. Information about Norwegian migration policies must be more targeted, and adapted to specific audiences. Availability of information about laws and regulations, in I itself, will rarely lead to this being conveyed through media or personal communication. Media campaigns targeting journalists directly can be useful. However, it needs to be clear for journalists that the Norwegian government sponsors it.
1. In order to lift the stigma of returns assisted by government-sponsored
2. Programmes, groundwork providing stories about returnees who have been able to take up their life and resettle in a successful way could be distributed to the Kurdish news media and within the Kurdish public sphere.
3. Although better ways of communicating Norwegians asylum policies is important, communication alone cannot solve the general dissatisfaction with Norwegian immigration policies. As long as asylum is the only way available to most people applying for residency in Norway, persons without a real need for protection

will continue to come. Norwegian authorities should consider systems of work permits from outside EU/EEA, and not only for specialists.

4. Dignity and social acceptance is crucial for returnees. Norwegian authorities should consider different measures in addition to cash incentives to motivate rejected asylum seekers to return. A system should be considered where rejected asylum seekers who sign up for voluntary return are granted a time-limited work permit before returning, thus enabling them to return in dignity with money they have earned, and with valuable experience. To avoid abuse, the majority of their salaries can be kept in a restricted bank account and disbursed after arrival in Iraq.
5. Residency based on virtue and merit should be considered by Norwegian authorities as an additional way to gain the right to residency. Asylum seekers with final rejections but who are well integrated, who have work and pay taxes, etc. could be given residency based on petitions from local communities in Norway.