



MIGRATION FLOWS FROM IRAQ TO EUROPE: REASONS BEHIND MIGRATION

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION (IOM)

IRAQ MISSION

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IOM IRAQ

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Foreword

In 2015, over one million migrants reached European shores after long, complicated and risky journeys. Iraqis represented the third largest group of migrants, with nearly 85,000 arriving to Greece by sea in the second half of 2015 alone.

IOM Iraq, as part of the larger IOM response to this unprecedented crisis, conducted research funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) to explore the trends and causes of Iraqi migration to Europe.

The first phase consisted of quantitative research carried out between November and December 2015; the report "Migration Flows from Iraq to Europe" was released in February 2016. The data collected investigated the experiences of Iraqis with regard to their journey, its organization, information gathering and decision-making, expectations, living conditions in the countries of destination and intentions for the future. The research shed light on aspects that required further analysis, particularly regarding the decision-making process. In order to pursue this further analysis and to investigate specific topics more deeply, such as reasons for migrating and push and pull factors affecting this process, a second research phase was launched.

The results of this second phase are presented in the report, "Migration Flows from Iraq to Europe: Reasons Behind Migration". The study consisted of a qualitative research carried out through focus groups discussions throughout the country with returnees from Europe who were willing to share their experience.

The 86 participants were identified through the lists of IOM Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration programmes. While this offered a limited pool of candidates, it allowed investigating and discussing major aspects of the migration process with individuals who experienced it firsthand.

One of the report's key findings is the complexity of factors that pushed or pulled Iraqis to leave their country. Additionally, security concerns were related to multiple factors, the current crisis being only one of them; the dichotomy between economic migration and seeking asylum did not emerge to be particularly striking and the location of origin did not come out as a predictive factor of the reasons for migration.

Through this exploratory study, IOM shares insights from the perspective of a sending country, and endeavors to provide inputs for an in-country, evidence-based response, and for further research on this layered subject.

Finally, this research indicates that a deeper understanding of the dynamics and complex driving factors behind the difficult decision to leave one's home is crucial to address the needs of migrants in the sending country as well as in the transit and receiving countries.



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MIGRATION FLOWS FROM IRAQ TO EUROPE: REASONS BEHIND MIGRATION

JULY 2016

Introduction

The year 2015 witnessed a significant intensification of the migration flows towards Europe. More than one million migrants reached the European coasts through different routes, particularly the eastern Mediterranean route through the Aegean Sea, from Turkey to Greece, and the central Mediterranean route, from Libya to Italy. Amongst the contributing factors to such an upsurge, the deterioration of the humanitarian situation in the Horn of Africa and the Syrian and Iraqi crises stand out. Iraqi migrants represent approximately 10% of the entire migrant population, moving to Europe mainly through the eastern Mediterranean route.¹

This qualitative study presents the findings of the second stage of a research study conducted by IOM Iraq's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) within the framework of the DFID-funded project *Understanding complex migration flows from Iraq to Europe* through movement tracking and awareness campaigns, implemented from November 2015 to May 2016. This initiative aimed to explore the experiences of Iraqi migrants in order to shed light on their motivations, decision-making process, journey and intentions for the future.

The first stage of the study consisted of quantitative research conducted in December 2015.² A structured questionnaire was administered to Iraqis living in Europe who had left Iraq during 2015. This quantitative approach was adopted in order to reach a high number of respondents in a limited period, which allowed IOM to interview nearly 500 respondents in approximately three weeks. This preliminary study aimed at examining a range of topics so as to better understand the overall process of migrating to Europe as well as some key motivations behind the decision to leave Iraq that could be further investigated through other research methods.

The questionnaire collected information from migrants, including demographics, family background, employment and education. It then looked at the preparation and organization of the journey, such as decision-making and planning, choice of country of destination, expectations and

information gathering. It also examined the journey itself by inquiring about the costs, routes and itineraries. Finally, the questionnaire asked about the country of destination by gathering information on current conditions and intentions for the future.

From the findings, important topics requiring further research were identified. In particular, the findings highlighted the migrants' remarkable lack of information on migration to Europe, which resulted in significant misconceptions on living conditions in the country of destination. These results highlight the importance of the decision-making process, particularly with regard to the migrants' reasons for migrating and to the reasons behind the choice of their country of destination.

In order to further explore the above themes, a qualitative research method was deemed the most suitable, particularly focus group discussions (FGDs). During March and April 2016 IOM conducted a series of FGDs with Iraqi migrants who had left Iraq in 2015 and had subsequently returned. Details on the methodology and the sample selection for this stage of the study are presented in the following section.

The report is divided into five sections, with a summary of key findings providing an overview of the main highlights from each of the core thematic sections of the report. Section 1 presents the methodology and sample; it briefly outlines the benefits and limitations linked to the structure of the research. It also touches upon the specific research questions used and the participants' profile to provide the reader with a clear framework of reference. Section 2 analyzes the specifics of the FGDs, particularly the push factors for emigration, and section 3, discusses the reasons why migrants chose to go to Europe and why at this particular time. Section 4 describes the living conditions of Iraqi migrants while in Europe, and the reasons for their decision to return to their home country. Finally, section 5 presents a series of brief concluding remarks.



Migrants in the Greek island of Lesbos.
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1. Detailed information is available on the IOM website to the migration crisis, at: <http://migration.iom.int/europe/>.
2. The report of the first phase can be found at: <http://iomiraq.net/reports/migration-flows-iraq-europe>

Summary of key findings

Push factors: reasons for leaving Iraq

Whilst many of the reasons for leaving Iraq are not new, the factors behind the recent mass emigration have become more acute, in particular the worsening security situation and the economic crisis. Issues such as political instability, corruption and insecurity are not new in Iraq; however most participants feel that the current context is worse, so they have little hope for the future and believe that the situation will improve. Key points that emerged from the discussions include:

- It is not possible to indicate a single reason for emigrating: there are several, highly intertwined reasons. Therefore, direct correlations between the origin of migrants and their reason for migrating cannot be clearly identified.
- Based on FGDs findings, the main reasons for migrating are:
 - ▶ Security (general and personal),
 - ▶ Lack of equality and social justice, and
 - ▶ Political and economic instability.
- Across the geographical areas where the FGDs were conducted, it was observed that responses tend to be homogeneous in terms of content, but different importance and priorities are given to these reasons, depending on the location of origin of the participants. For instance, personal security was reported to be a factor of more influence in Baghdad than in the KRI. Or, economic instability was mentioned across all locations, but considered secondary to security concerns in Baghdad.
- It was also noted that security and economic factors could not be considered as mutually exclusive, as both were periodically quoted as interlinked issues that prompted participants to decide to migrate, independently from the composition of the group. A crosscutting lack of hope that the current living conditions can change, whether on the short or long term, can be observed.

Pull factors: why Europe, why now?

The discussions highlighted that the reasons behind choosing Europe as a destination were multifaceted. As in the case of the push factors, the reasons that make Europe attractive to migrants are not completely new. Security, equality and social justice, and functioning welfare systems are not recent European characteristics, but what made Europe an attractive destination at the time of leaving Iraq, namely around August 2015, was a combination of need and opportunity: the decision to emigrate matured while the situation in Iraq deteriorated, alternatives dwindled and the journey became more feasible.

- Based on this research's findings, the pull factors do not seem to indicate any significant difference in relation to the various locations where the FGDs were conducted.
- The choice of Europe was reportedly made due to various reasons:
 - ▶ No other viable options were available in the region
 - ▶ The way to Europe was perceived as open, which, for migrants, implied lower risks and lower costs.
 - ▶ With regards to the reception system, European countries were perceived as implementing welcoming immigration policies.

Life in the country of destination and reasons for return

The last section of the report analyzes the reasons why participants decided to leave Europe and return to Iraq. The discussions focused on their level of satisfaction with their life in Europe in relation to each country's immigration policies and reception system. Participants were also asked how they had collected the information that made them build certain expectations and how this was related to their decision to returning.

- Most migrants reported that life in Europe had been somehow idealized and that the reality was harder than expected.
- The main reported sources of disappointment and frustration were the length and unpredictability of the asylum-seeking requests, followed by the living conditions (highly dependent on the reception system in place in the specific country of destination).
- All participants, with no exception, reported they had gathered information exclusively through word of mouth. No participant reported to have relied on official sources or channels of communication.
- It is possible to identify three main reasons for return:
 - ▶ The majority of the participants reported to have returned because they were exhausted from the waiting time to have their asylum request processed and because they were unsure of the final outcome. Many reported they were could not afford living for months in such a limbo, without an income to support themselves or their families at home.
 - ▶ A significant number returned because they were highly disappointed by their overall experience in Europe.
 - ▶ Finally, a limited number of people reported they had a positive experience in Europe but were forced to return because of tragic or exceptional events that required their presence in Iraq, and that otherwise they would have stayed in Europe.

1. Methodology

1.1 Research method and sampling

A qualitative approach was adopted to further explore selected topics identified in the first phase of this study: reasons for migrating, reasons for choosing a specific country of destination, characteristics of the decision-making process, and the process of information gathering to prepare the journey. FGDs were chosen among other methods because they allow participants to discuss topics taking into account the other participants' reactions and opinions, and going beyond their own personal experience.

In order to find a sample of individuals whose answers would help to identify the elements mentioned above, IOM contacted Iraqi migrants who had recently returned from Europe (hereafter referred to as returnees). This option was chosen over trying to identify individuals who could potentially be considering migration. The choice was mostly motivated by the consideration that returnees have a first-hand experience of migrating to Europe and can provide a more reliable insight into the decision-making and information-gathering dynamics.³

Additionally, IOM runs Assisted Voluntary Return (AVR) and Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programmes in approximately 250 countries. In 2015 IOM had AVR and AVRR programmes in 97 host countries and 156 countries of origin. In the case of Iraq, IOM assisted nearly 8,000 Iraqi nationals who voluntarily returned to their country from Europe between January 2015 and April 2016.⁴ Relying on this in-house information, researchers were able to access a pool of potential participants who could be reached and invited to participate in the study.

A total of 14 FGDs were conducted between March and April 2016, involving 86 participants who were invited from the lists of IOM's AVR and AVRR programs assisted returnees. It is worth pointing out that in the case of AVR assisted returnees –the majority of returnees who participated in this research– none were beneficiaries of any IOM services at the time of the FGDs. With regard to those who returned through AVRR programmes, most had already received their integration package.

The main selection criterion to participate in the FGDs was the timeframe of migration to Europe. Only migrants who had left Iraq during 2015 (irrespective of when they returned, whether in 2015 or in the first months of 2016) were invited to participate. In doing so, the sampling was aligned with that of the first quantitative stage of the study, when only migrants who left the country in 2015 were interviewed.

IOM tried to include the voices of women migrants as well as migrants who, before leaving Iraq, were internally displaced persons (IDPs). However, since the initial pool of participants was composed of a very small number of women and IDPs, the rate of participation was inevitably limited.

An effort was also made to organize at least one FGD composed of men over the age of 35 (who predictably, turned out to be married and with children) in order to see how their experience or motivations could differ from that of younger migrants, usually under 30, single men.

The organization of the FGDs, the rate of participation and the choice of the locations to conduct the FGDs were determined by operational constraints. Hence, the sampling was impacted on the one hand by the coverage of the AVR and AVRR programmes and on the other by the current security situation in Iraq. FGDs took place where there was a higher concentration of returnees willing to participate, in locations that were easily accessible for both returnees and researchers. Despite these limitations, IOM made every effort to gain a countywide, not regional, insight. The total of FGDs is broken down as follows:

- Six FGDs were conducted in Baghdad: 40 individuals;
- Three FGDs in Dahuk: 25 individuals;
- Two FGDs in Erbil: 10 individuals; and
- Three FGDs in Sulaymaniyah: 11 Individuals.



Migrants crossing the Serbian-Croatian border.
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3. Often, studies about migration also involve potential migrants. During the development of this project, this option was initially considered but eventually excluded. With regard to Iraq, potential migrants represent a vague category whose boundaries and definitions are too blurred and imprecise to allow identifying a sample and obtain meaningful insights. Within the Iraqi context, no definitions, indicators or information were available at the time this research project was implemented to define potential migrants as a category that could be identified and reached for the purpose of research. Most importantly, even if potential migrants were actually an identifiable category, they would still not have experienced migration during 2015, which is the focus of this research, and therefore any insights they would have provided would have been hypothetical, since their intentions have not been realized.

4. AVR and AVRR programmes are meant to assist migrants who wish to return to their countries of origin but lack the means to do so. More information can be found on IOM AVRR website (<http://www.iom.int/assisted-voluntary-return-and-reintegration>). A complete report (http://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/our_work/DMM/AVRR/AVRR_2015_Key_Highlights.pdf) on IOM AVRR activities during 2015 is available for download on the same website.



Migrants arriving from Athens to the border between Greece and Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM).
© IOM/Amanda Nero 2015

1.2 Limitations

This research approach presents some limitations, especially from a sampling point of view. The sample is only composed of returnees who returned through IOM's AVR and AVRR programmes and hence, Iraqis who returned using any other means were not involved.

Although the focus of the research was on the reasons for emigrating, the reasons behind the choice of a specific country of destination, the process of information-gathering and the decision-making process, IOM Iraq used this opportunity to investigate the reasons that pushed Iraqis who left the country in 2015 to return to their home country. This is the only element differentiating the experiences of participants from the first and second stages of the study, that is, Iraqi migrants living in Europe and Iraqi returnees from Europe.

1.3 Research questions

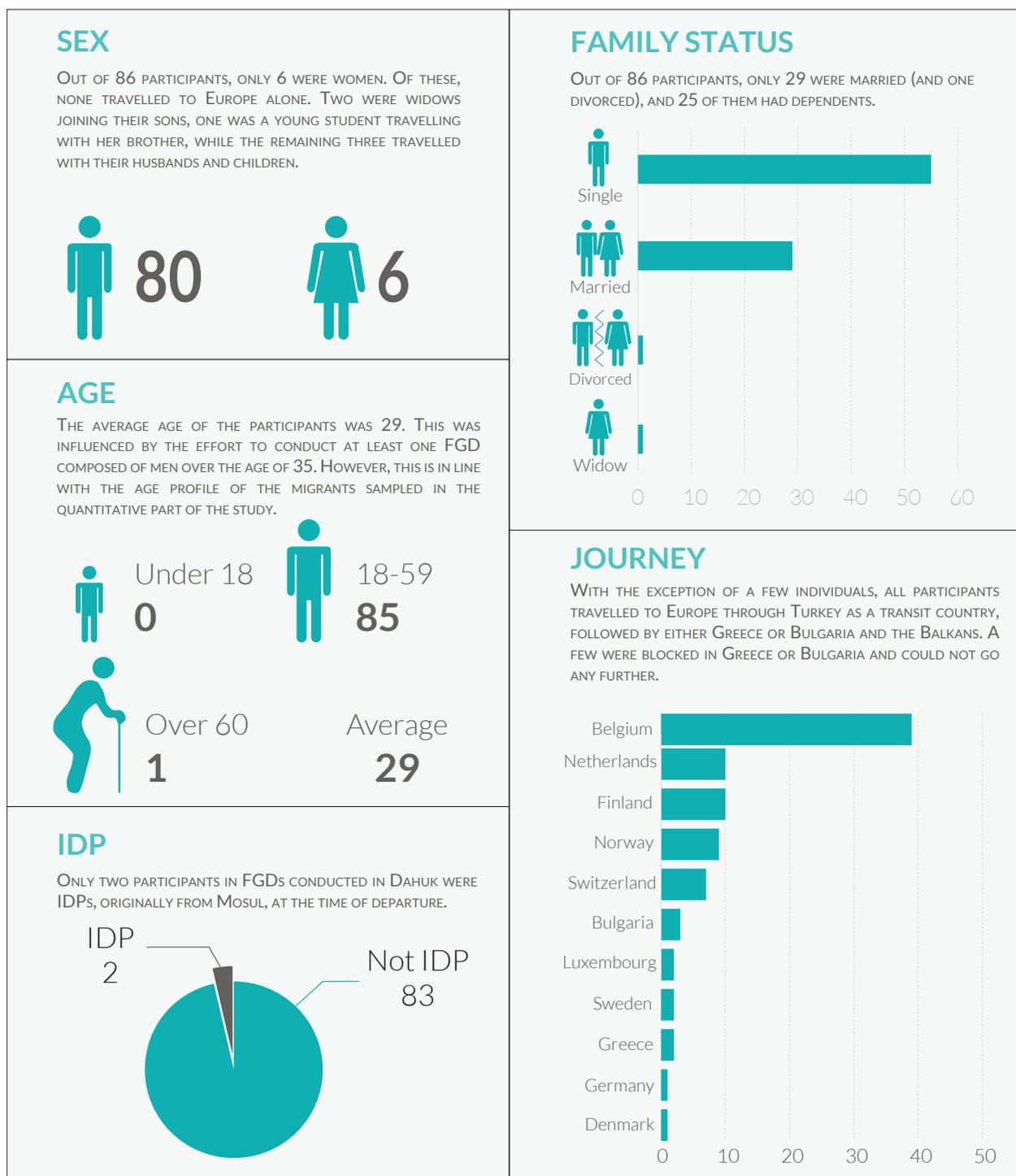
The discussion during FGDs was articulated around the following topics:

1. Reasons for migrating.
2. Reasons for choosing Europe (and/or a specific European country) and timing.
3. Hopes, false expectations, disappointment and misconceptions about Europe and/or the country of destination.
4. Information-gathering.
5. Reasons for returning.

1.4 Participants' profile

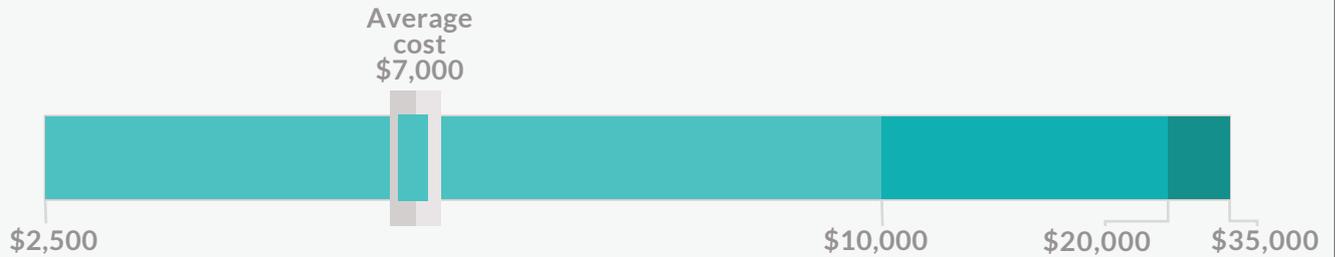
A few preliminary questions were asked during the FGDs about the participants' demographics, socio-economic background and journey. These questions did not represent a selection criterion and their only purpose was to contribute to understanding whether the group was homogeneous in terms of composition and experience, and whether any of the participants would stand out.

These questions allowed to draw a profile that does not claim to be representative of the whole Iraqi migrant population, but allows the reader to have a better understanding of the sample considered in this study.



COST AND DURATION

The average cost of the journey to Europe was USD 7,000 per person, and it lasted between 10 and 30 days.



COUNTRY OF DESTINATION/RETURN

IT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO REMARK THAT THESE FIGURES ARE NOT REPRESENTATIVE IN ANY WAY OF RETURNING PATTERNS FROM EUROPE. THE HIGH NUMBER OF RETURNEES FROM BELGIUM FOR EXAMPLE, WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF THIS RESEARCH, CAN BE ATTRIBUTED TO NO FACTORS OTHER THAN THE SAMPLING TECHNIQUE.



Migrants in the Greek island of Lesbos.
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2. Push factors: reasons for migrating

In order to gain insights into the reasons that triggered the movement from Iraq to Europe, participants were invited to discuss the reasons that pushed tens of thousands of Iraqis to leave their country in 2015.

Even though many answers were homogeneous and presented several similarities, it is possible to detect some differences between the various geographical areas where the FGDs were conducted. Differences were particularly noticeable

between governorates in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)⁵ and Baghdad, and less significant variations were noticed between the three KRI governorates. It is worth noting that the differences were detected more in the order of priorities than in the substance. In other words, respondents tended to indicate similar push factors, but gave them different weights.

5. The KRI is composed of the governorates of Erbil, Sulaymaniyah and Dahuk.

2.1 Security and political instability

Personal threats and targeted violence

In the case of Baghdad, security concerns were brought up immediately as a main concern and reason for migrating. These were not necessarily only related to the conflict, military operations or terrorism, but—in many cases—also to personal threats or targeted violence perpetrated by unspecified armed groups (AGs), whether politically or religiously affiliated, or common criminals.

Many participants from Baghdad reported that they received personal threats or that personal threats—including attempts of forced recruitment—were addressed to their close relatives or children. Some reported they lost their source of income when their business (the case of barbershops and internet cafes was mentioned several times) was set on fire by what they defined as “groups of religious extremists,” while others reported that they were abducted and tortured. Most participants described these episodes not as exceptional experiences, but as something quite common that could happen to anybody.⁶

Although cases were indeed reported in the KRI, targeted violence was not mentioned as often as in Baghdad. The cases mentioned were more related to political affiliation than to crime. Episodes of arrests or persecution because of political rivalries were mentioned several times.

Armed conflict

In Baghdad, in addition to personal security concerns, participants reported the fear of terror attacks, the volatile security situation due to military operations and clashes, the presence of armed groups (AGs) and sectarian militias, the tension among different ethno-religious groups and, in general, the political instability of the country, as the main reasons for migration.

Political instability

Security concerns were also raised in the FGDs conducted in the KRI, but with different nuances. The geographical proximity to the frontline of the battle with the self-proclaimed Islamic State was underlined, especially in Dahuk and Erbil, since ISIL posts are sometimes only a few kilometers away from KRI cities and villages. Although the threat of terror attacks and violence does not seem to be as strongly felt as in Baghdad, most participants reported to be profoundly concerned about the instability of the area and the unpredictability of the security situation. The frontline can quickly shift farther or closer. Participants report to be living with the fear that everything can change overnight. In the words of an FGD participant in Dahuk: “One day I might wake up and find ISIL at my door”.

Security concerns are compounded by fears about political instability because the government is perceived as weak and unstable—both at the central level in Baghdad and regional level in the KRI. References to the internal political instability were frequent. For instance, in Sulaymaniyah, security concerns were not only associated to the military operations and the frontline’s proximity, but also to civil unrest caused by the political tensions among different ruling parties within the KRI. Similarly, in Baghdad, many mentioned the recent protests in the streets against the government.

2.2 No “system” in place

The absence of a “system” was mentioned in numerous occasions as a major reason to leave Iraq. When asked to elaborate further and to define more clearly the concept of “system”, respondents provided various articulated arguments that can be grouped as follows:

Lack of law and law enforcement

Security and safety concerns go hand in hand with what is perceived as a lack of law and law enforcement. An often-repeated statement was: “there cannot be security without law and there cannot be law without security”.

“There cannot be security without law and there cannot be law without security”

Participants across all FGDs locations often reported feeling defenseless and abandoned to themselves, whether in everyday life issues such as minor car incidents, or in exceptional events such as the episodes of violence mentioned above. In general, participants reported they did not feel protected by the law or by those who should enforce it. As reported by a participant from Baghdad: “What is missing is not only the law, but the sense of law”.

“What is missing is not only the law, but the sense of law”

Participants reported a general sense of detachment and distrust in the authorities that are supposed to protect them. Especially during FGDs in Baghdad, it was explained that, in the case of personal threats or abductions, none of the participants would turn to security forces such as the police to deal with the matter. In the KRI, several participants explicitly reported they were afraid of the police. “No Iraqi feels protected as an Iraqi citizen”, reported a participant from Dahuk.

“One day I might wake up and find ISIL at my door”

“No Iraqi person feels protected as an Iraqi citizen”

6. Many participants reported that since personal threats represented their main reason for migrating, once they returned to Iraq they could not live in the same neighborhood or village where they used to live before their departure anymore, for they would be exposed to the same risks.

Social justice

The lack of a system was often associated to the lack of social justice. According to the respondents, Iraqi citizens have unequal access to services, education, healthcare, job opportunities, resources and wealth. Lack of fairness, justice and equality was often pointed out across all focus groups, irrespective of the location.

Respondents argued that the law does not apply equally to everybody: its enforcement is highly politicized and hence people are not equal in front of the law. Many participants complained that to achieve any thing, it is necessary to have the “right connections”. Corruption and nepotism were also mentioned frequently. “You need to know someone to get things done”, said a participant in Dahuk.

A great sense of frustration could also be perceived, as there were many complaints that Iraq is a country rich in resources, but that these are not equally distributed. “Some have everything and some have nothing”.

“Some have everything and some have nothing”

Participants often linked this alleged absence of justice and law enforcement –or of a “system”– to the feeling of not receiving what it is perceived as entitlements. This includes welfare benefits, quality public education, and access to healthcare. When asked to provide examples, one of the participants in Baghdad explained: “In Europe if you are sick and you go to the hospital, they treat you even if they do not know you”.

Furthermore, the absence of justice was also expressed with remarks about the lack of freedom of speech or expression. A number of participants reported having received personal threats or having been arrested and tortured because of their political affiliation, particularly in Baghdad; a few episodes were also mentioned in Dahuk. Even though this experience concerned a limited number of people, all participants in Baghdad and in the KRI mentioned a widespread sense of having no rights and not being entitled to advocate for or demand these rights. In the words of a participant from Baghdad: “There are no human rights in Iraq”.

“In Europe if you are sick and you go to the hospital, they treat you even if they do not know you”

“There are no human rights in Iraq”

2.3 Economic factors

Lack of job opportunities

Economic factors such as unemployment, lack of job opportunities, and the difficulty to make a living were reported as reasons behind emigration across all locations, yet with major differences between the FGDs conducted in Baghdad and those conducted in the KRI.

In Baghdad, the lack of job opportunities was mentioned among the factors pushing people to migrate. However, it is worth noting that many of the respondents in Baghdad were employed when they left the country (mostly state employees or occasional workers). Even though many reported that this economic factor existed and played a role in their choice –since their income was sometimes barely enough for survival– participants stressed that this was secondary to personal security, which is considered overwhelmingly more important. On the other hand, Baghdad respondents also suggested that the lack of job opportunities could possibly be seen as a more relevant reason for migrants coming from safer areas of the country, since they do not have to face the same level of security threats.

As predicted by the FGDs conducted in Baghdad, many participants in the KRI mentioned the lack of job opportunities as a major reason for emigrating. Many pointed out that the KRI is holding out off ISIL and suffering the economic consequences of the conflict, while hosting over one million displaced persons, be they Syrian refugees or Iraqi IDPs. “One million refugees reach Europe and all the newspapers write about it. There are one million IDPs in Kurdistan and nobody cares”, said a participant from Dahuk.

“One million refugees reach Europe and all the newspapers write about it. There are one million IDPs in Kurdistan and nobody cares”

Many blame refugees and IDPs for the economic crisis in the KRI. In particular, refugees and IDPs –regardless of the real impact of their presence on the labor market– are blamed for reducing the number of job opportunities and lowering salaries, since they accept to work for less.

Even though many were employed at the time of departure, the high cost of living and the economic downturn made it very difficult to earn enough money to cover all living expenses. Many respondents agreed that they barely earned IQD 10,000 to 30,000 per day (roughly USD 8 to 25), while rent alone can be as high as of IQD 600,000 (approximately USD 500) per month. Additionally, services such as good quality healthcare or education are largely private and prices had become prohibitive.

As other studies illustrate,⁷ the Government represents the main employer in the KRI, with a large and articulated public sector.

7. The World Bank released a report on 1 June 2016 titled Iraq - Reforming the economy for shared prosperity and protecting the vulnerable. Available online at: <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2016/06/26421488/reforming-economy-shared-prosperity-protecting-vulnerable-main-report>. The report provides insights on the current economic situation in the KRI. The World Bank had released also another report on 17 April 2015, titled The Kurdistan region of Iraq: assessing the economic and social impact of the Syrian conflict and ISIS. Available online at: <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2015/04/24381228/kurdistan-region-iraq-assessing-economic-social-impact-syrian-conflict-isis>. This report provides an understanding of the economic context in the region before migration flows from Iraq to Europe increased.

However, public employees, including teachers, doctors and soldiers have not received a full salary since the summer of 2015.⁸ Still in the KRI, across all three locations, many participants reported they did not want to go to Europe but felt compelled to leave because they could not afford living in the KRI.

Participants who were IDPs at the time of departure reported that they lost everything they left behind. They also reported they knew they were an exception because they managed to economically sustain their journey to Europe, while most other IDPs cannot afford it. Moreover, they added that in addition to the reasons given by other participants, as IDPs, they have no hope to return to their location of origin: they said they face ethnic discrimination, which makes their lives difficult in the short term and jeopardizes their integration in the long term.

Quality of life

Respondents in all locations reported enduring a low quality of life in Iraq. As reported, this low quality of life is the result of many factors, including violence and security threats, and lack of access to basic services such as healthcare and education. Many respondents insistently mentioned electricity cuts as a source of distress and as an example of their daily struggles.

Stress as a constant presence in daily life was mentioned several times. Instability, uncertainty, and constant risks and dangers are often reported as a major cause of distress with serious emotional and psychological consequences. Many respondents explained they only strived for a normal life and peace of mind. "We just want a normal life", said a participant from Baghdad.

"We just want a normal life"

2.4 No hope in the future

FGD participants were asked to address a point highlighted by the first phase of this study. When asked what their main reasons for emigrating were, many respondents indicated "no hope in the future", without providing any further explanation. Moreover, many FGD participants reported they were seeking a better future and hoping to achieve it in Europe.

Respondents explained that the feeling of hopelessness in the future comes from their certainty that all the issues and struggles they face daily are not temporary: participants feel these will never improve. "The country has been moving from one war to another". The concerns, fears and problems reported during the discussions might have intensified during the current conflict, but the fact that Iraq has witnessed decades of violence and instability is unquestionable. Respondents also stated that they would never desire to raise their children in Iraq because there is little or no future for

"In Iraq you cannot achieve anything: no job, no land, no marriage"

them. Young single men across all locations also illustrated their hopelessness by explaining that they cannot manage to get married. At their age (in their late twenties), they feel they are supposed to be married men, capable of taking care of a family. Given the current social, economic and political situation, and despite their age and their willingness to do so, they still cannot provide for a family; because of their financial precariousness, they are not considered "eligible bachelors." In the words of a male participant from Baghdad: "In Iraq you cannot achieve anything: no job, no land, no marriage".

Finally, many respondents reported they felt compelled or forced to migrate, against their will, because they could not see how the situation would ever change. The statements included "They pushed us to leave the country" "They pushed us to leave the country" and "Iraq rejected us as a country", while "European countries make their citizens love their countries".



8. EKurd (2015), Iraqi Kurdistan News in brief, 10/10/2015. [online] Available at <http://ekurd.net/iraqi-kurdistan-news-in-brief-oct-10-2015-2015-10-10>. Retrieved on 3 June 2016.
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Migrants cross the Serbian-Croatian border.
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3. Pull factors: why Europe and why now?

Having discussed the migrants' reasons for leaving Iraq, the next stage in the discussions was based on two considerations. First, this is not the first time that Iraq faces conflict; the current crisis (that is, the ISIL-related conflict), as reported by the participants, intensified issues that were often pre-existing and deeply rooted in Iraq. Moreover, as will be shown in the next sections, it took more than one year and a half after the beginning of the current crisis for the most recent migration upsurge to kick off.

Second, this is not the first time that Iraq has witnessed emigration as a consequence of conflict or crisis. However, previous conflicts and crises did not necessarily cause mass migration, particularly towards Europe. For instance, during the First Gulf War in 1991, or following the sectarian violence in 2006-2007, hundreds of thousands of Iraqis fled the country (considerably more than the estimated 100,000-120,000 Iraqis who reached Europe in 2015),⁹ but mostly to Arab countries, particularly to Syria and Jordan.¹⁰

9. IOM: <http://migration.iom.int/europe/> retrieved on 15 June 2016. UNHCR: <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php> retrieved on 15 June 2016.

10. UNHCR: <http://www.unhcr.org/subsites/iraqcrisis/470387fc2/statistics-displaced-iraqis-around-world-september-2007.html> retrieved on 15 June 2016. UNHCR: <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/subsites/iraqcrisis/3e798c2d4/chronology-1991-gulf-war-crisis.html> retrieved on 15 June 2016.

3.1 Why Europe?

Participants were asked to explain why they chose European countries over others, including countries in the Middle East such as Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt or the Gulf countries, which had hosted hundreds of thousands of Iraqis in the past, or extra-regional destinations such as Australia, the United States or Canada, which could potentially be as attractive as Europe.

Responses were twofold: on the one hand, Europe was perceived as the only feasible option at that moment; on the other, Europe strongly appeals to the imagination of migrants (regardless of whether facts corroborate their image of the continent).

Lack of alternative feasible options

Participants pointed out that neighboring countries that had hosted large numbers of Iraqi refugees in the past might not be a feasible option anymore. This is most notably the case of Syria, given its current crisis. However, this is also the case of Jordan and Lebanon (currently hosting large numbers of Syrian refugees), or other countries in the region where entry procedures, asylum requests, or temporary residence requests (while applying for resettlement elsewhere) are particularly complex and lengthy and have no guaranteed outcome. It was also reported that potential asylum seekers should be ready to wait for months, even years, to have their application processed, while supporting themselves financially in countries where asylum seekers are often not legally entitled to work.

With regard to the United States, Canada or Australia, often mentioned during the discussions, the main obstacles reported were the strict regulations and the lengthy and complex procedures, coupled with the geographical distance. When asked about Europe, many replies were along the lines of: “It was the only open way”.

“It was the only open way”

Europe’s appealing factors

“In Europe human rights are respected, there is justice”

With regards to Europe and its advantages in comparison to other potential destinations, participants were invited to indicate three keywords which, according to them, best described the advantages of Europe over Iraq, and vice versa.

With regards to Iraq, respondents generally pointed out personal relations and affections, and the most indicated words were family, friends, food and social life. As for Europe, the main reported key words were security, safety, law, freedom, human dignity, human rights, system and welfare.

“In Europe people are treated equally”

Broadly, Europe seems to respond to all the needs mentioned by respondents when they discussed the reasons that pushed them to leave their own country, particularly those related to security concerns and social justice.

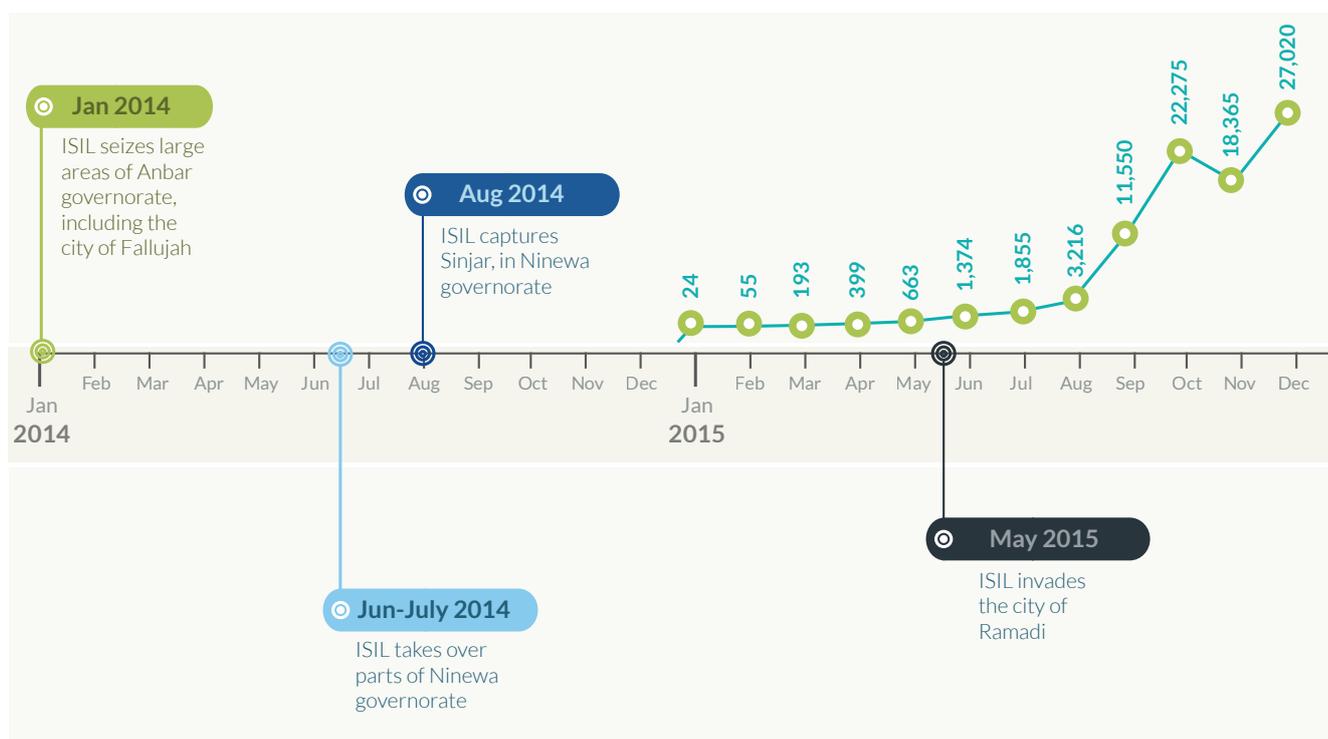
Migrants cross the Serbian-Croatian border.
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“In Europe you are treated humanely”

3.2 Why now?

To stimulate the discussion, participants were shown the following graph representing the number of monthly arrivals of Iraqis to Greece, as registered by the Hellenic Coast Guard and shared with IOM Greece in 2015.¹² The curve showing the trend was positioned in relation to a timeline reflecting the major events that took place in the last two years in Iraq, with specific reference to the current crisis. Participants were invited to add historical turning points or other major events they considered significant and to explain, from their point of view, the acceleration that occurred since August 2015.



The graph shows monthly arrivals from Iraq to Greece (Hellenic Coast Guard/IOM Greece) recorded in 2015 and a timeline reporting major turning points during the current Iraqi crisis.

Favorable conditions

Respondents explained that the way towards Europe was open in the summer of 2015, “We heard that European countries were accepting refugees”, and transit countries in the Balkans did not stop migrants. “In the past there was no open way to travel. Borders were closed to Iraqis”. For these reasons, compared to the past, the journey was perceived as less risky and was reported to be considerably less expensive.

“We heard that European countries were accepting refugees”

“In the past there was no open way to travel. Borders were closed to Iraqis”

In terms of risks, respondents were well aware of the risks involved in crossing the sea by boat, but also argued that in the past “guards at the borders would have arrested or shot us”, which was not the case in the summer of 2015.

“Finding traffickers in Turkey is very easy”

As for the costs, during the sectarian violence between 2006 and 2007 “A journey to Europe could cost up to USD 30,000”, according to a participant from Erbil. It was explained that “The cost of crossing the Aegean Sea to reach the Greek coast from Turkey dropped from USD 10,000 to USD 1,000”. Now, “Finding traffickers in Turkey is very easy”. One of the participants in Sulaymaniyah mentioned that “It took my brother one month to reach Turkey in 2002, while it took me two hours by flight”.¹³

- The data shared by the Hellenic Coast Guard are not comprehensive of the whole Iraqi population of migrants that reached Europe in 2015, as they do not include those who reached Europe without transiting through Greece. These, however, are believed to be a minority. This dataset does not include the registrations conducted by the Hellenic Police. Nonetheless, although the total figures do not perfectly match the figures of IOM and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), they do match in terms of order of magnitude. Finally, and most importantly, for the purpose of the discussion, the trend presented in the graph is a reliable and realistic representation of migration trends from Iraq to Europe during the year 2015. The figures of new arrivals by month are not available for 2014. However, according to the data provided by the Hellenic Police/IOM Greece, the number of newly arrived Iraqi migrants and newly detected Iraqi migrants for 2014 is 1,023.
- Despite the reported drop in price, many respondents explained they sold their cars, business assets, land or their house, or asked for loans from their family, relatives and friends, in order to be able to afford their journey. Once returned to Iraq many still have to pay their debts.

Timing and decision-making

In relation to the migration trends timeline, many respondents also explained that, while the current crisis started at the beginning of 2014, people were not immediately willing to leave their homes, their families and friends. As mentioned before, the feeling of being forced to leave their loved ones against their desire was broadly reported across all FGDs. However, this was particularly mentioned during the FGDs conducted in the KRI, where the life-threatening effects of the conflict are not as marked as in other areas of the country, and where the economic consequences of the crisis took time to be felt. Participants reported that they actually endured the situation for some time in order to see how things would evolve; only later did the conviction that things would only get worse start to mature, which led them to leave the country. “It is like a dam: water grows slowly until a drop is enough to overflow”.

The deteriorating socio-economic situation across Iraq further exacerbated access to services and overall living conditions of both the host communities and families displaced as a result of military confrontations. Chronologically, respondents in the KRI agreed that August 2015 was the peak of the economic

crisis and coincided with the Kurdistan Regional Government’s salary cuts. “Until 2014 it was possible to survive because life was somehow affordable”.

**“Until 2014 it was possible to survive,
because life was somehow affordable”**

Finally, participants across all locations —especially the youngest— reported that, since many people started migrating not only from Iraq but also from Syria, they could rely on information shared by those who migrated before them. Information was easily accessible through direct contact or via social media. Success stories were reported to be a great encouragement to embark on the journey. The expression “going with the flow” was used sometimes to explain the perceived practical easiness of moving with large groups of people, sharing information and means. At the same time, this idea seemed to refer also to the psychological comfort of not having to face such a difficult journey alone. “I have been thinking of leaving for a long time and have seized the chance now”, said a participant from Baghdad.

**“I have been thinking of leaving for a
long time and have seized the chance
now”**



Migrants in the Greek island of Lesbos.
© IOM/Amanda Nero 2015

Migrants in the Greek island of Lesbos.
© IOM/Amanda Nero 2015



4. Life in the country of destination and reasons of return

The last section of the report focuses on the experience of returnees in their country of destination in Europe. FGD participants were asked whether they achieved what they were hoping for and expecting in Europe, and whether this influenced their decision to return.

Unlike in previous sections, where topics of discussions were applicable to the experience of migrants still living in Europe, this topic is closely linked to the experience of the participants as returnees from a specific European country, for policies

from different countries may have had diverse impacts on the migrants' experiences. Hence, rather than homogeneous, responses highly depend on the country of destination and are not representative of the whole Iraqi migrant population still living in Europe.

4.1 Living in Europe

Europe's myths

With regard to Europe in general, regardless of the specific country of destination, there was a general consensus among respondents that the reality was very different from what they imagined. All participants, across all locations, reported –and this was a widespread feeling–that Europe had somehow been idealized and that initial expectations were too high. They frequently referred to “Europe’s myths” or to other false expectations, such as that “before travelling, migrants imagine Europe like paradise”.

“Before travelling, migrants imagine Europe like paradise”

The reality was more difficult than expected when it came to settling and accessing basic services. This includes issues regarding the standard of living, access to residence permits, financial support, freedom of movement and work opportunities: “People expected that once they had crossed the border, they would receive an ID”.

“People expected that once they had crossed the border, they would receive an ID”

Pragmatic difficulties added up to the psychological and emotional distress of living in a new, unfamiliar environment, and of being far away from home and beloved ones. “Migrants are shocked because the life in the country of destination is completely different from their expectations”, reported a participant in Baghdad.

“Migrants are shocked because the life in the country of destination is completely different from their expectations”

European countries of destination

With regard to specific countries, it was remarked that immigration policies played a major role in the sense of disappointment or satisfaction of the participants. Some, especially those who returned from the Netherlands or Scandinavian countries, reported to have received proper accommodation and were highly satisfied with the treatment they received. One of the respondents, for instance, was very satisfied with the situation he encountered, as his application was processed in less than two months, he was given proper accommodation and even started practicing sports in a local club. He was forced to return to Iraq for personal family reasons, but he explained he would have stayed otherwise.

Other participants reported to have received different treatment. A few pointed out that the police verbally and even physically abused them, whether in transit (the example of Hungary was mentioned) or in destination countries (particularly in Belgium): “We were not treated with respect”. Those who were given accommodation in camps while waiting for their asylum request to be processed, in Belgium for instance, complained they had to live in military-like tents: “we expected a home and we were put in a tent with military blankets”.

Some reported having to share an overcrowded space with people of different nationalities with whom there was no common language for communication: “we were not prepared for life in the camp”, “the camp was like a military base”. Particularly, those who were hosted in camps expressed great frustration because they were completely dependent on authorities and were not able to manage basic functions of their daily life, such as the possibility of cooking their own meals. Participants also referred to the fact that they were bothered because they were not allowed to work and make their own living and were forced to rely on local authorities for financial support.

Other participants who were also hosted in camps had a negative impression and said they felt rejected: “They do not want us to integrate in society. That’s why the camps are located in rural, isolated areas”.

Migrants in the Greek island of Lesbos.
© IOM/Amanda Nero 2015



“We were not prepared for life in the camp. The camp was like a military base”

The *iqama*

A major reported source of disappointment and distress was the difficulty encountered to obtain the *iqama*. As mentioned earlier in the report, it is important to remember that *iqama* was used during the FGDs as an umbrella term, since none of the participants were well versed on the differences between the different types of visas, residency permits and refugee status, nor were they familiar with the required procedures to be granted any kind of permit.

“Receiving a residency permit is not as easy as expected. Waiting times are really long”

Additionally, respondents said that although they were assured they would have the *iqama* request processed in less than one month – by word of mouth – many had to wait

for months just for the first interview. “Receiving a residency permit is not as easy as expected. Waiting times are really long”, said a participant in Baghdad. The lack of information with regard to the bureaucratic procedures, together with the constant changes and amendments, have been described as a “psychological war”. Respondents explained they could not keep up with all the changes, could not access clear and unequivocal information, and felt frustrated by the continuous delays in the process: “initially all procedures were simpler, and fingerprints would be taken during the first and only interview”.

Another source of frustration was the perceived unfairness of application processing. Various participants reported they felt treated as second-class migrants after the Syrians, who, according to the FGD participants, would be granted refugee status much more easily, without undergoing the same scrutiny. Similarly, they also insisted that some people who arrived after them, even Iraqis, had their application processed first and that the granting of the *iqama* was unrelated to the applicants’ profile. A participant stated that “the dreamers got the residency”, meaning those who reached Europe more for the sake of adventure than out of need.

“The dreamers got the residency”

4.2 Information and sources

The quantitative study that proceeded these FGDs pointed out that the main type of information collected by migrants before their departure was on routes and costs, while only a small number collected information about life in the country of destination and asylum seeking procedures. The initial phase of the study also indicated that the most important criterion for the choice of the country of destination was the reported ease of being granted refugee status, followed by the presence of contacts in that specific country. Finally, the most important sources of information turned out to be word of mouth, Internet and social media.

This finding has been confirmed throughout all FGDs. None of the participants reported to have sought information through official channels. Information about routes, costs, asylum seeking procedures and life in the country of destination was reportedly collected only through word of mouth, either through friends and family members who already migrated, or indirectly through acquaintances. When asked to specify and provide details about the use of the Internet and social media, respondents explained that they relied on Facebook and Viber, but only as a virtual version of word of mouth.

In this regard, the vast majority reported that their confidence in the speed of obtaining the *iqama* and accessing services and support from the host country was based on the experience of their contacts already residing in the country or on the success stories they heard through word of mouth or social media.



Migrants cross the Serbian-Croatian border.
© Francesco Malavolta/IOM 2015



Migrants walking towards Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM) border. © IOM/Amanda Nero 2015

4.3 Reason for return

Migrants who returned to Iraq were asked to explain the reasons that prompted them to return, and to highlight the relation between their decision and the disappointment they might have felt in Europe. Answers in this part of the FGDs tended to be diverse.

Interestingly, a number of participants, especially from Baghdad –including some who had been granted the *iqama*– returned for personal reasons. A few mentioned that relatives fell sick: “my mother had surgery and I had to come back to take care of her”. Other examples of personal stories include a case of a participant who returned to sell his house to pay for his kidnapped son’s ransom, while another one returned to take care of his teenage son who, after being kidnapped, suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms. These migrants returned because of tragic events that took place back home that demanded their presence. Otherwise, they reported that they would have preferred to stay in Europe. For this limited number of cases, migration seemed to have been a positive experience: “In Europe I could feel human. Seven months in Europe were better than 26 years in Iraq”, remarked a participant in Baghdad.

In contrast, most participants in these FGDs seem to have returned either because their requests were rejected or because they felt extenuated by the endless delays in their asylum request process: “Before, it was possible to receive residency within six months, and one year for the family reunification. Then we were told that the time is now stretched to two to three years for the residency only”.

“ In Europe I could feel human. Seven months in Europe were better than 26 years in Iraq ”

Within this group, most reported that they would have preferred to remain but that they could not afford to stay away from home for so long, either because they ran out of savings for themselves, because they could not provide for their families while away (“My wife called saying she could not buy milk”, said one participant) or because they could not stay away from their family for so many months, regardless of financial issues.

“ My wife called saying she could not buy milk ”

Finally, a few returned because they could not endure living conditions in Europe while waiting for their request to be processed: “I could not handle the living conditions in the camps”. When asked if they would consider leaving again, one of the respondents replied: “Not even if the plane picks me up in front of my doorstep”.

“ I could not handle the living conditions in the camps ”

“ I wouldn’t leave again, not even if the plane picks me up in front of my doorstep ”



Migrants cross the Serbian-Croatian border.
© Francesco Malavolta/IOM 2015

5. Final remarks

As part of IOM's response to the upsurge of migration to Europe during 2015, IOM Iraq conducted a phased research in the framework of the DFID-funded project *Understanding complex migration flows from Iraq to Europe* through movement tracking and awareness campaigns.

IOM Iraq used its in-country capacity and knowledge of the local context to gain insights on the broader migration phenomenon by studying key, previously unexplored, elements from the perspective of a sending country and its migrants. This approach and the study's findings make an important yet modest contribution to the emerging literature on the issue of migration to Europe, particularly by highlighting issues that are not usually prioritized in studies in transit and receiving countries.

The first part of the study consisted of quantitative research during which a structured questionnaire was administered to Iraqis who had left the country in 2015 and were living in Europe. Among other topics, the questionnaire gathered information about the migrants' profile, the preparation and organization of the journey and the journey itself, migrants' expectations, and living conditions in the country of destination.

This allowed IOM to collect useful information and acquire a general understanding of the overall migration phenomenon; it also cast light on specific issues worth further investigation at the individual level, such as the migrants' perceptions and misconceptions about what the emigration process entailed.

The second stage of the research consisted of a qualitative approach. Through FGDs with returnees from Europe, IOM explored in greater depth topics such as the migrants' reasons for leaving and for choosing Europe and/or a specific country, their hopes, expectations, misconceptions and, lastly, the reasons for returning to their home country.

The findings presented in this report show that it is not possible to provide clear-cut, overarching answers to questions on an issue as complex as forced migration. Expected key driving factors —such as security concerns, political tensions, conflict dynamics and poor socioeconomic conditions— have proven to be intertwined and multi-layered, but not necessarily directly correlated to each other. Furthermore, the subjective nature of the migrants' decisions, based on facts as much as on their own beliefs, experiences, perceptions and risk-aversion threshold, came up as major influencing factors.

It is important to note that since the beginning of this research, immediately after the peak of arrivals to Europe from Iraq in August and September 2015, the situation has changed. Since December 2015, the number of new arrivals per month to Europe from Iraq has been steadily decreasing. Nevertheless, this research highlights topics that transcend the current crisis and points out at driving factors and dynamics that are not necessarily time-bound.

IOM Iraq hopes that this exploratory study will contribute to a better understanding of the events that took place over the last months. More importantly, IOM Iraq expects to have set the foundations to develop and pose the right questions, facilitating evidence-based policy responses to this humanitarian crisis.



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