“We are just trying to give our children a future”: Self-reliance for Syrian Refugees in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

NRC NORWEGIAN REFUGEE COUNCIL

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) is an independent humanitarian organisation helping people forced to flee. In crises across 31 countries, NRC provides emergency and long-term assistance to millions of people every year. NRC promotes and defends displaced people's rights locally, nationally and on the world stage.

Cover photo: Muhammad Khalil, originally a farmer from Derik, Syria, now finds refuge in Domiz 1 camp within the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Ahmed Kaka/NRC

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October 2023

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Acronyms

3RP: Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan

EU: European Union

IASC: Inter-agency Standing Committee

IDP: Internally Displaced Person

KRG: Kurdistan Regional Government

KRI: Kurdistan Region of Iraq

NGO: Non-Governmental Organisation

NRC: Norwegian Refugee Council

REIP: Refugee Education Integration Policy

SEM: Swiss State Secretariat of Migration

UN: United Nations

UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Introduction

Since 2012, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has generously hosted over 260,000 refugees fleeing conflict and violence in Syria. Over the years, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has worked with humanitarian partners to initiate concrete policies that allow for a degree of self-reliance for a community unable to return home, including renewable residency permits, limited access to the labour market, and greater education access. The Refugee Education Integration Policy (REIP),[1] for example, seeks to promote equitable access to education, support social cohesion, and gradually integrate children of Syrian descent into Kurdish host communities through the formal schooling system.

Despite the gains made, some challenges remain. Almost 12 years since being displaced, Syrian refugees face an uncertain future as refugees across the Middle East. Despite conditions in Syria remaining untenable for sustainable return, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey have indicated intent to repatriate refugees. While Iraq has taken significant steps to support and integrate Syrians in the Kurdistan Region, Baghdad too has recently deported[2] three Syrian Kurds to Damascus and detained an additional 70 for allegedly violating[3] the residency system. Deportation of refugees to Syria is inconsistent with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) position on facilitating and promoting returns at this time and may amount to refoulement under international law.[4] Given the protracted nature of the response, the sharp decline of humanitarian funding, and the unsustainability of near-term return, it is important to capitalise and expand on policy gains to support prospects for durable solutions in KRI.

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) has supported refugees and host communities in the KRI since 2012, providing education, legal assistance, shelter, hygiene (WASH) and livelihoods assistance. Concurrent to programming, NRC has worked alongside authorities and the United Nations on developing and advocating for policies and practice that recognise and respond to both the specific needs and rights of refugees, and those of host communities.

Supported by the Swiss State Secretariat of Migration (SEM), this report uses survey data, field insights and NRC's programmatic experience to assess lingering barriers to durable solutions for Syrian refugees in Iraq. Specifically, the report assesses opportunity and vulnerability across four themes: **impact of reduced aid assistance; equitable access to education; access to formal employment and income; and refugee perceptions of self-reliance and durable solutions.**

Methodology

To understand opportunities and barriers to durable solutions for Syrian refugees, the report uses three streams of data: a survey of 546 refugees living in both camps and urban settings; focus-group discussions with refugees and host communities; and desk research. Additionally, findings have been informed by insights from colleagues in partner organisations, and through consultations with individuals in key ministries in the Kurdistan Region.

In July 2023, NRC surveyed 546 in-camp (Domiz I and II, Gawilan, Bardarash) and out-of-camp households across Dohuk governorate.[5] Additionally, four focus group discussions were conducted in August in both camp and urban settings. Findings were triangulated through desk research.

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Terminology

This report assesses preconditions that support self-reliance in support of durable solutions. Frameworks used align with those of the Inter-agency Standing Committee (IASC),[6] and with commitments set out in the Regional Refugee Resilience Plan (3RP),[7] which was designed to integrate humanitarian and development approaches to the Syrian refugee crisis.

For the purpose of this report, durable solutions[8] for Syrian refugees are set within a comprehensive protection and solutions strategy which seeks to: 1) support host country and community resilience; 2) enable refugee self-reliance, including access to services, legal work opportunities and livelihoods; 3) expand access to resettlement in third countries and other complementary pathways, and; 4) plan for the return of refugees to Syria, on a voluntary basis, when conditions for a safe, dignified and sustainable return are in place'.

Self-reliance, which is one component of durable solutions, can be defined as the ability of refugees to sustainably meet their own social

and economic needs, seeks to transition from dependence on humanitarian aid to integration of refugees into existing formal economies.

Access to self-reliance opportunities, particularly for refugee children, adolescents and youth, in situations of conflict and displacement are essential in promoting recovery, stability, reducing protection risks distinct across demographics, and building individual, household and community resilience. The protracted absence of self-reliance opportunities for refugee children and youth can present significant challenges for durable solutions and drive major protection risks with far reaching, often inter-generational consequences. However, self-reliance is at the level of the individual, while durable solutions encompass support at the level of society and system.[9]

Two short notes:

1. To protect confidentiality, all names of participants have been changed.
2. The report is based on surveys and consultations with Syrian refugees residing in Duhok governorate only, not the wider Kurdistan Region. As of July 2023, Duhok hosts approximately 25 percent of Syrians in Iraq. Almost 50,706 of Syrian refugees in Duhok live in four camps while the rest live in urban settlements.

Bardarash camp in Dohuk governorate currently hosts approximately 1500 Syrian refugees. Photo: Ahmed Kaka

Findings

- **3 in 5 Syrian refugees earn less than 200 US dollars a month.** This is below the USD 239 minimum wage set by the Iraq's Council of Ministers under Article 63 of the 2015 Iraqi Labour Law[10] and deepens precarity of an already vulnerable population.
- **Over half of surveyed respondents work in the unregulated, informal sector, and about one-third of refugees reported being unemployed.** Majority of refugees report difficulty finding formal jobs as a Syrian.
- **3 in 4 Syrian refugees are in debt and borrow money to cover their daily expenses.** Indebtedness in the refugee community can be understood at the level of the community, with negative coping mechanisms, exploitation, and associated vulnerabilities commonplace.
- While refugees have access to education in the KRI, and the Refugee Education Integration Policy (REIP) is seen as a step in the right direction, **children have trouble catching up without accelerated programmes supported by humanitarian agencies.**
- 4 in 5 refugees reported being unable to start small businesses in the past year due to lack of capital and barriers to accessing formal financing options.

This report focuses on four main issues that are of particular significance: **the impact of reduced aid assistance; equitable access to education; income and expenditure; and self-reliance and durable solutions.**

1. Impact of Reduced Aid Assistance

> *"Do you want me to call the ambulance? We can wait together and see if they show up."*

While the protracted Syrian refugee responses has led to a deliberate shift away from aid-dependence toward programming in support of self-reliance, refugees in the KRI have felt the steady withdrawal of aid agencies acutely.

Over the years, conditions in the camps have reportedly deteriorated as support from international organisations have waned. Reduced support from organisations is linked directly to reduced funding for humanitarian support to the Syrian refugee response. Monthly food rations have been cut,[11] and access to health services has suffered. For Khadija, the lack of health services is concerning: "The only health clinic here opens for only a few hours and closes at 1 PM. **There is an ambulance num-**

Haitham, a Syrian refugee, stands outside his tent home in Bardarash camp, Dohuk governorate, Iraq. Photo: Ahmed Kaka/NRC

ber, but there is lack of response. Do you want me to call the ambulance? We can wait together and see if they show up. What happens if our children fall sick at night?"

Refugees, especially in camps, believe "if NGOs leave, they might be left vulnerable." Specifically, respondents highlighted the issue of *maktoumeen*[12] –fearing that if NGOs reduce their footprint, there would be even less eyes on the camps, meaning increased risk of 'raids' on people who may not have any documents from Syria or in Iraq. In Domiz camps, anywhere between five to ten percent of residents are estimated to be *maktoumeen*, although this data needs further triangulation.

The process to obtain residency in the KRI is lengthy and intensive. Upon the entry to the KRI territory, refugees are directed to the residency office. Permits are granted following: an approval letter from Security Service (*Asayish*); UNHCR asylum seeker certificate; proof of address from *Mukhtar* or camp management if residing in the camp; blood work report testing for communicable diseases; and proof of nationality issued by Syria government. For some refugees, meeting these conditions has been challenging, especially for those fleeing violence from disputed areas such as *Rojava*, documents from which are not recognised by the KRI authorities.

Residencies for Syrian refugees also need to be renewed yearly. Renewals require the applicant hold a valid UNHCR asylum seeker certificate, or, a letter from UNHCR explaining any delays on the agency's part. A majority of Syrians engaged for this report had expired UNHCR certifi-

cates, owing largely to the backlog of cases during the Covid-19 pandemic. Failure to renew residencies on time may lead to a daily penalty. Refugees who live in camps and those who live in urban settlements have the same legal status; renewable residency that offers access to basic services like employment, education and healthcare. Delay in renewal and cost of transportation to and from the residency directorate were the main concern of the respondents. All refugees who participated in this study had formal residencies, but residencies of a few had expired.

Costs associated with expired residencies are steep, with a daily penalty of 20,000 IQD imposed. There are one or two reasons for expired residencies: either failure to renew due to oversight or failure to renew due to UNHCR backlogs, or because of impediments through government procedures. Multiple respondents reported that they were being given a "run around" and had been waiting for months to resolve cases of renewal. Issues usually arise when additional family members need to be added to the UNHCR certificate or need to be taken off due to divorces or deaths.

A valid residency permit generally allows for free movement within the KRI across the three governorates. If refugees want to move to another governorate, they must have a valid residency card. Not notifying the authorities can result in additional financial penalties. However, in practice, there is some variance across the three governorates on how Syrian refugees are treated, potentially impeding their movement within the KRI. A KRI residency permit and/or the UNCHR certificate does not allow travel to Federal Iraq, which usually requires a visa through the Federal government in Baghdad.

The cyclical nature of residency renewals through UNHCR means refugees need constant access to legal assistance and counselling. Over the years however, refugees have highlighted reduced quality of services, especially when it comes to legal assistance and education. Responses by UNHCR, reportedly, have slowed, and the degree of support offered has deteriorated. Participants highlighted cases of wrongly recorded names, or misplaced documents that has held up residency renewal which have been put in backlogs. Without residency, refugees are unable to move from the camps. Hassan, 71, spoke of his daughter, who has been navigating authorities for close to a year to renew her residency, and has had to pay fines close to 250,000 IQD. "Many agencies," Hassan said, **"say they are here, but I only see logos. People come and tell us they are here to help, but they don't even know how to speak to us properly."**

Unable to leave camps due to low incomes and high costs of living, refugees increasingly live in congested surroundings. Ali, 72, lives with his children, who have started families of their own: **"We are three families under one roof. My son is married but cannot afford to rent another place; my daughter is divorced and does not have any place to go. We are crowded together in a house that is barely 100 square feet in size".**

Challenges faced by refugees in KRI is not constrained to just camps. A significant proportion of Syrian refugees live in urban settlements in sub-districts like Summel and Zakho.

Perceptions of life in the camps vary widely between "in-camp and out-of-camp residents." Refugees in urban settings believe those living in camps are "lucky" because they do not have to pay rent and other services. Perhaps surprisingly, many like Habib have applied to move to camps: **"I would move tomorrow if I could. There are empty houses, but you need to know someone to get them. Without wasta,4 you can't get anything done."**

Without access to decent work,[13] as documented by NRC previously, every day costs pile up. Decent work is defined by the ILO as "work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace, and social protection for families." It includes wage-paid work, as well as self-employment. For refugees, decent work "is fundamental to their resilience and self-reliance, benefitting both refugees and host economies and societies."[14] While urban settlements promise greater opportunities, refugees across Kurdistan still face barriers to living, working, and achieving a degree of self-reliance. Nowhere is this discrepancy more apparent than in Zakho, which sits just 30 minutes from the Syrian border. Refugees here have lived in Kurdistan for the past decade or so, grappling with the pull of home that has slipped farther and farther away with each passing year. Unlike refugees in the camps, no barbed wires surround their homes, and no aid agency logos are plastered around their surroundings. On the face of it, their lives seem normal. But normalcy and refuge do not often go hand in hand. **Despite important policy shifts in Kurdistan that have allowed temporary legal status to refugees, barriers to self-reliance and resilience still exist.**

Syrian refugee shop owners standing in front of their businesses in Sumel district, Dohuk. Photo: Ahmed Kaka/ NRC

2. Equitable Access to Education

> *"Do you want to see the future? Come in the evening and you will see how our children beg, steal and fight for money."*

Since 2018, KRI authorities have worked with the United Nations and NGOs to develop and adopt the Refugee Education Integration Policy (REIP).[15] The policy focuses on integrating Syrian refugees into the host community by ensuring that refugee children learn the Kurdish language, follow the same curriculum, foster relationships in the classes and have equal opportunities as Kurdish children. The REIP came into effect at the start of the 2022 academic school year.

While respondents overwhelmingly supported the idea of "integration through education", learning in a different language continues to be a challenge. Although a vast majority of Syrian refugees based in KRI are ethnic Kurds, there is a level of preference to learning in Arabic. Reasons for this vary: some refugees see it as remaining connected to Syrian roots; for others, it is easier for parents to help children in Arabic rather than Kurdish. As Asma, a mother of two puts it: **"We want our children to learn in Arabic because it is the language of their ancestors. We might not ever get to go back to Syria, but we hope our children will be able to return one day."**

As a result, last year, some parents opted to abstain from sending their children to schools, protesting the change from an Arabic-language curriculum.[16] Some refugees have instead sent their children to schools for internally displaced Iraqis where the teaching modality is in Arabic. Further, the quality of teaching remains a cause for concern: **"teachers are not paid enough, or paid at all, so they have no incentive to try ... if our children do not go to private tutors, no one would pass."**

Community challenges related to the mainstreaming of REIP is more prominent in urban settings. In discussions, respondents felt that children in camps are better placed to learn, with access to accelerated learning programmes by NGOs.

As is the case across the global, parents believe education is the key to their children's future, and that it unlocks the door to self-reliance and freedom. In KRI, Syrian refugees are no different. As Naima put it, **"This is not about us. We have spent our lives running. This is about our children. Education is more than just classrooms. Our children don't have a field to play in, they are not learning skills that will help them to get a job."**

Habib, a father of two, wants his daughters to have a better life than he has had: "We save everything we can to give our children the best education. We try to send our children to university; but then, they graduate and are forced to work the same jobs we do. No one will hire them."

While the REIP is a step in the right direction, the policy in isolation is not enough to foster self-reliance. The vast majority of Syrians are still forced to find employment in the informal sector, and those who do enrol in higher education are left with an uncertain future.

Young students making their way to school in Domiz 1 camp, Duhok governorate.Photo: Ahmed Kaka/NRC

As Mariam 31, puts it, **"Do you want to see the future? Come in the evening and you will see how our children beg, steal and fight for money."**

3. Formal Employment and Income

> *"There is no point going to court, it is a waste of time, money and energy. I will be dead by the time the case is heard."*

Self-reliance, which is broadly defined as the ability of refugees to sustainably meet their own social and economic needs, seeks to transition from dependence on humanitarian aid to integration of refugees into existing formal economies. Unfortunately, despite evidence pointing overwhelmingly to the benefits of economic inclusion,[17] the institutional context of host societies typically constrains legal pathways to employment for refugees. As a result, refugees are often forced to seek informal work which exposes them to exploitative working conditions, lack of decent and dignified work, marginal wages, unsustainable livelihood, and tension with local communities.

While access to formal work is a key component of self-reliance, **only 5 percent of the 546 participants had formalised employment.** 34 per cent of respondents worked in the informal sector while the rest were unemployed. While a handful of refugees have formalised employment contracts, the vast majority of FGD participants noted wage theft, discrimination and exploitation as normal practice, alongside second-

ary impacts of social tension between refugee and host populations. As Rezan, 37, put it, **“As a Syrian, I am given 30,000 IQD for a job an Iraqi is paid 50,000 IQD for, and then I am blamed for lowering the wage … I am just trying to provide for my family. What am I supposed to do?”**

Legal recourse for wage theft remains out of reach of Syrians, and indeed most labourers in the informal sector. While disputes could be resolved in courts of law, or through informal means such as mediation, few refugees opt for either. According to Rafiq, who was recently fired from a restaurant without cause, **“There is no point going to court, it is a waste of time, money and energy. I will be dead by the time the case is heard.”**

In theory, Syrian refugees can work in the private sector, although a maximum ==[[‘[];’[[[[[[0 of 25 percent is imposed on foreigners including refugees by the KRG Councils of Ministers Decision No. 172 made on 20th September 2022. As of September 2023, refugees are not allowed to work in the public sector, or open bank accounts. Although research has noted that the decision of quotas by the government was made to minimise inter-group tensions between refugees and the host community, perceptions on the ground point to the existence of some tensions.[18] Perhaps owing to an overall lack of opportunities in the KRI region, host communities often blame refugees and internally displaced Iraqis for lack of employment and lower wages.

Mohammed is from Afrin, Syria, he works as a mechanic in Sumel district in Dohuk governorate. Photo: Ahmed Kaka/NRC

Owing to a lack of opportunities, some refugees have taken extreme and risky measures to provide for their families. One refugee conceded that he sometime works as taxi driver and "transport people illegally but in case of any accidents, we are at risk getting fined, licence confiscated or even going to jail." In the KRI, refugees are only allowed to hold private driving licences, excluded from applying for licenses that allow them to operate taxi services.

Income in the Syrian refugee community is also low, with 61 percent (3 in 5) reportedly earning less than 200 US dollars a month. This is lower than the 293 USD minimum wage set by the Iraq's Council of Ministers under Article 63 of the 2015 Iraqi Labour Law.[19] However, since most Syrian refugees work in the informal sector, there are often no written contracts that can be enforced.

Additionally, Syrian refugees cannot own a property and can only hold a license for small businesses. Often. this leads to refugees using Iraqis as an intermediary sponsor, which can lead to housing, land and property disputes. According to Hamid 43, a *Mukhtar* in Waar city, **"Some of us have sold land in Syria to buy flats through Iraqis, but we depend on their mercy and good will. Some have bought apartments that have then been sold by the Iraqi sponsor. Unfortunately, we do not feel like the court will listen to us, and trying to navigate the system means spending more money that we do not have."**

Indebtedness, too, is an issue. 77 **percent of refugees reported being currently in debt, and every single respondent had borrowed money sometime in the past year.** Usually, refugees borrow either from other community members, or from money lenders in Duhok. Borrowing occurs on a monthly schedule with steep collaterals: **"Every month, I go to Duhok to borrow. When I go, I pay back what I owe from last month and leave behind something valuable – usually jewellery. Sometimes, a group of us borrow money together, and then pay it back together."**

Financial debt in the Syrian refugee community is not just at individual level but exists at the level of the community. Most of the shops in the camps, often run by Syrians and owned by Iraqis, had notebooks containing the name and contact details of debtors. Refugees borrow primarily to make ends meet, and sometimes for unforeseen medical expenses, or nascent business opportunities. For both, **the cyclical nature of debt means refugees are stuck in perpetual financial insecurity making them vulnerable to exploitation.**

Syrians in Kurdistan increasingly feel the limits of welcome. Youth who have grown up in the region and graduated from universities are denied jobs because of their refugee status. On the other hand, host communities who are also facing the brunt end of an economic downturn see refugees and IDPs being assisted by aid agencies and given 'preferential treatment'. Refugees themselves often blame IDPs being hosted by the KRI for dwindling assistance. In a region that has shown laudable generosity to both refugees and IDPs, the lack of a whole of society approach has resulted in blame games and increased uncertainty for all.

4.Barriers to Self-Reliance and Durable Solutions

Iraq receives refugees under the 1971 Political Refugee, Act 51, which gives political and military refugees benefits such as the right to work and equal access to health and education services as Iraqis; and Law No. 21 of 2009 from the Ministry of Migration and Displacement. Yet, as the experience of the Syrian community shows, protection delivered under this legislation lacks consistency related to rights and entitlements.

There are three complementary pathways to resolving refugee crises: voluntary return, resettlement, or integration. Unfortunately, as is the case with most refugee responses globally, political and diplomatic efforts concentrate overwhelmingly on return to countries of origin. For Syrians, as of today, return remains a non-option, putting the impetus on integration and resettlement options. There are, however, barriers to both options: Iraq does not allow naturalisation of refugees, and resettlement options are available for a very small portion of refugees. [20]

In line with the IASC framework, there are 3 equally valid durable solutions options. However, these settlement options in terms of physical movement, by themselves, are part of the process of durable solution, and not an end all by itself. Securing a durable solution is a long-term and complex process of gradually diminishing displacement-related needs, while ensuring that the displaced populations can fully claim their rights without discrimination.

Ramz, a farmer hailing from Qamishlo, Syria, has been residing in the Kurdistan region of Iraq along with his family since 2012. Photo: Ahmed Kaka/NRC

The lack of alternate pathways has cultivated a pervasive sense of hopelessness and frustration amongst the Syrian refugee population in the KRI.[21] Almost all of the respondents engaged were looking to find a way to Europe. Jamila, 25, is waiting for her husband to take her and her two children to Germany. **“Everyone I know is saving up to leave. The magic number is 10,000 USD.” Mohammed, 18, works as a day labourer and is one of many who do not see a future in KRI, “Today, 20 people left Zakho. I would have left with them, but my father is disabled, and someone needs to care for him.”**

Almost every refugee this report engaged with had family in Europe, and depended, in one way or another, on remittances. Capital flows within the Syrian refugee community are a clear indication of how far refugees are from self-reliance. For refugees, as has been previously documented, income is highly erratic, depending on informal wages and casual work. While monthly income teeters at around 200 USD, average expenditure is around 300 USD per month. To meet basic needs, refugees are forced to borrow, and borrow often.

At the same time, Syrians in KRI have forged a sense of community in exile. In Waar city in Summel, for example, refugees make up 80 per cent of the 1,500 residents, and while community connections are apparent throughout the Syrian community, they seem more pronounced in urban settings, and a source of shared support.

“If I go back, I might be killed. If I leave the camp, I will not be able to feed my family. So, I stay, stuck.”

In its capacity as an implementing partner, NRC is constructing a total of seven hundred housing units in Gawilan Camp, providing permanent homes for Syrian refugees previously residing in Bardarash Camp. Photo: Ahmed Kaka/NRC

Conclusion

Most refugees in the KRI live within driving distance of ancestral homes in Syria. Even today, 12 years into the crisis, Syrians travel back to get married; and those who die in Kurdistan are transported back home to be buried. **For now, staying as a refugee in Kurdistan is not an option chosen but accepted.**

This report assesses progress toward fostering self-reliance and prospects of durable solutions for Syrian refugees in the KRI across four themes: impact of reduced aid assistance; equitable access to education; access to formal employment and income; and refugee perceptions of self-reliance and durable solutions. Findings highlight specific barriers to income security, access to formal employment, and learning pathways that support self-reliance.

Findings indicate impact of reduced aid assistance, economic precarity, barriers to formal employment and challenges with equitable access to education. Three themes stand out:

The steady withdrawal of aid agencies has been acutely felt by refugees in KRI, leading to deteriorating conditions in camps. Reduced support has resulted in decreased food rations and limited access to healthcare. Access to education is one consequence of reduced humanitarian support. While the Refugee Education Integration Policy (REIP) aims to integrate Syrian refugee children into the host community's education system, more after-school programmes were identified as necessary for children to catch up. Additionally, language barriers and concerns about learning in Kurdish persist, and some parents have even abstained from sending their children to school due to curriculum changes.

Economic precarity is pervasive amongst the Syrian community in the KRI. **Three in five refugees earn less than $200 per month, well below the minimum wage set by Iraqi law.** Over half work in the informal sector, with about one-third being unemployed. A majority of refugees struggle to find formal employment, leading to high levels of indebtedness within the community.

Lastly, legal barriers and restrictions on employment opportunities continue to force many Syrian refugees into the unregulated, informal sector, exposing them to exploitative conditions, low wages, and social tension with host communities. Legal recourse for wage theft remains largely inaccessible, leaving refugees vulnerable to exploitation.

Combined, these barriers have cultivated hopelessness and desperation amongst refugees. Almost every respondent knew somebody who had made their way to Europe, and youth in particular reported saving up to try and smuggle themselves out. Irregular migration is not a phenomenon unique to Syrians living in Kurdistan, but Syrians constitute a significant proportion of those undertaking journeys. As of mid-2023,

the central Mediterranean has registered over 40,000 cases of crossings, 17% of which account for Syrians.[22] With reception in Europe tepid, and pushbacks and incarcerations commonplace, lack of coordinated durable solutions pathways mean Syria refugees often feel forced into a choice between limbo on land or risks at sea.

Aleya, 32, is one of many Syrians looking for any way out. **"Everyone I know is saving up to leave. We know this is unsafe, and perhaps this is wrong, but for us, it is one of the few options left. Sometimes it feels like the whole world sees us as criminals, but we are just trying to give our children a future."**

Recommendations

To the Kurdistan Regional Government

1. Reducing or removing penalties for expired residency permits will go a long way in alleviating financial challenges for refugees. By and large, expired residencies seem to be a result of case backlogs, which often result in refugees having to pay steep daily fines.
2. Support increased access to legal assistance for refugees. In collaboration with humanitarian partners, this could include establishing mobile legal offices in refugee camps and urban areas to provide guidance on residency renewals, citizenship applications, and other legal matters.
3. Policy changes to formalise work and investment will go a long way in enabling self-reliance. Issuing taxi licences to Syrian refugees will enable opportunities in taxi service companies, and allowing refugees to open banks will formalise economic activity.
4. To strengthen the REIP, humanitarian agencies should be encouraged to roll out accelerated programmes in Kurdish to ensure effective inclusion within the formal schooling system.
5. Children of Syrian descent born in Iraq are at risk of statelessness and require policy solutions that support the issuing of birth certificates and residencies.
6. While the labour law prohibits discriminatory practice against refugees in the workplace, stronger enforcement is required to nurture an enabling environment.

To humanitarian NGOs and the UNHCR

1. Parallel to advocacy around refugee reception in the West, push to expand third country resettlement options for vulnerable members of the community.
2. Lead advocacy with authorities to renew solutions focused commitments in line with the Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan (3RP), ensuring Syrian refugees are not excluded from the pursuit of durable solutions for IDPs.
3. Communicate reasons, if any, for backlogs in issuing UNHCR certificates to refugees, and take steps to allocate resources to support both camp and urban residents.

To donors:

1. Continue to support refugees in the KRI, including through programming that provides skills building for youth and adolescents, more equitable access to formal economies, and livelihoods support.
2. Continue to support economic revitalisation in the KRI, and lobby for economic inclusion of Syrian refugees as part of broader recovery and stabilisation efforts. In tandem, support KRI authorities in the planning and provision of financial resources to assist in the local integration of refugees.
3. Coordinate and support the KRG to strengthen integration pathways to de-incentivise dangerous and irregular migration through the Mediterranean.

Narin, tightly holding her mother's arm inside their tent home in Bardarash camp for Syrian refugees.Photo: Ahmed Kaka/NRC

Endnotes

1 UNHCR, 'Refugee Education Integration Policy' Available at: https://help.unhcr.org/iraq/en/education/refugee-education-integration-policy-2/

2 Dana Taib Menmy, 'Iraqi authorities deport three Kurdish refugees to Syria' (The New Arab, 17th July 2023). Available at: https://www.newarab.com/news/iraq-deports-three-kurdish-refugees-syria

3 Wladimir van Wilgenburg, 'Iraqi security forces arrest 70 Syrian Kurdish refugees' (Kurdistan24, 18th July 2023). Available at: https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/31976

4 Under international human rights law, the principle of non-*refoulement* guarantees that no one should be re- turned to a country where they would face torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and other irreparable harm. See for example, Article 33(1) of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees
Refugee Convention and Article 3(1) of the 1984 Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

5 Surveys were conducted in six locations: Domiz I and Domiz II, Gawilan, Bardarash, Zakho and Summel.

6 Inter-agency Standing Committee, 'IASC Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons' (5th April 2010). Available at: https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/other/iasc-framework-durable-solutions-internally-displaced-persons

7 UNHCR and UNDP, 'Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP)'. Available at: https://globalcompactrefugees.org/good-practices/regional-refugee-and-resilience-plan-3rp

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