

## **‘Here, I’m a Syrian in Erbil’**

### **Identities and Livelihoods of the Syrian Refugees in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq**

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#### **Introduction**

This article examines the livelihood and identities of the Syrian self-settled refugees living in Erbil city, the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). Although our case analyses a population of only a few more than fifty thousand people (UNHCR 2023),<sup>1</sup> it is worthy of scholarly attention for several reasons. The urban refugees in the KRI are vastly understudied, as they are hard for field researchers and humanitarian organizations to reach. Official statistics on urban refugees are largely unavailable in Iraq. The focus of scholars and aid agencies has been on refugees settled in camps. However, recently urban non-camp refugees have become not only more numerous, but also a focal point of humanitarian organizations and scholars (see, for example, Sanyal 2012).

The scholars analysing interethnic relations in migration studies generally do so in a European context, where refugees and host communities hail from different ethnic groups (see, for example, Lancee and Hartung 2012; Slavnic 2011). Unlike the latter, this chapter analyses a case of intra-ethnic relations, which are more common in Syria’s neighbouring areas. Understanding the integration of Syrians with their host communities is not only vital to assessing the humanitarian situation of the Syrians, but also to understanding the reformulation of inter- and intra-ethnic relations in a sectarian-

ized new Middle East. To curb the reach of the tumultuous Arab Spring in 2011 and keep themselves in place, authoritarian regimes across the Middle East resorted to sectarian narratives. In countries with religious and ethnic diversity, the Shia–Sunni sectarian line was used to prevent the formulation of cross-sectarian oppositions and polarize communities (Matthiesen et al. 2017). Sectarianism coloured trajectories of displacement and return as well. Shiites in Iraq mostly fled to areas inhabited by their co-religionists, as did Sunnis. Returning families in Syria were found to be brought in from the Shiite community of Iraq and Lebanon in place of the displaced Sunnis (Chulov 2017).

Based on original field data – a survey conducted in Erbil in March 2020 (N = 152), key informant interviews with relevant stakeholders and in-depth life story interviews with refugees conducted by the authors in Erbil – this chapter shows that these refugees are in a more dire situation and in more need of protection than most aid agencies think, especially during shocks and crises. Although the permissive policies in place in the KRI have created a favourable market environment where Syrians can access public services, establish business and move freely within the KRI (Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan 2021; Hayes 2018), the lack of legal protection puts refugees up against economic hardship on the ground.

Moreover, Syrians may face differential treatment while receiving services, an aspect that could bring into question the rhetoric of successful assimilation into the host community often touted by local authorities and the UNHCR. However, differential treatment and access to state services is systemic also for Iraqi Kurds in the KRI, due to the pervasiveness of *wasta* and patronage.

Despite sharing a common ethnic bond, Kurdish Syrian refugees in Erbil also often feel a sense of alienation emanating from an othering label of ‘Syrians’ commonly used by the host community. The experience of displacement and the lack of protection have created significant vulnerabilities among the Syrian Kurdish refugees in Erbil. Being Syrian nationals, ethnic Kurds and refugees or displaced persons creates a compounded identity that is different from that of the Kurdish Iraqi host population. This comes into play when Syrians need to access state services and in relation to gender roles.

Importantly, our study analyses livelihood during a period of economic crisis and external shocks in the Kurdistan Region, due to the economic downturn in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region following the decline in oil prices from 2014 and the conflict between Baghdad and Erbil over sharing oil resources. The economy was also affected by the war against ISIS between 2014 and 2017 and the pressure of the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic fallout.

The chapter first reviews the relevant literature and then provides a brief methods section before it turns to an analysis of the socio-economic backgrounds of the Syrian refugees in Erbil in the KRI. Finally, the chapter

examines the relationship between the Syrian Kurdish refugees in Erbil, on the one hand, and the Kurdish Iraqi host community, on the other, in light of our findings and the secondary literature.

## **Background**

The UNHCR, through its operational data portal, puts the total number of Syrian refugees residing in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) at 248,404 individuals, inhabiting Erbil, Dohuk and Sulaymaniyah governorates. Out of the three governorates, Erbil hosts the largest proportion, around half, followed by Dohuk (a third of the Syrians) and Sulaymaniyah (around 10 per cent) (UNHCR 2023).<sup>2</sup>

Prior to the Syrian conflict, the KRI was already attracting Syrian Kurds. Many had come to the KRI for work prior to 2011. The economic prospects in the KRI, enabled through oil sales, and the shared Kurdish culture had prompted many Syrian Kurds to cross into the region through the porous state borders (Dionigi 2018). This amalgam of pull factors along with the start of the conflict might have coalesced to facilitate large-scale movement into the KRI. By 2012, one year after the onset of the Syrian war, around 150,000 Syrian Kurds – that is, a little more than half of those living in the KRI today – had already settled in a refugee camp in the city of Duhok in the KRI (Dudlák 2017). As the conflict intensified in Syria over the next few years, cross-border displacement also picked up. The besiegement of the town of Kobani spurred the influx of thousands more into the KRI in search for safety and security (Bahram 2018; Dudlák 2017). The UNHCR Operational Data Portal shows that the cross-border displacement peaked in March 2015, with numbers exceeding 246,000 Syrian refugees (UNHCR 2023). The number has roughly plateaued ever since, with the latest June 2023 figure registering 262,218 individuals.

Iraq is not party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, nor its Protocol of 1967 (Janmyr 2021), and as such it deals with refugees through the Political Refugee Law of 1971, Law No. 21 of 2009 of the Ministry of Migration and Displacement of Iraq and a memorandum of understanding between the UNHCR and the Iraqi government (Warda and Almajraji 2020: 36; Yassen 2019). Refugee rights, especially economic rights, have in light of the absence of a legal framework been conferred to this population on a *de facto* basis (Petersohn 2022). This reality has produced an unstable legal environment where regulations keep changing and exceptions to formal procedures are granted on a whim.

Syrians living in Iraqi Kurdistan also need to constantly renew their papers: both the asylum seeker certificate from the UNHCR as well as the identification card from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) have

to be renewed yearly with the Kurdish security (known as Asayish)<sup>3</sup> and residency unit (Bahram 2018).<sup>4</sup> The process of renewal is done at the UNHCR compound, which has Asayish and residency units.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, given rifts in administration within the KRI, regulations are believed to ‘constantly change’, and vary in each of the three Kurdish governorates in the KRI (ibid.). Decisions are taken at the governorate level and not at the level of the KRI. Moreover, KRI authorities have self-interest in welcoming refugees to the three Kurdish governorates of Iraq, with regards to the burning issues (with Baghdad) of demographics and control over disputed areas (ibid.). Baghdad, on the other hand, places a heavy emphasis on security in dealing with the Syrian Kurdish refugees.

The Syrian refugees are spread across Erbil governorate, and many are economically self-reliant. Upon registering with the UNHCR, Syrian refugees can undertake economic activities within the private sector, where they tend to occupy reconstruction, wholesale and retail trade industries (Krishnan et al. 2020), sectors avoided by Iraqis (Durable Solutions Platform 2019). The Syrian population appear to be largely engaging with the informal economy and have no access to public employment given statutory confinements (Petersohn 2022).

Few Syrians have a work permit, and important challenges remain concerning full integration into the job market: the need for security approval from the authorities to gain a work permit and the frequent need for personal connections (*wasta*) to secure a job in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan. Moreover, Syrians say that Iraqi employers sometimes do not recognize Syrian qualifications (Durable Solutions Platform 2019). Additionally, Syrian refugees enjoy equal access to public services and goods, including education and health, as the host community (Durable Solutions Platform 2019), although the quality of these services could be improved (Ministry of Planning 2013; World Bank 2016).

Erbil, the capital of the Kurdistan Region, has approximately two million inhabitants (Durable Solutions Platform 2019). It sits on expansive, flat, dry terrain and is considered one of the largest cities in Iraq (Map 3.1). Erbil governorate is considered the economic hub of the KRI and has attracted more than half of the Syrian refugee population in the region. Most of them live in urban areas, and only a fourth reside in camps on the peripheries of Erbil city (Durable Solutions Platform and Impact Initiative 2021). Certain neighbourhoods such as Havalan, Mamzawa and Bahirka appear to have accumulated sizable Syrian populations.

The KRI’s economic downturn starting in 2014 challenged the integration of Syrians in Erbil into the local labour market (WANA 2017). Economic hardship spread across the KRI and Iraq because of the decline in oil prices from 2014 and the conflict between Baghdad and Erbil over sharing oil resources. The local economy was also affected by the war against the

organization of the Islamic State (also known as Daesh) between 2014 and 2017. Arguably, from 2015 onwards, Syrian refugees increasingly found themselves out of work (*ibid.*). Economic vulnerabilities, jobs, income and making ends meet have now come to the fore (Durable Solutions Platform 2019). Furthermore, Erbil is becoming increasingly expensive for everyone, not only for the refugees but for the host population as well. For all these reasons, the refugees have become more vulnerable in recent years.

Compared to Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, the Syrian refugee response in Iraq was somewhat overshadowed by the sheer number of internally displaced people (IDPs). Iraq had 3.3 million people fleeing ISIS in 2015, and around 1.2 million of these came to the KRI, while many of the displaced are yet to return (KRG 2018; IOM 2023). The presence of the IDPs, who are covered by a separate response programme (Redvers 2014), created a more difficult situation for the refugees, and sparked competition for jobs and wages in the private market among refugees, IDPs and members of the host community (WANA 2017; Dudlák 2017; Durable Solutions Platform 2019; World Bank 2015). The insecurity linked to the armed struggle against Daesh, which seized large parts of the areas surrounding Erbil in 2013 and 2014, also strained livelihoods.

In terms of assistance, there is a sense among Syrian refugees in Iraq that humanitarian aid is centred on the refugees living in camps only. According to a senior UNHCR official, formerly based in Erbil, there might be some basis to that claim, although it is mostly because private donations for Eid only take place in refugee camps, where they are more easily organized. The UNHCR indeed has a programme of monthly cash assistance for urban Syrian refugees in Erbil, yet only the most vulnerable receive support (UNHCR n.d.). To become beneficiaries of this programme, refugees need to have a valid registration with the UNHCR and to show documentation that they are vulnerable and need assistance.<sup>6</sup>

## Literature Review

The literature on Syrian refugees in the KRI is in short supply, especially compared with that on Syrian refugees in the wider region. This is not surprising, because Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan all host more Syrians in absolute and relative terms than Iraq.<sup>7</sup> The literature has focused on the issue of legal protection (Kamal and Sadeeq 2014; Janmyr 2021), schooling for Syrian refugees (El-Ghali et al. 2017), the resilience of Syrian refugees (Singh et al. 2015) and the reintegration and future perspective of the Syrian population in Iraq (Durable Solutions Platform 2019). Other studies have examined issues such as gender and host-guest relations. Hayes (2019) mentions that the experience of migration is gendered because Syrian Kurdish men have

often been to Iraqi Kurdistan before as economic migrants, while women arrive for the first time as refugees. Moreover, since men fear conscription in Syria, it is easier for women to go back and forth between Syria and Iraq.

The relationship between the Syrian Kurds taking refuge in the KRI and the fellow Kurdish host population has been analysed from the perspective of intra-ethnic Kurdish relations. Dionigi (2018) argues that KRI officials and the public are to be thanked for avoiding xenophobia and conflict, and stresses that integrating Syrian refugees has been more 'successful' (the job market being one example) than the integration of internally displaced Iraqis has been (*ibid.*; WANA 2017). The historical and kinship bonds existing between the Syrian Kurdish refugees and the host communities in the KRI partially explain this. Additionally, Dudlák (2017) posits that the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has not securitized nor instrumentalized the Syrian refugee issue. The Syrian Kurdish refugees are believed to share national aspirations with their Iraqi Kurdish counterparts.

Bahram (2018) and Hayes (2019), however, show that while many Syrian Kurdish refugees perceived the KRI to be part of their own symbolic homeland, Greater Kurdistan, they were disappointed once they arrived, facing challenges in accessing opportunities and feeling vulnerable. Aiming to fill the void in the literature on refugees in cities and out-of-camp settings, this chapter focuses on the relationship between the host community and the refugees in Erbil city. Building on original data from a mixed-methods study, it updates and explains existing scientific and sociological studies by Bahram (2018), Hayes (2018, 2019, 2020) and Dionigi (2018).

## **Methods and Data Collection**

To capture a detailed picture reflective of the overall conditions of the Syrian refugees in the KRI, we employed a 'mixed-methods' approach. This included a preliminary desk review of existing literature on the Syrian refugees in the KRI, three expert interviews (two on-site and one via Skype), a household survey of 152 respondents and six in-depth interviews with Syrian refugees residing in Erbil. Among the survey respondents, eighty were male and seventy-two were female.

Building on knowledge gained from informal discussions with Syrians and Iraqi Kurds in Erbil, we selected three urban areas in Erbil city widely known for the density of the Syrian population (Map 3.1).<sup>8</sup> Havalan, the most affluent neighbourhood among the three, is to the east of Erbil, adjacent to the one hundred-metre road that circles the city.<sup>9</sup> Proximity to this road and the presence of a thriving economic market in Havalan, reflected in malls and restaurants that dot the area, could have arguably pulled the Syrian Kurdish population to this quarter.

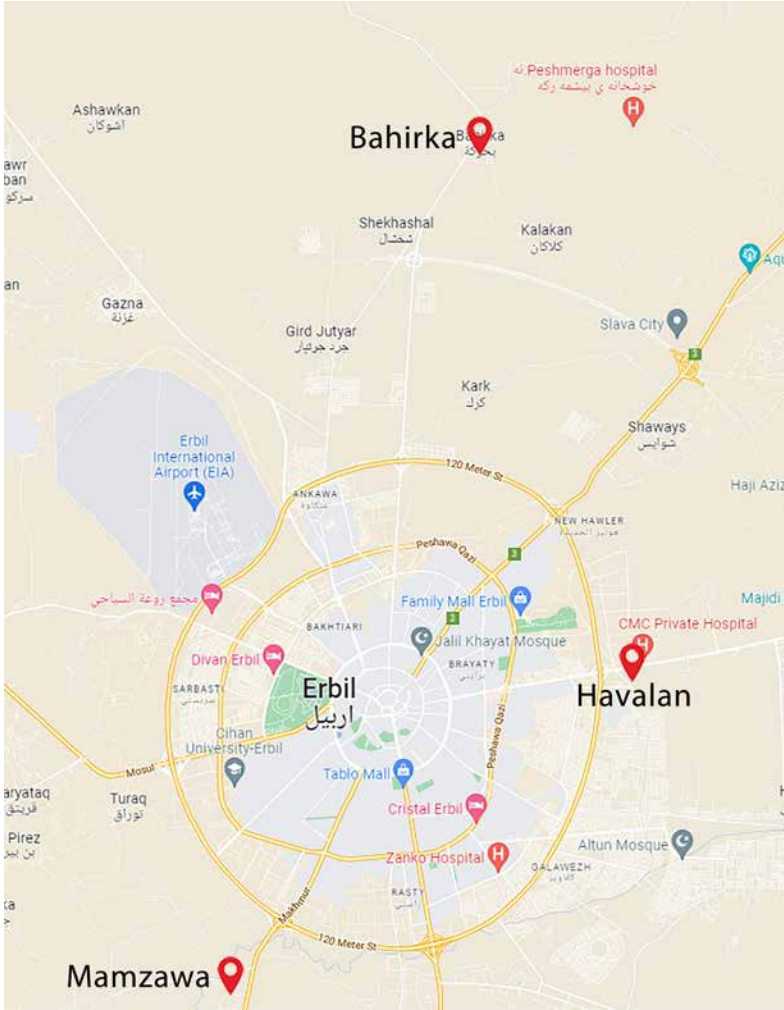
Bahirka, the second area selected for this study, lies to the far north of Erbil city. Given its distance to the city, this area is a subdistrict of Erbil district (Erbil Governorate n.d.) and can be considered peri-urban. The website of Erbil governorate states that the area is largely a flat agrarian terrain with some residential complexes recently built (ibid.). These complexes and the agrarian nature of Bahirka, along with lower rent prices in comparison to other areas in the city, could have coalesced to draw a sizeable Syrian community to the neighbourhood.

Mamzawa, on the other hand, is not as developed as the other two areas in terms of infrastructure. Mamzawa is an intensely populated neighbourhood to the south-west of Erbil. On the outskirts of Erbil city, the area sits on a highway bisecting it into two sections. The inhabitants of Mamzawa are mostly tribal, with low incomes generated through daily labour, selling merchandise or service in the Peshmerga, one of the major armed forces of the KRI. Mamzawa possesses an informal market made up of car repair shops, restaurants and construction factories of cinder blocks, iron bars and bricks. Such merchandise is used for the booming construction industry in Erbil. It is possible that this informal economy and the low rental prices drove Syrian Kurds to Mamzawa. It is also a peri-urban area.

A minimum of fifty households were surveyed in each of these three target areas. After obtaining approval from the authorities, the enumerator teams headed to each target area at a given time and used a method to randomly select Syrian households. After attaining verbal participation consent, they would administer the survey, which took an average of forty-five minutes. Enumerators considered gender representation while selecting survey participants. The survey data yielded significant amounts of descriptive statistics.

Snowball sampling was utilized to recruit the in-depth interview participants, who were initially recruited by the Middle East Research Institute's (MERI) contacts and networks. This technique might have created bias in the sample but was chosen given the difficult fieldwork context. A randomized sample involving GPS coordinates would have been very difficult to obtain with the available resources in this project (for a discussion of sampling and sampling frames, see Fowler 2009). Moreover, the enumerators were unable to access a fourth target location, to which the security forces gravely limit access on the assumption that the Syrians residing there sympathize with the People's Defence Unit (*Yakejankani Parastini Gal*, YPG). Our sample therefore does not reflect the livelihood and concerns of these populations, who are believed to be living under stronger state surveillance and scrutiny.

The first author trained the enumerators, and KoboToolbox software was used while administrating the survey. As our survey was part of a bigger cross-country survey, the survey questions were provided by the PI of the larger project. The authors had influence on how to translate questions but



**Map 3.1.** Map of Erbil city, highlighting Bahirka, Havalan and Mamzawa within the city. Used with public domain permission.

were not able to run a pilot on the ground or to adjust questions after seeing some initial results and weaknesses. We suspect that some unclarity in the formulation of survey questions (especially related to translation issues) might have yielded some unclear results. All data collection activities and materials were made available in both Kurdish and Arabic.

The global coronavirus pandemic was a major challenge during our field-work. The survey and the in-depth interviews were conducted during the



early stages of the lockdown of Erbil in March 2020. The data might reflect the exceptional situation created by the pandemic and the shutdown and might therefore not be representative of the livelihood and the refugees themselves pre-pandemic. For example, many of the refugees we talked to had just recently been furloughed because of the closure of many restaurants. The survey did not pick up these nuances, since in asking about unemployment, it only gathered data about the last thirty days.<sup>10</sup>

Soon after we finalized data collection in Erbil, as a precautionary measure to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus, roads between the cities were shut. Nevertheless, the pandemic did not cause difficulty in accessing the target group within Erbil as restrictions were loosely applied at the start of the pandemic. Most of the participants in the survey were household heads. Being a household head means being the person who holds responsibility for organizing and caring for their family, though not being a household head does not necessarily imply participating in income generation. We believe that interviewing household heads has given us more accurate information about overall conditions because they are often more aware of the family needs and the neighbourhood, given the need to interact with the surrounding environment. However, it could also be a weakness in the data, as we surveyed mostly household heads rather than all members of the households randomly. Our survey therefore reflects the concerns and situations of the household heads primarily.

## **Survey Findings: Who Are the Syrian Refugees in Erbil?**

Our survey data from Erbil indicates that the majority of the Syrian Kurdish refugees living in Erbil city are relatively young, literate and from urban origins in Syria, generally Al-Hasaka Governorate (two-thirds) or Aleppo Governorate (one-third).<sup>11</sup> This is in line with other studies (Petersohn 2022; UNHCR 2022; El-Ghali et al. 2017; Durable Solutions Platform 2019).

Most (eight out of ten) of the surveyed Syrian refugees were married, and their household sizes, at 4.5 members, were smaller than the average of the regional Syrian refugee population in camp settings overall: 5.9 on average reported in 2017 by the United Nations and, reportedly, 6.3 on average among Syrians in Jordan in 2013 (ACTED 2013).<sup>12</sup> All this could indicate that despite their deprivation in Erbil, the refugees we surveyed might actually come from relatively more privileged or educated backgrounds than the general Syrian refugee population in Iraq.

Moreover, most of them (four-fifths) reported never having spent time in refugee camps, but having arrived directly from Syria to Erbil. Out-of-camp settlement seems to have been a choice available to them because they already had family members in the KRI who could help them find ac-

commodation. This finding is slightly different to that of the Durable Solutions Platform (2019) study, which assumes that many refugees moved from camps to Erbil city in search of job opportunities.

The vast majority of the survey respondents were literate and had either completed primary, secondary, high school or tertiary education levels. More than two-thirds of the survey participants lived in Syrian cities and towns before their departure to the KRI, where access to education is easier than in villages. Most of the Syrian refugees in the KRI were attending school prior to their displacement to Iraq (NRC 2013). Syria's overall literacy rate was at around 86 per cent in 2017, a figure comparable to Iraq's literacy rate (Their World 2017; UNESCO n.d.).

The Syrian refugees in Erbil were, as expected, vulnerable in terms of access to income-generating opportunities (see also Durable Solutions Platform 2019). Around half of the male refugees surveyed stated that they were unemployed in Syria prior to their flight to the KRI. This must be interpreted in light of the war and economic hardship that have beset Syria since 2011. The other half appear to have engaged in the local economy in Syria as either unskilled workers, skilled workers, farmers or self-employed workers.

The men we interviewed were mostly unskilled workers, many working as daily laborers in the construction sector. Although many of the Syrian Kurdish male refugees that we interviewed had been skilled workers before they fled to Iraqi Kurdistan, employment opportunities in Erbil were limited for them at the time of the data collection. This could be because 'white collar' or 'high-profile' jobs were hard to come by, and many Syrian university graduates took unskilled work (Durable Solutions Platform 2019).

Only a quarter of the surveyed population had reportedly worked in the last thirty days. Building on our interviews and the secondary literature, we believe that many of the surveyed men had been furloughed due to the coronavirus pandemic, which caused the local economy to nosedive. Our survey was conducted in early March 2020, when businesses had sent their staff on furlough as a measure of mitigation against the pandemic. According to a survey conducted in August 2018, 45 per cent of refugee households in Erbil city had access to an income-generating opportunity, compared to 85 per cent of the host population in Erbil (Durable Solutions Platform 2019).

The negative consequences of the pandemic are reported to have disproportionately affected the Syrian population in the KRI, more so than the host community. Unlike the latter, Syrians mostly engage in the private informal economy with little enforced labour rights, and as the economy buckled under the pandemic and financial mismanagement, they faced furlough, reduced wages and longer working hours. Moreover, they were also forced to resort to coping mechanisms such as taking debts and taking children out of schools (Petersohn 2022). The ability to provide basic needs such as food and shelter was strained, increasing poverty by 21 per cent among

this population (Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan 2021; Petersohn 2022). Financial insecurity appears to be commonplace among the Syrian refugees in Erbil. Three-quarters of the respondents to our survey reported being in debt. Relatives and family members first and foremost, and then shopkeepers, are the most common sources to whom the refugees would resort for loans.

Almost half of the households in our survey from Erbil told us that they had school-aged children. However, around a third of the school-aged children do not attend school. The number of children out of school is lower than the reports from the UN about the Syrian refugee population in Iraq overall suggest, and lower than what our impressions from the in-depth interviews and local newspapers indicate. This is another indication that our surveyed population was *relatively* more privileged than the average. The coronavirus pandemic has considerably worsened the situation since we conducted our survey: Less than half of refugee boys and girls in Iraq enrolled in formal primary and secondary school prior to COVID-19 continued schooling at home after physical school closures (UNICEF 2021).

While reasons for not attending school were not asked about in this survey, we learned from our in-depth interviews that the harsh economic conditions put constraints on the capacity of the Syrian refugees to send their children to school. This is also the case in Lebanon, especially since the 2019 economic and financial crisis. In fact, Petersohn (2022) found that children dropped out of school in response to worsening economic conditions. Although Syrian refugees are entitled to free public primary and secondary schooling, indirect costs associated with education (transportation, stationary, clothing) are difficult to cover in the absence of income.<sup>13</sup> This was clearly visible in the less developed area of Mamzawa, in comparison to Bahirka and Havalan.

Some families also mentioned the language barrier. Syrian Kurds commonly speak the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish, while Sorani is spoken in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah governorates (Hayes 2019: 664). However, at the time we conducted our data collection, in 2020, many Syrians had lived more than eight years in Erbil and had learned the language. Additionally, the qualitative interviews pointed to the poor quality of the public education system, with one respondent noting that 'that it was of no use to send our children to school'.<sup>14</sup> This also speaks to Hayes (2020) and Bahram (2018), who have argued that Syrian Kurdish refugees (and Iraqi Kurds) did not see education in the KRI as the right way to find a good job and secure their own futures, because political connections were more useful than university degrees.

In terms of assistance, a large majority of our survey respondents reported not having received any cash assistance from the UN or other non-governmental organizations nor any family remittance in the three months preceding the survey administration. As mentioned above, support programmes

exist in urban areas in Erbil. Those who stated that they had not received cash assistance might not have been considered vulnerable enough by the UNHCR, or had not all updated their registration with the UNHCR, and this effectively excluded them from becoming beneficiaries. The majority of the respondents reported that they had not received in-kind assistance in the three months prior to the administration of the survey – unsurprisingly, because most handing out of food, clothes and other supplies takes place exclusively in camps; it is simply too difficult to organize in urban areas, where Syrians live alongside the host population.<sup>15</sup> For individuals and organizations wishing to donate something to refugees, for example during Eid, it is easier to give it to a refugee camp manager. Yet the UNHCR has been relatively very present in Mamzawa, one of the areas where the survey was conducted, for example through a community centre for women run by a partner organization.

During our in-depth interviews, most of the refugees stated that they had little knowledge of any organizations able to help them, and they asked us (the authors) for help.

After my arrival [in Iraq], I went to the UN and registered with them and that is it. I started working. The issue is that Syrians do not receive any help unlike what happens in Europe. This is the first time I meet an expatriate. I have not encountered any other international organization at all so far. (Young male Syrian refugee)

Another interviewee said:

When we face issues, we can only rely on ourselves. There is no one to turn to. If you do not have *wasta* [connections], then you cannot do anything. We have no hope here. We remain silent. Listen, we have a contract with the landowner for a year. But now we are being evicted even though the contract is still valid and not yet over. We do not know who to turn to. No organization has ever knocked [on] our door to tell us our rights or help us. The UN is like a labyrinth. Go to them and they keep sending you to different units and at the end you get nothing. (Young male Syrian refugee)

Thus, many refugees expressed uncertainty about who to turn to for help. This might indicate that humanitarian organizations may have more difficulty in reaching urban refugees than they believe. However, it might also be that the refugees expressed frustration that they did not actually *receive* help from the UNHCR. Moreover, shocks and crises related to the coronavirus pandemic have posed disproportionate challenges to the lives and livelihoods of urban refugees.

Our data indicates that most respondents were registered with local Kurdish authorities but not with the UNHCR. We are unsure of the validity of this data, because it is not in line with other sources. In fact, registra-

tion with the UNHCR and with the Kurdish security authorities (*Asayish*) is done at the same place, and both the UNHCR and the Kurdish authorities require registration with the other party in order to validate the registration. It is therefore not plausible that the refugees only register with local authorities – except for those who are registered not as refugees (but through other schemes), but that is a completely different process, and much more costly.<sup>16</sup> Yet more than half of the participants reported not being registered with the UNHCR given delays in registration. The registration process is not lengthy, but the wait to get an appointment is seemingly tedious; for some, it could take up months. The main reason that refugees register with the UNHCR is not to seek resettlement (because only as few as 1 per cent obtain resettlement in a third country); it is because registration with the UNHCR is needed in order to obtain residency in Iraq.

## **Relations with the Host Communities and Implications for the Kurdish National Movements**

Bahram (2018) argues that when arriving in Erbil, Syrian refugees were alienated because Iraqi Kurds often saw them as 'Syrians' (*Suriyakan*), rather than as fellow Kurds. This created a distinction between local and Syrian Kurds and therefore raised a barrier to equal rights and economic opportunities. Hayes (2019: 666) also sheds light on the intra-Kurdish boundaries, regarding which one of the participants stated, 'In Damascus, I was a Kurd. Here, I'm a Syrian, not a Kurd'.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the lack of envisaged economic opportunities and of legal protection strengthened feelings of alienation. It was not only the country of residence, it was above all also the lifestyle and the vulnerability experienced by the refugees that created the feeling of displacement, because of the weakness of the rule of law in Iraq and the country's failure to ratify international refugee law (Bahram 2018). Syrian Kurds in the KRI, facing more limited opportunities than the host population, never felt completely at home, and still expressed a firm intention to return to Syria if the country stabilized (Hayes 2018, 2019).

In our in-depth interviews with refugees, it seemed that gender played an important role in explaining the level of integration. Syrian women we talked to were more likely to express feelings of unease and isolation than male counterparts. Most of the refugees we talked to were of the view that the conservative and restrictive attitude that the host community holds towards women's societal role stands in sharp contrast to that of the Syrians or the Syrian Kurds. As one young girl said:

We do not leave the house much. We stay in. As a girl, I am fearful because I have heard many things. I will not take taxi[s] alone. I have heard a lot. I have

found a Syrian taxi driver who takes me to work and brings me back home.  
(Young female Syrian refugee)

The problem of harassment in taxis is mentioned in the secondary literature (Durable Solutions Platform 2019). During our interviews, the women and girls we talked to all avoided taking taxis. As one Syrian male told us:

Recently, I had to rearrange my working hours to the evening to take my female cousin to a meeting and back to home, because here you cannot trust the taxi drivers. In Syria, women could get out of [the] home alone, nothing would have happened, a girl could travel between the cities of Qamishli and Damascus for 14–15 hours. They would feel OK and comfortable and no problems at all. But here, in five–ten minutes from Havalan to Family mall, they do not feel fine.<sup>18</sup>

The Kurdish women we interviewed said that they were part of the workforce in Syria prior to 2011, but that they were unable to work in Iraq, due to a lack of networks and to cultural and social norms. Many women identified this as a great source of frustration for them, as they felt obliged to stay inside their houses most of the time, without having many contacts in the KRI, an aspect that may explain the stated widespread feelings of loneliness and alienation.

This included women with university degrees from Syria, who said that the historical influence of Marxism on the Kurdish areas in Syria had led to women's emancipation in Syrian Kurdish cities and towns.<sup>19</sup> Conversely, Iraqi Kurds in Erbil are known to often have traditional perceptions about gender roles and look down upon and stigmatize families where women work. Especially in Erbil, which has a more tribal structure than the city of Sulaymaniyah, even women with university diplomas are often expected by the community to stay at home after marriage, though this norm is reportedly changing at a rapid pace.

The stereotype about Syrians in Erbil is that both women and men are employed. According to our interviews, it is often easier for a young girl to find an unskilled job at a restaurant than for an older man. Nevertheless, our survey found that a mere 16 per cent of Syrian women in Erbil city had participated in the workforce in the thirty days preceding the survey administration (approximately one out of six women). Most women (three-quarters) reported being housewives. This finding poses a challenge to the common assumption among the host community in Erbil that Syrian women, unlike women of the Iraqi Kurdish host community, are in the workforce on a large scale.

Moreover, according to statistics, women's participation in the labour force is equally low in Syria and Iraq, at around one-sixth (Sen et al. 2022). This number is similar to the finding of our survey. There are no available statistics on women's participation in the labour force exclusively centred

on women in Kurdish areas of Syria (Rojava), and Kurdish areas in Syria are also diverse in themselves and have been in transformation since 2011. It is still safe to assume that Kurdish women's integration into the workforce has been slightly higher than for Arab women, given the influence of the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the prevalent YPG movement in Syria.<sup>20</sup> However, more data is needed to shed light on gender roles, perceived and real, and how these issues might create barriers between guests and hosts in Erbil city.

It could be that our findings from the in-depth interviews point rather to the isolation of some Syrian women in Erbil, who wanted to work but were unable to find an adequate job. Some, for example a young woman who was recently married, and who had recently joined her husband in Erbil, said that this isolation had seriously affected her mental health.<sup>21</sup> She also said that had she known, she would not have left Syria. She claimed to have been studying in Deir Ezzor literally 'under the bombs' but had arrived in Erbil to become isolated inside a simple apartment and unable to find a qualified job. However, she had arrived just months earlier, and might not have had time to completely settle yet.

## **Host–Guest Relations in Access to Services and Authorities**

Another source of host–guest tension appears to arise from perceived differential levels of access to public services such as health and education. There appears to be a perception among the refugees that public services are not equally extended to the refugee community in Erbil. While the refugees are entitled to the same public services, the interviews suggest unequal treatments and discriminatory practices such as longer waiting hours, denial of services and verbal insults. Syrian young people are entitled to enrol in Iraqi universities, but not if they lack their official education certificates from Syria, which many do<sup>22</sup>. One lady we interviewed chose to go back to Syria for three months to undergo surgery in the city of Qamishly in the north-east, because it was reportedly cheaper there than the equivalent in Erbil<sup>23</sup>. Many services were allegedly not available in the Iraqi public system. She and others said that she sought out Syrian doctors in Erbil privately when needing check-ups and treatments.

Some Syrians said that they were not being paid their monthly wages by the employers (interview, Bahirka, Erbil, March 2020). The authorities, such as the mall administrative office or the police, did little to help them (interview, Havalan, Erbil, March 2020). In one of our interviews, a young Syrian told us that his Syrian colleague had been beaten at his workplace:

Something happened at a restaurant where I worked, they accused someone of theft. They took him to the store and started beating him with a cable. I rec-

ommended him to go to the Syrian consulate and take photos of his bruises. But, eventually, [if] you do not have the connections, you better go home and keep silent.<sup>24</sup>

In another case, a woman we interviewed said that she had been insulted when undergoing a caesarean. Allegedly, hospital staff had asked her why she was having children while she was a refugee<sup>25</sup>. In the same interview, her husband said that being a Syrian made you liable to being accused of crimes in society: ‘As long as you are Syrian, that is it, you are always accused.’ Moreover, he also said: ‘True, we are refugees, but this country has benefited from us so much, we did not stay home and make you feed us, but we are working to do so ourselves.’ Reportedly, the host population in Erbil perceived the arrival of Syrians to have negatively affected the level of safety in the neighbourhood (Durable Solutions 2019). These divergences have given rise to schisms between the host and refugee communities, causing Syrians to form clusters comprised of their own members instead of assimilating with the host community (Kamal and Sadeeq 2014).

However, we also interviewed a Syrian Kurdish refugee who was a lieutenant within a Peshmerga group close to the dominant Kurdistan Democratic Party in Erbil; a separate Peshmerga faction for Syrians exists within the Peshmerga<sup>26</sup>. His descriptions of the Kurdish authorities were much more positive; he reported not being subject to discrimination. He had been involved in politics prior to his flight from Syria. He praised the Kurdish authorities in Erbil, and reported that all his children were enrolled in education and at the university, and that they had received stipends to cover transportation to school<sup>27</sup>. Moreover, the Barzani Charity Foundation had provided help in crossing the border as well as ‘house stuff’ to furnish their rented house.

Other participants in our semi-structured interviews did share with us that they lacked the necessary contacts to obtain access to basic public services. We therefore have some reason to believe that the lack of access to services is not only because of refugee status, but because access to public services in the KRI in general may be facilitated only when connections (*wasta*) are available, a reality that applies even to locals. One strategy that some Syrian Kurds appear to resort to is to say that they are from Rojava (Syrian Kurdistan), rather than Syria, emphasizing their common Kurdish identity vis-a-vis Iraqi Kurds (Hayes 2018).

## Conclusion

The Syrian refugees in the KRI are understudied, and the urban refugees are especially so. This chapter details the socio-economic conditions of the Syrian refugees in the capital of the KRI. Based on a mixed-method ap-



proach with a small-N survey and in-depth interviews, the chapter attempts to identify the demographic features of the Syrian refugees; their interaction with the host community, the local authorities and the relevant international organizations; and their housing conditions. We found that similarly to the case in Lebanon, Syrian school-aged children in Erbil often do not attend school even if school is free, because transportation and other related costs are too high. Unlike in Lebanon, however, Syrians in Erbil seem to have relocated to Iraqi Kurdistan with their entire families, as they do not appear to have large family networks in Turkey or remaining in Syria. Like in Lebanon and Jordan, the Syrian refugees in Erbil work in unskilled and vulnerable jobs. Like in Jordan and Lebanon, most female refugees do not work; they are housewives and report limited mobility outside of their immediate house and neighbourhood.

The chapter has detailed the fact that despite commonalities with the host community and facilitations by authorities, the Syrian refugee community may still be vulnerable and isolated due to perceived discriminatory practices in service provisions, cultural stereotypes and a disconnect with the relevant international organizations. Syrians report feeling particularly alienated when seeking state services. We argue that this might be due to their lack of connections (*wasta*) in a highly patronage-structured society, in addition to their lack of legal protection. Moreover, Syrian women feel alienated as gender roles are reportedly more conservative in Erbil than in Kurdish parts of Syria.

Given their skills, young age and shared sense of ethnic identity, the authorities in the KRI would do a good service if they invested in finding better opportunities to exploit the dividend that the Syrians could bring to the region. Finally, the UNCHR needs to quickly do a better job in reaching the Syrians in Erbil and registering them, to meet at least some of their protection needs.

Nevertheless, the limited amount of qualitative data admittedly does not help to provide a detailed picture of the conditions of the Syrian refugees and their relations with the host community. More in-depth research is needed to better understand how the Syrian population is fairing in the Kurdistan Region and what it implies for intra-Kurdish relations and the Kurdish national movements. Further studies should seek to understand how forced migration in Syria's neighbouring countries not only tilts the fragile sectarian and ethnic balance in the region, but also how the experience of migration, the vulnerability of refugeehood and the relationship between host communities and refugees contribute to reshaping ethnic identities within and across these countries. Finally, further studies could also examine how specific refugee communities are used politically by agile political actors across the Middle East.

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## Notes

1. There are, as of December 2022, a total of 94,574 non-camp Syrian refugees in Erbil governorate (UNHCR 2022). The numbers on how many of them live in Erbil city vary, depending on how the city boundaries are drawn.
2. Nearly all of the Syrian refugees in Iraq are settled in the KRI within the jurisdiction of the Kurdistan Regional Government. This chapter deals exclusively with the KRI response and not with Baghdad's response towards Syrians hosted in other governorates of Iraq.
3. Asayish is the Kurdish Security Organization (intelligence). The word Asayish is Kurdish for 'Security'.
4. Phone interview, former head of UNHCR Erbil office, February 2023.
5. The residency unit is part of the Ministry of the Interior.
6. Phone interview with a UNHCR senior staffer, former head of the Erbil office, February 2022.
7. There are about 3.73 million Syrians in Turkey, 1.5 million in Lebanon, and 672,000 in Jordan (UNHCR 2023).
8. Profiling at the neighbourhood level is no easy task in Iraq, a fact that might explain the scarcity of information about the Syrian population in urban settings.

- Humanitarian and developmental stakeholders are up against this reality when they implement programmes. Information about numbers, profession, family size, place of origin and more can be found at the Asayish. However, the Asayish does not readily share information.
9. The information in the following three paragraphs was gathered by the Middle East Research Institute in Erbil, through their contacts in the areas and with local community leaders.
  10. Another consequence of the lockdown was that we had to cancel our plans to collect similar survey data for Duhok and limit ourselves to the Erbil data only. We conducted a similar survey in Duhok in June 2022, and plan to publish the results in a forthcoming article.
  11. The Durable Solutions Platform (2019) survey also found that the Syrians were from Al-Hasaka and Aleppo governorates. It does not say anything about household size, marital status or literacy levels of the refugees.
  12. Household size is a significant benchmarking factor for several economic characteristics and growth of the refugee population over time (United Nations 2017).
  13. Interview with Syrian refugees in Erbil, March 2020.
  14. Interview with a female Syrian refugee, Mamzawa, Erbil, March 2020.
  15. Phone interview with a UNHCR senior staffer, former head of the Erbil office, February 2022.
  16. Phone interview, former UNHCR head of Erbil office, February 2023.
  17. Hayes's study is based on fifty-three interviews with Syrian refugees (individuals and families) living either in the city of Suleymaniyye or in the Arbat camp in the summers of 2017 and 2018 (Hayes 2019: 662).
  18. Interview, Havalan, Erbil, March 2020.
  19. Interview, Erbil, March 2020.
  20. Interview, Bahirka, Erbil, March 2020.
  21. Interview, Havalan, Erbil, March 2020.
  22. Interview, Havalan, Erbil, March 2020.
  23. Interview, Mamzawa, Erbil, March 2020.
  24. Interview, Havalan, Erbil, March 2020.
  25. Interview, Mamzawa, Erbil, March 2020.
  26. Interview, Erbil, March 2020.
  27. Interview, Erbil, March 2020.

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