

Teenager holding the Kurdistan flag in northern Iraq at sunset time on Nowruz 2019 / © Felix Friebe / Adobe Stock



ESCAPING FROM DUOPOLY RULE

How a Two-party System Drives Iraqi Kurdish Migration En Masse?

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ABSTRACT

Since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) appeared to be a thriving region in the north of the country, even called the “other Iraq” by many. The region experienced considerable economic and infrastructural development after the collapse of the Baath regime, in contrast to the central and southern provinces plagued by economic and security crises. However, when throngs of migrants appeared at the border between Belarus and Poland in November 2021, it came as a surprise to many that the majority of the migrants stranded at the border were Iraqi Kurds. What drove the Iraqi Kurds to migrate en masse? The duopoly rule of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), since the formation of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in 1992, has created a political status quo that has caused widespread disillusionment and has left citizens with little to no hope for economic and political reforms. Importantly, the two parties’ patronage-based economy is no longer able to absorb the majority of its supporters into the labor force. Amidst the absence of any meaningful political and economic reforms, as well as a growing population on the margins of the KDP-PUK client network, Iraqi Kurdish migration to Europe will continue to surge.

INTRODUCTION

It was last September, when I was in Baghdad, that a Kurdish friend called and asked me, “Mera, could you please visit a travel agency there to ask how much the fee for a Belarussian visa is? I have been told it is cheaper there.” A couple of days later, I came back to Sulaymaniyah and visited a café where I work at. At the café, I was looking for Hevar, a waiter, with whom I always had a little chat before starting to work. “Where is Hevar,” I asked one of his colleagues. “Don’t you know? He is in Belarus,” the colleague responded. Later in the evening, I met one of my best friends. “Ah, I cannot wait to get my visa ... everyone I knew has left,” he said. Two of these three persons are now in Europe and the one who asked me about the visa fee broke his leg and could not take the journey.

These three persons, who desired to emigrate, represent a variety of social classes in the KRI, ranging from working class to lower and upper middle classes as well as different educational backgrounds. The first one, who had received a sum of money to fund his journey from his father, did not finish his studies and is jumping from one unstable job to another, with his current occupation as a truck driver, receiving a monthly payment of nearly above \$200. The second one graduated from a public school, but, similar to a vast majority of youth, failed to find a job in his field of study and took a job at a café with a monthly payment of \$450. He utilized his years long savings to fund the journey. The third one finished school from one of the top well-known private universities across the country, with a stable job offering a monthly income over \$2000, which proportionally a tiny elite in the private sector make, but still emigrated.



Men are seen outside the headquarters of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) after it was burnt during anti-government protests on the outskirts of Sulaymaniyah in December 2020 / © Ako Rasheed / Adobe Stock

This opening vignette exemplifies the complex social backgrounds of some of the Iraqi Kurds who have recently tried to migrate to Europe. Moreover, it marks the pervasiveness of the desire to emigrate that has emerged since 2014. Since then, the KRI has gone through a deteriorating economic and political situation, which has fueled the desire to migrate. The region is more polarized than ever since 2003 and the economy is barely offering employment to the influx of youth joining the labor forces. The two ruling parties, the KDP and PUK, have dominated the region since the establishment of the KRG in 1992 and have maintained a “duopoly” over the region’s political system and economy. The KDP’s control over Duhok and Erbil is virtually uncontested while the PUK, notwithstanding electoral challenges, has proven its military and economic supremacy over Sulaymaniyah.¹

With the deterioration of political and economic stability in the Kurdistan Region since 2014, the desire of Iraqi Kurds to migrate to Europe has increased, notwithstanding the legal barriers and treacherous journey many migrants face. This is because the drivers of mass migration present in 2014 have significantly worsened since that time. As a result, as soon as people find an opportunity to leave, an influx of Kurdish migrants arrives at the European borders. This desperation of ordinary Kurds is not only a humanitarian crisis, but it has become a weapon of foreign policy for nations like Belarus who exploit Kurdish grievances to pursue European power rivalries. Therefore, the problem of Kurdish mass migration transcends Middle Eastern regional politics and has become inextricably linked with the problems host governments face closer to home.

Kurds have fled Iraq in numerous waves throughout the 20th century. However, the current wave of migration is unique

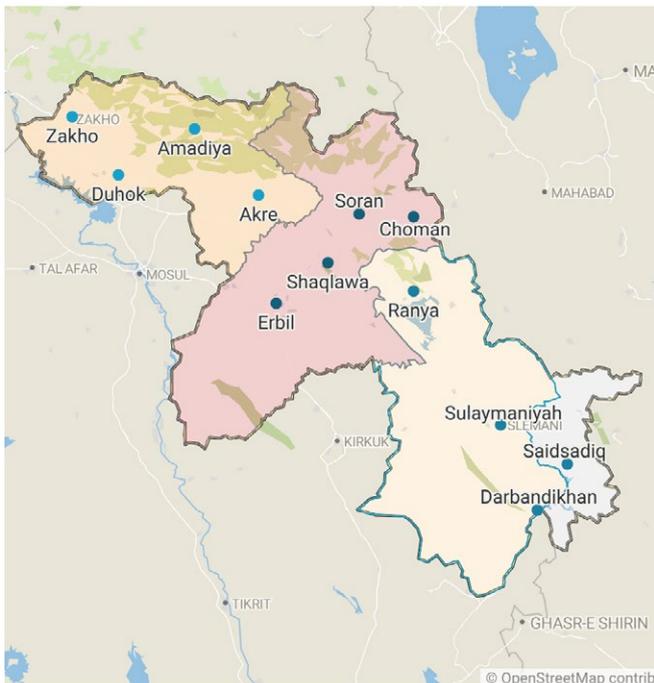
1 Megan Connelly & Mera Jasm, “Iraqi Kurdistan in Context: Disorder Within the New Political Order,” University of Waterloo, April 2021. https://uwaterloo.ca/defence-security-foresight-group/sites/ca.defence-security-foresight-group/files/uploads/files/dsfg_connelly_bakr_policy_brief_special_edition_iraq.pdf

that most Kurdish migrants are not fleeing from war or persecution by a non-Kurdish government. In the 1970s, Iraqi Kurds migrated to Europe, Iran, and the Soviet Union due to the collapse of the 'September revolution'. In the 1980s and early 1990s, many fled political oppression, genocide, and forced displacements committed by the Baathist regime. In the 1990s, extreme poverty as a result of United Nations and Iraqi sanctions on the newly-established Kurdistan Regional Government and the civil war between Kurdish political parties displaced many more and caused them to seek refuge outside Iraq. Yet, the migrant wave since 2014 suggests the failure of a political system that most Iraqi Kurds dreamed of and that many fought for, and, most importantly, that was supposed to protect the dignity of the Kurds, a stateless ethnic group. Kurds strove to create such a state since the formation of the modern Iraq in 1921.

This paper seeks to explain the key reasons behind Iraqi Kurdish migration to Europe. It draws its analysis from 12 semi-structured focus group discussions (FGD) in 12 key areas of the Kurdistan Region from November to December 2021. 94 individuals, of which 25.5% were women, ranging in age from 16 to late 30s participated in the FGDs. Their background included employed graduates, unemployed graduates, university students, government employees (in the education, health, and security sectors), journalists, civil society activists, and political activists. The areas of the FGDs included the three provinces of the region, and, in particular, primary areas of origin of migrants. The locations were as follows:

Erbil Province; Erbil City, Shaqlawa, Soran, Choman; Sulaymaniyah Province; Sulaymaniyah City, Darbandikhan, Said Sadiq, Ranya; Duhok Province; Duhok City, Akre, Amedi, Zakho

The map below demonstrates the areas across the region where the focus group discussions were conducted for this research.



Map: Mera Jasm Bakr - created with Datawrapper

Drawing insights from the FGDs and the existing literature, this report argues that the KDP and PUK's two-party political system, in place since the 1990s, as well as its corresponding clientelist practices produced a socioeconomic and political order that is completely tied to the ruling parties and has caused immense political disillusionment. As financial and ideological ties to these parties diminished through budget cuts and a resulting weakening of patron-client ties, more people have abandoned the ideals of the Kurdish national project and have sought to migrate to Europe.

This paper identifies the following causes of migration from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq after 2014:

1. Kurdish Youth, Marginalized by the Political Parties Amid a Weakened Economy, Seek Opportunities Abroad – The absence of a sustainable economy is the byproduct of the expansion of KDP-PUK clientelism from 2007 to 2014, which depended predominantly on transfers of the KRG budget from the federal government. The resulting economic structure could not keep pace with the rapid growth of the under-30 demographic of the KRI. In other words, while the clientelism consolidated the binary rule of the KDP and PUK, it was incapable of absorbing a growing youth population into the labor force. The exclusiveness of the post 2014 KDP and PUK patronage ties to the elites' business clients, security forces and a senior political cadre has awarded a minority with massive wealth and has neglected the growing population. As a result of their economic marginalization, young Iraqi Kurds seek to migrate to Europe.

2. Disengagement From and Lack of Alternatives to the Existing Political Leadership and Party System – After the collapse of the Baath regime, Iraqi Kurds hoped for socioeconomic and political reforms in the KRI. The Gorran Movement (Kurdish for 'Change'), established in 2009, called for such reforms through civil disobedience, and later, electoral politics. However, the KDP-PUK alliance proved resilient and Gorran's ineffectiveness and internal turmoil led to its decline. Amidst the failure of electoral politics to meet popular expectations, people are left with two options; resistance or emigration.² In recent years, the price of resistance measures including criticism, protest, and political participation has increased, as the KRG responded with repressive measures such as mass arrests and prosecution. Consequentially, migration to Europe became a viable alternative to a diminishing and costly political resistance.

3. Waning Allure of the Kurdish National Project – The profound disillusionment of the Iraqi Kurds originates from a system of self-governance created in 1992 under the reign of the KDP and PUK, which promised to end humiliation and restore dignity among Iraqi Kurds. The system has failed to deliver freedom for all, to consolidate democracy, to guarantee to all the benefits of citizenship, and to provide restitution to those who suffered from the aggression of the former Iraqi regime, and who relied on the promises of the Kurdish national project espoused (and embodied) by the KDP and PUK. As a result, many Iraqi Kurds abandoned the ideals of nation building and migrated instead to express their grievances against the humiliation of their dignity.

2 Kamaran M. Palani, "Youthful Anger and the Crisis of Legitimacy in Iraqi Kurdistan," Al Sharq Strategic Research, 6 January, 2021, <https://research.sharqforum.org/2021/01/06/youthful-anger-and-the-crisis-of-legitimacy-in-iraqi-kurdistan/>

This report concludes with recommendations for the KRG and international stakeholders to deal with the crisis.

THE KRI'S PATRONAGE SYSTEM: THE MAIN DRIVER OF MIGRATION

Zmkan Ali Saleem and Mac Skelton assessed how patronage shapes partisan conflict in the Kurdistan Region in their paper titled *Assessing Iraqi Kurdistan's Stability: How Patronage Shapes Conflict*. Through this lens, I also argue that chronic economic crises since 2014 have diminished the power of the KDP and PUK's strategy to use clientelist practices to secure loyalty and the general welfare. As a result, the relationship between the parties and the population is no longer mutually beneficial; it has financially rewarded a minority political elite, and marginalized the majority. The failure of the patronage system on which most of the population of the KRI relied resulted in a great desire to emigrate.

a. A Multi-Layer Form of Clientelism From 2003 to 2014 Built a Rentier Economy Dependent on Federal Budget Share

A primary reason that drives Iraqi Kurdish migration is the chronic economic crisis the region has faced since January 2014. Since then, thousands of youths are joining the labor force and graduate from universities on a yearly basis, but the vast majority fails to find a job. The KRG's public universities and technical institutes have admitted 167,683 students in the last four academic years, while tens of thousands have also been admitted to the private universities and institutes.³ As a result, 50,000 jobs would need to be created annually to integrate youth into the workforce, according to a World Bank report published in 2016.⁴ The question here is, why are there so few jobs in the region? In essence, the KRI has failed to build an economy that is relatively capable to provide jobs for the growing population, because the post-2003 political structure of the KRI is built upon the two party (KDP and PUK) patronage system.⁵

After the US-led invasion in 2003, the KRI witnessed an economic boom up until January 2014. The peak of this boom took place from 2007 to 2013, during which the region received over \$66 billion from the central government as the KRG federal budget share.⁶ The KRG also generated revenue

from internal regions, including custom border revenue, taxation, and oil exports to neighboring countries through oil trucks. The KDP and PUK utilized this budget to strengthen the bonds of loyalty between the parties and the inhabitants of the areas under their control – the KDP in Erbil and Duhok, and the PUK in Sulaymaniyah. The parties employed many people in the public sector in exchange for their political support. From 2000 to 2013, the number of KRG public employees tripled from 450,000 to 1,400,000,⁷ the majority of which were employed after 2003 – when influx of federal oil income to the regional coffers increased. By 2014, 53% of the region's total labor force was employed in the public sector.⁸ The KDP and PUK employed many of these people in their respective security forces, comprising a regional security sector that receives 42% of the over \$700 million dollars that the KRG pays to public employees every month.⁹ According to a demographic survey of the KRI, conducted by the United Nation Population Fund (UNFPA), two thirds of households in the KRI earn their living on the public payroll.¹⁰

The parties also provided services and infrastructure rehabilitation across the region, targeting areas with large populations of displaced persons such as Germyan and Raparin for electoral advantage. The devastation of the region's infrastructure, especially in rural areas as a result of the Kurdish armed struggle against the Baathist regime in the 1970s and 1980s, the Kurdish civil war in the mid 1990s and the United Nation Security Council's crippling sanctions on Iraq from 1991 to 2003, displaced thousands. These people were left unemployed in urban and peri-urban environments, heavily dependent on the generosity of Kurdish political parties.¹¹

Political patronage also went beyond public sector employment and included the distribution of generous pensions and participation in social welfare programs (housing, business startup and marriage loans, scholarships to study abroad, social securities to unemployed and disabled people, and monthly stipends to students etc.). By 2014, nearly the entire population – 98% of the 5.4 million population – was receiving non-labor public distribution of cash or rations. These were distributed regardless of the size or poverty level of the household. Thus, the populace as a whole benefited financially from this system. In fact, the phenomenon of "reverse migration" spoke to the region's prosperity, as thousands of diaspora Kurds returned to the region between 2010 and 2013.¹²

However, the KRI economy was heavily dependent on its federal budget share,¹³ which was based on national oil income, and it placed little emphasis on developing a viable market economy. Furthermore, with 1.4 million public sector employees out of a population of six million, the public sector relied on its share of the Iraqi federal budget to provide

3 "Students Allowance Between the Ministry of Finance and Higher Education," Draw, 2 December 2021, https://drawmedia.net/page_detail?smart-id=9269

4 "The Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Reforming the Economy for Shared Prosperity and Protecting the Vulnerable," World Bank Group, 30 May 2016, pp 125, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/24706?show=full>

5 Zmkan Ali Saleem and Mac Skelton, "Assessing Iraqi Kurdistan's Stability: How Patronage Shapes Conflict," Institute of Regional and International Studies (IRIS), July 2020, <https://www.uis.edu.krd/iris/frontpage-slider-publications/assessing-iraqi-kurdistan-stability-how-patronage-shapes-conflict>

6 Halmat Mohammed Shkur, "Deep State: Kurdistan Region as a Case Study," Peyserspress, January, 2021, <https://www.peyserspress.com/detail/7266>

7 "Civil Servants Between the Bankruptcy of Kurdistan Region and Baghdad," Diplomatic Magazine, 15 February, 2018, <https://diplomaticmagazine.net/economy/155>

8 World Bank Report pp. 7.

9 Mera Jasm Bakr, "The War at Home: The Need for Internal Security Sector Reform in Iraqi Kurdistan," Middle East Institute, 6 July, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/war-home-need-internal-security-sector-reform-iraqi-kurdistan>

10 "The Demographic Survey of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq," United Nations Population Fund, July 2018, <https://iraq.unfpa.org/en/publications/demographic-survey-kurdistan-region-iraq>

11 Michiel Leezenberg, "Urbanization, Privatization, and Patronage: The Political Economy of Iraqi Kurdistan," The Kurds, edited by Faleh A. Jabar and Hoshmand Dawod, SAQI Books, 2006, pp.151-179.

12 These years among many Iraqi Kurds are known as "The years of infinite money" - "سالی پاره زۆرییه که".

13 Denise Natali, "Iraqi Kurdistan's Silent Revolution," Al-Monitor, 15 August, 2013, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2013/08/iraqi-kurdistan-silent-revolution-barzani.html>

employment to a rapidly growing population. In 2013, the KRI began to independently explore, produce, and export oil, resulting in the complete severance of its federal budget share in January 2014. As a result, the KDP and PUK-led government was immediately faced with the prospect of failing to pay civil servants, on whom they depended for political support, and on reducing employment opportunities. Ultimately, the long-standing practice of securing political support through the civil service hindered the region's ability to develop a viable and independent public sector that could withstand shocks to the oil market.

Young university graduates under the age of 35 have suffered the most from the collapse of the KRI economy. As a result of federal budget cuts, the KRG has been unable to create civil service jobs for the past eight years and instead implemented austerity measures and a "salary savings system" from 2014 to 2019.¹⁴ The goal of these drastic measures was to generate revenues to help the KRI pay its debts to international oil companies, while compensating civil servants' reduced wages. However, the salary savings system was not accompanied by substantial economic reforms that would have led to the creation of job opportunities in the private sector. Furthermore, salaries, pensions, and other benefits were paid intermittently and sometimes not distributed at all for months. Therefore, even if wages and non-labor distributions were paid, uncertainty and confusion about the continuation of these entitlements prevailed.

b. Contracting Client Networks

The economic collapse caused the parties' client networks to contract severely. A system that once either paid the salaries or supplemented the incomes of nearly the entire population of the KRI now benefited the elites' business clients, security forces and senior political cadres. The political elites continued to profit from private business ventures. The KDP and PUK have for long controlled all major industries in their areas of influence, such as the manufacture and import of medical supplies, construction, oil exploration and export among others. The parties also possess large stakes in corporations in exchange for legal recognition and license. Consequently, "a number of the party-affiliated businesses have become multi-billion-dollar operations, generating employment and revenue for party affiliates on a scale that rivals some of the major public sector institutions" (Saleem and Skelton, 2020, p.11). For example, the KDP-affiliated KAR and PUK-affiliated Qaiwan companies own the two major oil refineries in the region. Qaiwan now dominates the construction sector in Sulaymaniyah, as the contractor for the construction of the city's most important public works initiative: the construction of the 100-meter highway. Prime public real estate is also meted out to party shell corporations for the construction of public housing (another

currency of patronage).¹⁵ However, these enterprises do not create sufficient employment opportunities, let alone absorb the youth. As a result, the majority of youth who expected to join the labor force after earning a university degree were left unemployed and without a safety net. Moreover, they received no credible assurances from the government that elder family members would receive salaries and entitlements.



Migrants in Grodno Belarus close to the Polish border in November 2021
© Djordje Kostic / Shutterstock

Party elites' ostentatious displays of wealth and power upset a population suffering from austerity and with few prospects for improvement. Scandals surrounding party leaders' elaborate spending dominated the local media. For instance, prominent MP Ali Hama Salih revealed that the plot of land allotted to a real estate proxy company of a politician in Erbil is worth \$1 billion, and a villa of the residential compound could cost up to \$6 million.¹⁶ This happened at a time when 87% of KRI households lived on a monthly income of less than \$684.¹⁷ The strict administration of their security forces, in particular the internal security forces, remains to be of vital importance to elites to protect their contracting clientelist network and monopoly of violence, allowing both parties to secure political and economic hegemony.¹⁸

The key issue with the KDP and PUK clientelism that drives Iraqi Kurds migration since 2014 is that it has concentrated wealth for a few in highly profitable industries such as construction. The wealth from these enterprises is not redistributed across the broader population through taxation, nor has it been reinvested across industries to enable economic growth and job creation for the youth. Iraq, including the KRI, is among the world's "youngest" nations in terms of population. As of 2021, over half of the country's 40 million citizens are under the age of 25.¹⁹ Due to the concentration of wealth in a few sectors, the private sector employs only about 30% of the workforce.²⁰ Attaining private sector jobs either requires partisan connections

14 The KRG owes over \$10 billion to its public employees as a result of the saving salary system implemented from 2014 to 2019. See: Hiwa Jamal, "KRG owes \$10 billion in back pay to public sector employees," Rudaw, 20 March, 2019, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/interview/10032019>

15 Megan Connelly and Mike Fleet, "Living Apart Together: Decentralized Governance in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq," Institute of Regional and International Studies, November 2020, <https://www.auris.edu.krd/iris/frontpage-slider-publications/living-apart-together-decentralized-governance-kurdistan-region-iraq>

16 See Salih's detailed information on the plot of land here: <https://www.facebook.com/330509840320751/photos/pb.100050509268547.2207520000.4439222766116084/?type=3>

17 According to the report United Nations Population Fund's report, 51% of KRI households live on a monthly income between 500,000 to 1,00,000 Iraqi Dinar (IQD) (\$342 to 684), while the income of nearly 36% of KRI household is less than 500,000 IQD (\$342); only 13% of KRI household make over 1,000,000 IQD (\$684).

18 Mera Jasm Bakr, "The War at Home: The Need for Internal Security Sector Reform in Iraqi Kurdistan," Middle East Institute, 6 July, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/war-home-need-internal-security-sector-reform-iraqi-kurdistan>

19 "Youth are the future: UNDP Iraq celebrates International Youth Day," United Nations Development Program, 11 August, 2021, <https://www.iq.undp.org/content/iraq/en/home/stories/2021-stories/08/youth-are-the-future--undp-iraq-celebrates-international-youth-d.html>

20 United Nations Population Fund's Report.

or advanced skills. A select number of students from top private universities, such as the American University of Iraq in Sulaymaniyah or the University of Kurdistan in Erbil, receive these jobs. By contrast, the majority of public university students lack the required English language proficiency and necessary quality of the education.

Meanwhile, the private sector is present primarily in the Erbil governorate, specifically in the city of Erbil. As of July 2014, 63% of local firms and 73% of foreign firms registered in the region were located in Erbil governorate.²¹ Few private sector employment opportunities exist in the governorates of Duhok and Sulaymaniyah, where migration rates are highest. A lack of opportunity in urban peripheries, where the majority of citizens of the Kurdistan Region live, is evident. There, the private sector is almost non-existent and the public sector employs most residents. Beyond public sector employment, the most common jobs in the peripheries are in restaurants, cafés or tea shops, which pay an average monthly wage of \$200. Iraqi Kurds in these areas also compete with Syrian Kurdish refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) from the other provinces of Iraq, who accept lower wages. In one of the peripheries in Erbil, a cadre from a KDP branch who participated in the FGD, said that a sub-department of a government department will soon be opened. While only ten individuals can be hired, the branch received over 500 CVs. A party support letter is also required from applicants. Thus, only few with ties to the political elite can join the patronage system, which continues to hijack the private sector. As a result, unemployment among educated and uneducated youth has mounted, as 40,000 youth seek to join the labor force every year.

c. Understanding Post-2014 KDP and PUK Clientelism as the Main Driver of Emigration Through the Eyes of People

The failure of the KDP and PUK patronage system has created two distinct social classes in the KRI: the privileged who benefit from party patronage, and those who do not. According to study participants, the majority is excluded from the small circle of elites in the KDP and PUK system, which includes administrative officials, politicians, and their staff and cadres. Accordingly, the masses are “treated as second class citizens while the elite and their sons have dominated and monopolized economic power”, spreading a feeling of alienation, as one participant said. The feeling that Kurdistan, as a homeland, only belongs to a certain number of people increases. Consequently, when the state is no longer inclusive and financially rewards a tiny minority, many consider migration as the only opportunity left.

The wealth gap between the elite and the mass has sharply widened and the elite is perceived to be the KDP and PUK, which are controlled and led by the two-ruling families: Barzani and Talabani. People, especially the youth, have felt

“being deprived of their homeland,” and “the homeland is now the homeland of the politicians.” The sense of economic alienation is also pervasive among the KDP and PUK patronage, thinking that the wealth of the nation is owned by the top elite of the party, not even them as members of the parties. “I am treated as a second-class citizen. Go and have a look in Erbil, like the Italian or English [residential] villages. The children of the politicians come out from their homes and see super markets and swimming pools, and in the other neighborhoods, the children have to play in the dust,” a cadre of the KDP said. A university student from Duhok also stated, “there are two classes now [in Kurdistan] ... one is us, the mass ... the other is the authority and those close to them. They have a better life and the places they go I cannot. They get good jobs ... they have created a circle for themselves, where everything is available.”

Participants were resentful of the economic power of the sons and daughters of the top elite. The perception among them is that although they earn a degree, they cannot find a job and build a future, while simultaneously, in contrast to the children of the elite. “Why does a son of a politician who is even younger than me have a car, and my entire family cannot afford buying a car?”²² a young male participant, who returned from Belarus and works as a street vendor, asked. By contrast, Idris Barzani, 24, the son of the KRI president, sold his shares at the Kurdistan International Bank worth approximately \$35 million²³ in December 2021, a month after the spike of the migration crisis at the Polish-Belarusian borders as well as a month after mass student protests for the resumption of the average \$50 monthly students’ allowance (suspended since 2014).²⁴ The protests, ruthlessly cracked down by the security forces, depict the dire economic situation of KRI students as they recited revolutionary poems about “the revolution of the hungry stomachs.”²⁵

Moreover, since 2014 the KDP and PUK have financially rewarded security forces, primarily the internal branches, to secure their loyalty to the exclusive patronage network. This creates the impression among the rest of the population that security forces’ members are superior. “My dad had been serving as teacher since 1970s and he was awarded with a plot of land that was worth of \$3,000, while a military commander of the KDP, who was his student in the past, was given with a plot of land that was worth \$40,000,” an activist from the province of Duhok said. Another participant who was a teacher said, “my cousin, who is a military commander, became sick. They called his family from the top of the party and said whatever can be done to save his life, we will do it ... I swear [to God] if I become sick, no one will care about me.” In other words, preferential treatment of the elite triggers the resentment of ordinary people. Unlike prior to 2014, the father can no longer depend on the government for his

21 “Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Economic and Social Impact Assessment of the Syrian Conflict and the ISIS Crisis,” World Bank Group, February 2015, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/21597?locale-attribute=en>

22 The need to purchase a car for people in the countries Iraqi Kurds desire to immigrate to might seem quite unnecessary with the presence of well-established public transportations. However, in the KRI, in the absent of public transportations, vast majority of people need to have a car to carry out daily tasks. And the most basic decent car costs approximately \$10,000, that means someone with a salary of \$300 needs almost three years to be able to own a car, if he does not spend a cent.

23 See the receipt here: <https://twitter.com/KurdistanWatch/status/1474326583485906958/photo/1>

24 Wladimir van Wilgenburg, “Iraqi Kurdish students threaten more protests if government reneges on funding,” Middle East Eye, 14 December, 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iraq-kurdish-students-pledge-protests-government-reneges-funding>

25 The students’ demonstrations were quite new in that, firstly, they were led by youth and, secondly, they had a strong presence of female participants, thirdly, rejected the inference of any political parties, including the New Generation Movement, which electorally became the third party after the KDP and PUK in the last federal elections. See the video here: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=saved&v=441790897559484>

mortgage, nor can the teacher seek financial relief to pay for medical treatments. As a result, the post-2014 KDP and PUK clientelism eroded the notion among citizens that there is a state for everyone.

FROM HOPE FOR REFORM TO MIGRATION: THE LACK OF POLITICAL ALTERNATIVES AT HOME

Political pluralism arrived in the Kurdistan Region with the liberalization of the electoral system and the emergence of a powerful opposition party. However, popular disengagement from politics combined with a low voter turnout indicate widespread disillusionment with ostensibly democratic processes. Citizens no longer believe that their participation in the political system will lead to substantial economic and social reforms. The persistence of the political status quo of two-party rule, despite the emergence of a popular opposition movement called 'Change' that challenged the ruling parties in elections, causes apathy. The resulting disengagement from politics contributes to the desire for migration to Europe, where socioeconomic and political values are ostensibly protected.

This section provides a chronological transition from the hope for reform to migration. It focuses on the rise of the Gorran Movement to the collapse of trust in civic struggle to bring about change, and concludes with the rise of political prosecution and marginalization in the KRI.

Gorran Movement: The Hope for Reform

Since its establishment in 1992, the KRI has been ruled by the KDP and PUK, who have shared control over the economy, territory and a monopoly on violence. Soon after the US-led invasion, popular resistance against the duopoly mounted. In 2006, Kurdish media revealed the two parties' rampant corruption, lack of transparency and political power-sharing. Consequently, people took to the street and violent demonstrations followed.²⁶ However, the establishment of the Change Movement in 2009 consolidated popular grievances into an opposition movement, aiming at challenging and unseating the duopoly rule of the KDP parties through electoral politics.

The vast majority of people who opposed the KDP and PUK placed their hope in Gorran to transfer their demands into actual reforms on the ground. The movement, founded by the charismatic and former leader of the PUK, Nawshirwan Mustafa, secured 25 seats out of the 100 seats of parliament in its first participation in the 2009 regional elections, while the KDP and PUK's united list, called Kurdistan List, won 59

seats.²⁷ Popular resistance and the Arab Spring resulted in widespread demonstrations led by Gorran in 2011, in particular in the PUK sub-region, which were also the main base of Gorran. Demonstrations lasted for over 60 days despite mass crackdown, killings and violence against protestors.²⁸ Intellectuals, writers, political activists and ordinary people met and called for reforms at the Freedom Square in Sulaymaniyah.

The movement created hope for a new and old generation who followed the Gorran leaders in opposing the KDP-PUK duopoly. Gorran soon became the vanguard party for reforms. Its influential leaders, including key former PUK military commanders and chief intelligence, led mass demonstrations and confronted the KDP and PUK in parliament and even threw bottles at the KDP speaker of parliament. In the 2013 regional elections, the movement won 24 seats, while KDP and PUK separate lists won 38 and 18 seats respectively, making Gorran the second most powerful party.²⁹ Expert on Iraqi Kurds and former Assistant Secretary at the US Department of State, Denise Natali, called this aspiration to shake the binary power structure "a silent revolution"³⁰ in 2013.



Kurdish demonstrators gather during a protest over unpaid salaries of the public servants by the Iraqi Kurdish regional government in Sulaimaniyah in December 2020 / © Ako Rasheed / Adobe Stock

Duopoly Rule Overcomes Political Pluralism

As the leading opposition movement, Gorran decided to join the new regional government in 2014, forming an alliance with the winner of the elections, the KDP. On paper, Gorran's government participation aimed to deliver on promises made to constituents. However, the KDP and PUK refused any reform that would threaten their hegemonic rule. In 2015, a fierce political contestation between Gorran and the KDP ensued over the KRG's Presidency Law, with Gorran demanding the implementation of a parliamentary system, similar to that of Federal Iraq. As a result, the KDP, which sought to keep President Masrour Barzani in office notwithstanding the legal conclusion of his term, closed the parliament and dismissed Gorran's ministers from the

26 Robert F. Worth, "Kurds Destroy Monument in Rage at Leadership," New York Times, 17 March, 2006, <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/17/world/middleeast/kurds-destroy-monument-in-rage-at-leadership.html>

27 KRI parliament has an additional 11 seats allocated to minorities.

28 Tim Arango and Michael S. Schmidt, "Anger Lingers in Iraqi Kurdistan After a Crackdown," New York Times, 18 May, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/19/world/middleeast/19iraq.html>

29 Kristina Bogos, "Analysis: Looking Back on the 2018 Kurdish Elections," Institute of Regional and International Studies, March 2019, https://www.ais.edu.krd/iris/sites/default/files/Analysis_Looking%20Back%20on%20the%202018%20Kurdish%20Elections_March%202019.pdf

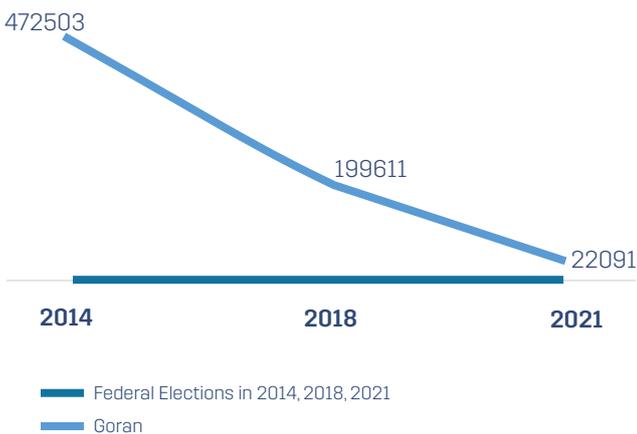
30 Denise Natali, "Iraqi Kurdistan's Silent Revolution," Al-Monitor, 15 August, 2013, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2013/08/iraqi-kurdistan-silent-revolution-barzani.html>

government.³¹ Since then, the KDP and PUK have either tried to punish or co-opt Gorran to eliminate potential threats against the duopoly role.³² For example, the KDP included Gorran in the new government under the disguise of promises of real reforms, although the movement lost half of its seats in the 2018 regional elections compared to that of 2013. However, the intention was to eliminate any threats the movement could pose to the new government led by Prime Minister Masrour Barzani.

Gorran's expulsion from the government, its dependence on ruling parties and intra-party rivalry³³ demonstrated the movement's failure to act as a viable alternative to KDP and PUK rule, and crushed hopes that a civic movement could change the political system. Eventually, Gorran's credibility faded and it lost 96% percent of its votes in the federal elections of 2021 compared to that of 2014. This defeat deprived the movement of any seats the Iraqi Council of Representatives for the first time since 2009.³⁴

The following graph shows the free-fall decline of Gorran's votes in the last three federal elections in the KRI

GORRAN'S VOTES WITHING RHE KRI PROPER IN THE LAST THREE FEDERAL ELECTIONS



Consequently, Gorran's opposition through electoral politics has failed to transform the system. The failure to bring about change has resulted in apathy and certainty about the continuation of the status. Concerningly, people now think that voting for an opposition group – be it the Islamists or the seculars – would simply install a new group that benefits from the system. As one FGD-participant explained, "elections are hopes for change, but they do not constitute changes [here] ... we have backed opposition movements since 2009, we elect qualified people, but we cannot make changes ...

Elections have failed to create change." Thus, while 58% voter turnout of the 2018 regional elections was the lowest in the history of KRI's regional elections since 1992,³⁵ the upcoming regional elections [expected to take place on October 1st this year], will most probably record another historic low turnout.

POLITICAL MARGINALIZATION: THE PEOPLE VERSUS THE AUTHORITIES

The failure of electoral politics and peaceful demonstrations to challenge the binary rule of the KDP and PUK have made people, especially youth, believe that they are marginalized and deprived of political participation. The two parties' grip has created the impression that two opposing classes exist, "the people" and "the authorities."³⁶ Given the high cost of protest, many believe migration remains the only viable option for Kurds seeking financial stability, security, and dignity.

The quasi-family rule of the Barzani's and Talabani's in the KRI has vanished hopes for people and youth that they could have political ambitions. The highest positions of the state and political institutions have been dominated by both parties. In addition to head of the KDP and PUK, the region's presidency, premiership, deputy premiership and security chancellorship have been occupied by members of the two families. Consequentially, participants of the FGDs explained that it is the families who are entitled to leadership and governance in the KRI, explaining that the transfer of power only happens within the circle of the two families. "It does not matter how qualified, skilled and educated you are, certain positions are already allocated to an elite, you already know who is the president and prime minister in the years to come ... It is allocated by blood, not merit ... or you have to be the son or daughter of a martyr ... you have to be born into an elite family," an interviewee said.

Moreover, the political marginalization of the people and their resistance to the binary rule of the KDP and PUK are clearly reflected in the results of the elections. In other words, both parties are losing the legitimacy of electoral representation of the population. While the situation is slowly deteriorating for the KDP in its sub-region, it is obviously collapsing for the PUK. In the last federal elections held in October 2021, the KDP won 16.6%³⁷ and the PUK 6.1%³⁸ out of the 3.4 million eligible voters throughout the three provinces of the Kurdistan Region, meaning 77.3% (2.6

31 Isabel Coles, "Political crisis escalates in Iraq's Kurdistan region," Reuters, 12 October, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-kurds-idUSKCN0560HX20151012>

32 Zmkan Ali Saleem and Mac Skelton, "Protests and Power: Lessons from Iraqi Kurdistan's Opposition Movement," 10 November, 2019, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2019/11/10/protests-and-power-lessons-from-iraqi-kurdistan-opposition-movement/>

33 Fazel Hawramy, "Iraqi Kurdistan's Movement for Change faces rebellion from within," Al-Monitor, 9 July, 2018, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2018/07/change-movement-nawshirwan-mustafa-kurdistan-iraq.html#ixzz7QQSW7jqd>

34 "Gorran Movement in front of Voters," Draw, 18 October, 2021, https://drawmedia.net/page_detail?smart-id=9034

35 Kristina Bogos, "Analysis: Looking Back on the 2018 Kurdish Elections," Institute of Regional and International Studies, March 2019, https://www.uis.edu.krd/iris/sites/default/files/Analysis_Looking%20Back%20on%20the%202018%20Kurdish%20Elections_March%202019.pdf

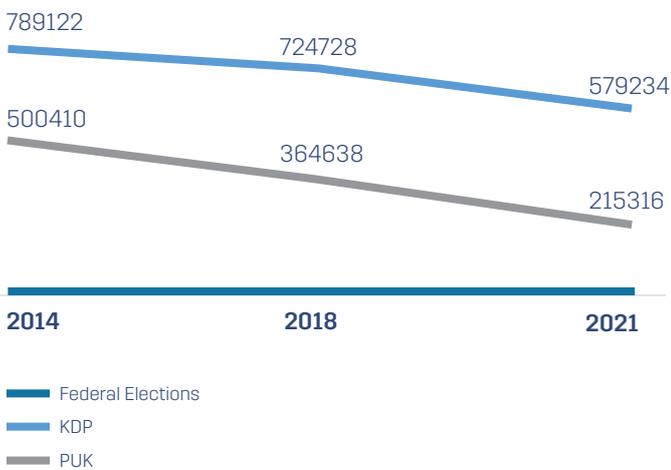
36 This sub-section builds on a paper published by a Kurdish scholar, Kamaran Palani, titled, Youthful Anger and the Crisis of Legitimacy in Iraqi Kurdistan. See: Kamaran M. Palani, "Youthful Anger and the Crisis of Legitimacy in Iraqi Kurdistan," Al Sharq Strategic Research, 6 January, 2021, <https://research.sharqforum.org/2021/01/06/youthful-anger-and-the-crisis-of-legitimacy-in-iraqi-kurdistan/>

37 "Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in front of Voters," Draw, 18 October, 2021 https://drawmedia.net/page_detail?smart-id=9033

38 "Kurdistan Democratic Party in front of Voters," Draw, 18 October, 2021, https://drawmedia.net/page_detail?smart-id=9032

million of that 3.4 million eligible voters) did not vote for the KDP and PUK. Together with 22.7% votes of the total voters, they are representing less than a quarter of the population. Moreover, the KDP lost 26.5% and the PUK 56.9% of their votes, comparing the number of the votes the two parties won in the federal elections of 2021 to that of 2014. The sharp decline of the KDP-PUK happened despite that 769,705 individuals have become eligible voters in the federal elections of 2018 and 2021.

KDP AND PUK VOTES WITHIN THE KRI PROPER IN THE LAST THREE FEDERAL ELECTIONS



State of Fear: Political Prosecution to Eliminate Resistance

One of the factors cited as a motivation to migrate is fear of political persecution. In recent years the KRI has dominated headlines for its violations of citizens' civil and political rights and their freedom of expression. KRI authorities have suppressed protest and ordered the pre-emptive arrest of organizers.³⁹ Many journalists, activists and dissents have been detained. Every KRI citizen is familiar with the case of journalists and activists from the Badinan area that have been detained for over two years. Five of them were sentenced to six years imprisonment on vague charges of endangering national security.⁴⁰ However, the KRI president, KDP's Nechirvan Barzani, issued a decree to reduce the sentences of five activists and journalists to 60%.⁴¹ The reduction of the sentences by a mere presidential decree creates the impression that the judiciary branch is under the dominant influence of the KDP and PUK,⁴² and leads people to believe that the authorities are above the law and legislature.

The recent years' arrest and crack down on protesters have induced fears of a witch hunt against dissents, their family members, and their associates. A university graduate and political activist in Zakho explained, "when you see that today someone is arrested for his criticism, you fear that the next day it will be your turn." Political prosecution makes activists pay for their resistance. Many participants mentioned how one could be arrested and interrogated as a result of statements made on Facebook. "I once posted on Facebook at 10:30 PM and after three hours, my house was surrounded by Asayish security forces. I was detained for two days and three nights," one activist said. Another participant explained that he posted something on Facebook and the day after he was called by the Asayish to visit them and was interrogated for hours. The Asayish's quick reaction shows the excessive surveillance of social media platforms by the KDP and PUK security institutions.⁴³

Arrests, detentions and surveillance have created a climate of fear that intelligence agents of the two parties could be anywhere. This assumption is more common in the KDP areas than in PUK regions. In Erbil, every taxi driver is suspected of being an agent and political discussions with them are avoided. The agents are tasked with finding and reporting people who criticize the authorities. "I suspect that there is an agent even in this discussion," a graduate from the KDP's controlled town of Soran in Erbil said, while freedom of speech was being discussed. A young male, working in the humanitarian sector in Erbil, said, "there is no freedom of speech here because you always fear that someone is listening to you, who would put you in trouble." Such fear has led to a situation where individuals do not feel secure discussing politics in a public space, or even when they are with people whom they know.

In addition, mass crackdowns have put severe prices to demonstrations as a form of resistance to the system. In PUK controlled areas, where protests were regular, PUK security forces killed and injured dozens of demonstrators in a militarized crackdown in December 2020, after the government declared a state of emergency.⁴⁴ Organizers were arrested and armored vehicles spread fear and intimidation.⁴⁵ Demonstrators have been arrested en masse and even the intention to stage a protest could result in one's arrest, as a pattern of arrests targeting organizers prior to the planned demonstrations has emerged. Concerning last November's student demonstration, a teacher and activist from a town in Duhok said, "my nephew was detained along with another 65 students only because they had the intention to arrange a demonstration." Detention for Facebook posts, being spied on by agents and being arrested for participation in demonstrations mean that resistance to the political system has become a politically costly act and enhanced the appeal of migration.

39 Belkis Wille, "Kurdish Authorities Clamp Down Ahead of Protests," Human Rights Watch, 19 May, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/19/kurdish-authorities-clamp-down-ahead-protests>

40 "Iraqi Kurdistan sentenced 5 journalists and activists to 6 years in prison," KirkukNow, 16 February, 2021, <https://www.kirkuknow.com/en/news/64901>

41 Dilan Sirwan, "Presidential decree reduces Duhok detainees' sentence by 60 percent," Rudaw, 23 February, 2022, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/230220221>

42 Kamal Chopani, "Judiciary in Kurdistan Region in Peril," The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 11 January 2019, <https://timep.org/commentary/analysis/judiciary-in-kurdistan-region-in-peril/>

43 Megan Connelly, "Social Media, Youth Organization, and Public Order in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq," Youth Identity, Politics and Change in Contemporary Kurdistan, edited by Shivan Fazil and Bahar Baser, Transnational Press London, 1 September 2021, pp. 47-73.

44 Shelly Kittleson, "Dozens killed, injured in Iraq's Kurdistan Protests as some consider leaving," Al-Monitor, 11 December 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2020/12/iraq-kurdistan-sulaymaniyah-protests-economy.html>

45 See the picture of the Humvees stationed in front of Sulaymaniyah's governorate building here: https://www.facebook.com/198465916860619/photos/pb.100050467901097-2207520000_/5100842349956260/?type=3

**“You Cannot Take Their Power Away With a Pen”:
From Demanding Reform to “Complete Change of
Order”⁴⁶**

As an elite that monopolizes political and economic power remains in place, disillusionment with the system, political antagonism and violent radicalization of the youth are on the rise in the KRI.⁴⁷ People are rhetorically more hostile to the elite and have resorted to violent demonstrations against the status quo under which youth unemployment, frustration, polarization, corruption and perceptions of injustice have been mounting.⁴⁸ Since late 2017, protests repeatedly turned violent, as protesters attacked headquarters of all political parties in the PUK controlled areas, in addition to setting governorate directorates such as traffic police and a public library in Sulaymaniyah’s Peramagron town on fire. Last November, students set fire to the PUK headquarters in Sulaymaniyah and attacked riot police forces.

Violent demonstrations show a shift from reform through elections and civic engagement to severe disillusionment and contempt for the system as a whole. Demands for a complete change have replaced calls for reform, as many believe that only a revolution can alter the status quo.

This sentiment was also pervasive among participants of the FGDs. Asked about an alternative solution to initiate changes, many claimed that reform within the system is not possible. A revolution must overthrow the whole system. “The mere alternative for the disillusionment is either leaving the country or staging a revolution,” said a lawyer from a town in the PUK sub-region. The fact that the two ruling parties originated in guerrilla organizations in the mountains⁴⁹ and staged an armed struggle against the former regime legitimates the idea of armed struggle over civic means: “They came to power from the mountains through an armed struggle; you cannot take that power from them using your pen,” said a master student from the KDP controlled city of Erbil.

THE QUEST FOR DIGNITY

Participants of this research connected the desire for migration to the current socioeconomic inequalities in Kurdistan. The Kurdish struggle for national liberation throughout the 20th century exposed the entire nation to oppression and violence from the successive Iraqi regimes. However, Kurds as an ethnic group are no longer perceived as facing the same destiny. Those who rule the KRI enjoy economic and political power. As former leaders of the armed struggle against the Baath regime, they believe they are entitled to rule, forgetting about the role of ordinary Kurds in successive collective struggles for self-rule and recognition. The latter now believe that “they are deprived of their homeland.”



People departing from Erbil International Airport / © Thomas Koch / Shutterstock

The establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government in 1992 promised that all who participated in the struggle for liberation would benefit from the new polity. However, the political system has failed to meet its guarantees under the social contract. Many increasingly question their participation in an ideal that has not provided them with prosperity or stability. “Your dignity is humiliated. It is not only about the public sector but also the private sector, because the companies also belong to them [KDP and PUK]. Everything now belongs to them. See they are occupying Erbil and Sulaymaniyah [referring to the valuable pieces of land in both cities by the proxy companies of the two parties],” said a FGD-participant and journalist from Sulaymaniyah. Ironically, a system created to protect Kurds from prosecution has reproduced patterns of oppression. Disrespect and unjust treatment at the hands of non-Kurds is now carried out by Kurds. A female accountant from the town of Said Sadiq in the Sulaymaniyah Governorate, which has experienced consistent violent demonstrations in the past years, stated “the government disrespects you, unjustly imprisons you, makes accusations against you ... these create uncertainty in your psychology that encourages you to move to a country that respects you and that does not do unjust to you.”

While the KDP and PUK have adopted a narrative of victimhood and idealize the Peshmerga forces and families of martyrs in the Anfal campaign (Anfal was a genocidal campaign by the Baath regime in which it killed 182,000 Kurds) for mass mobilization, economic marginalization of the affected areas continues. Mass migration from Sulaymaniyah’s town of Ranya, which sparked the uprising to expel the Baathist regime from the Kurdish region in 1991, speaks to the degree of unresolved issues of restoring dignity.⁵⁰ The failure of the KRG to repair and redress the dignity of Iraqi Kurds has gone so far that a person from Halabja, whose family members were gassed to death by

46 Palani’s Paper.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Kerem Can Uşşaklı, “Securitizing Citizenship and Politicizing Security in Iraqi Kurdistan,” Middle East Research and Information Project, Summer 2020, <https://merip.org/2020/08/secuitizing-citizenship-and-politicizing-security-in-iraqi-kurdistan/>

50 Samya Kullab, “Iraqi region hit by migrant deaths; smuggling big business,” Associated Press, 3 December 2021, [10](https://apnews.com/article/iraqi-kurds-seek-smugglers-despite-migrant-deaths-eb643df8dfda9f3ab54d6e5cd8726e46; Holly Johnston. “Leaving Every Night’: Kurds still determined to reach UK after Channel Tragedy,” New Statesman, 13 December 2021, https://www.newstatesman.com/world/middle-east/2021/12/leaving-every-night-kurds-still-determined-to-reach-uk-after-channel-tragedy; Martin Chulov, “Channel drownings unlikely to slow exodus from Iraqi Kurdistan,” Guardian, 26 November 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/26/channel-drowning-unlikely-slow-exodus-from-iraqi-kurdistan-dangerous-journey-europe_</p>
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Saddam Hussein, stated on the 34th anniversary of the chemical attack of the city on March 16, 2022, that he forgives Hussein because his government was better than the “humiliation by the [KDP and PUK] government.”⁵¹ This is not to mention that the people of Sulaymaniyah’s district of Chamchamal, designated by the KRI parliament as the capital of Martyrs and Anfal, stopped the KRG’s minister of Martyrs and Anfal Affairs from giving his speech on the 34th anniversary of Anfal in the town on April 14, 2022 and expelled him.⁵²

Many describe this sense of humiliation and connect it to their desire to leave the region. “Every time when I was arrested, I was humiliated because the dignity of individuals in this country [referring to KRI] is not protected. When I am humiliated and kicked in a country, I seriously do not see that country as the homeland of mine. I will leave every piece of it and will move to a place where my dignity is protected,” said a young lawyer and civil society activist from the city of Sulaymaniyah, who was detained several times in the past. Evidently, the KDP-PUK-led system has not lived up to its promises.



Migrants seeking shelter in a logistic center in Belarus close to the Polish border in November 2021
© Djordje Kostic / Shutterstock

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The Iraqi Kurds emigration wave is ongoing, only contained by strict barriers of reaching Europe. The political and economic situation continues to deteriorate and drive migration. The multi-layer and inclusive patronage system of the KDP-PUK hindered the establishment of the pillars of an economy independent of oil from 2003 to 2014. Moreover, clientelism since 2014 has hindered any real economic reform and private sector expansion. The waves of youth annually joining the labor force will continue to drive unemployment across the region and incentivize migration. In addition, increasing political prosecution on behalf of the KRG will drive disappointment in a system that was supposed to repair dignity under a shared homeland, which generations fought for. The greater that feeling grows, the greater the desire for emigration. As a result, the KDP-PUK-led KRG and EU members states should take the following steps to deal with the migration crisis.

1. Private Sector Expansion Must Absorb the Youth and Reach the Periphery

KDP and PUK shall allow the private sector to expand beyond certain lucrative industries and move toward private sector diversification that stretches from the city centers to peripheries. Inclusion of the peripheries in future investments in the region is a must to address the migration crisis. The government could call upon investors across the region to step in and establish factories and companies, and provide them with certainty that their business will not be hindered by partisan barriers and interventions. This also requires authorities to let go of their sector monopoly.

2. KDP and PUK Political Prosecution Must End

The KDP and PUK cannot perpetually suppress popular resistance, as this will make the region more prone to mass violent demonstrations, instability, and youth radicalization. The government must communicate and interact with the populace to understand their concerns. Both parties must recognize that their political hegemony does not equal stability and legitimacy. They must realize that the durability of their duopoly rule is at stake, considering, consistent diminishing electoral support and increasing political disillusionment. Newly eligible voters could eventually pose serious challenges to KRI rule and electoral legitimacy. Forceful continuation of the current system plants the seed of instability in the region. Both parties must adopt structural political reforms that would address the current issues and

51 Watch the video here: https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=search&v=451486213440438&external_log_id=d7aed1ba-39ea-4f6a-aca6-8cb3bd85c9a2&q=nas%20-%20kurd

52 Watch the video here: <https://www.facebook.com/NasKurd/videos/308821308060709/>

convince the youth abandon protests, they must transform themselves and meet popular demand for socioeconomic and political changes.

3. The KRI Social Contract Must Be Restored

The KDP and PUK must realize that they are no longer the two parties that mobilize the majority of the Iraqi Kurds – as in previous decades. Their reign has failed to live up to the social contract, with a special deterioration of their legitimacy in the eyes of people since 2014. In the last eight years, the political and economic marginalization of the people and the ostentatious wealth of party leaders and their children have distorted the belief that Kurdistan as a homeland belongs to all. Eventually, the KDP and PUK must pursue policies that address the core issue that has led to the profound disillusionment in the system and restore the social contract between the elite and the people. This requires genuine political will to formulate policies aiming at transparency, accountability, and general economic and political reforms. It is important for both parties to understand that pursuing policies to bring about meaningful political and economic reforms might be costly to their power within the elite in the short term, but will help them restore their trust amongst the populace in the long term.

4. International Stakeholders and the EU Must Put Pressure on the KDP-PUK

International stakeholders and EU member states must realize that the Iraqi Kurdish desire to migrate to Europe has not ended, as the populace lacks political and economic security. EU member states should put effective pressure on the KDP and PUK to carry out socioeconomic and political reforms. Their pressure on both parties must aim at implementing the above-mentioned policy recommendations.

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