

Engaging Diasporas in Development and State-building: The Role of the Kurdish Diaspora and Returnees in Rebuilding Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Baser, B.

Author post-print (accepted) deposited by Coventry University's Repository

Original citation & hyperlink:

Baser, B 2019, 'Engaging Diasporas in Development and State-building: The Role of the Kurdish Diaspora and Returnees in Rebuilding Kurdistan Region of Iraq' *Ethnopolitics*, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 76-91.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2018.1525167>

DOI 10.1080/17449057.2018.1525167

ISSN 1744-9057

ESSN 1744-9065

Publisher: Taylor and Francis

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Ethnopolitics on 22/11/18, available

online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/17449057.2018.1525167>

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**Engaging Diasporas in Development and State-building: The Role of the Kurdish
Diaspora and Returnees in Rebuilding Kurdistan Region of Iraq
Bahar Baser (Coventry University)**

Abstract

Diasporas can play an important part in contemporary social processes, either via remittances, investment, skills transfer, diaspora philanthropy or political influence. Currently, many states establish diaspora ministries or sub-committees under existing institutions to connect with their diaspora and tap their resources for development in the homeland. This paper contributes to this literature on the diaspora-homeland nexus by focusing on the Iraqi Kurdish diaspora and returnees. The paper analyzes the intricacies of diaspora and returnee involvement in state-building in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq by discussing their capabilities and expectations as well as the tensions between the diaspora and the homeland.

Introduction

The Second World Kurdish Congress (WKC) was held in the capital of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), Erbil, between the 12th and 14th of October 2012.¹ The conference was an invitation to Kurdish diaspora scholars from various disciplines, which could be interpreted as a calling for the “scientific diaspora” (Kuschminder, 2011, p.7) to refresh their ties with the homeland. The first WKC was organized in 2011 in the Netherlands and focused on Kurdistan’s economy and society in transition. There was something special about this second gathering; it gave the opportunity to Kurdish diasporans around the world to have a homecoming and see the “miracle”² with their own eyes. The participants of the conference were not solely Iraqi Kurds, there was a sizeable community of diasporans who are Kurds of Turkish, Iranian and Syrian origins. The diasporic attachment, which Williams (2018, p.6) called “the altruistic tie” was very much present.

¹I participated in this conference with over 600 participants. It created transnational a platform for Kurdish policy makers, diplomats, civil society organizations and the diaspora to discuss the future of Kurdistan and its place in the Middle East. See: <http://cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?l=12&a=45538>. (Last access 28 February 2018).

² As one of my interviewees at the Congress put it, what happened to Kurdistan in the recent years was a “miracle”.

Research suggests that in some cases, diasporas are ascribed parts in a national project (Shindo, 2012, p.1699). “Diasporic patriotism varies in time and space, with patriotic flame being doused and ignited by a variety of origin and destination specific triggers” (Ancien et. al 2009, p.17). In cases where out-migration was once perceived as unpatriotic, especially in countries experiencing crises, the discourse has now shifted towards a more positive outlook characterizing the diasporas as part of the solution to underdevelopment (Mohan, 2008, p.464; van Hear and Cohen, 2017, p.172), or as “agents of change” (van Houte, 2014; Budabin, 2014; Sinatti and Horst, 2015; Rock, 2017). In post-conflict settings, diaspora contributions become all the more important as they can contribute to knowledge capital, capacity-building and investment, as well as peace-building and the strengthening of civil society (Kuschminder, 2011; Hamdouch and Wahba, 2015). These state-led initiatives not only tie the diaspora to the homeland development, but also construct a pan-ethnic discourse that aims at solidifying nationhood transnationally (Chan and Tran, 2011, 1103). What is special about the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is that it has started a homeland calling for the diaspora, acting as states do, despite its ambiguous autonomous position within the Iraqi state.

By focusing on this special case, this paper analyzes the intricacies of diasporas’ and returnees’ involvement in state-building in the KRI with a focus on their expectations and the tensions between the diaspora and the homeland. What role do the diaspora and returnees play in post-conflict reconstruction in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)? How do their expectations evolve given the complexities and challenges of state-building in the homeland? What does the homeland expect from them and what capacities does it offer to facilitate their engagement?

Methodology and Data Gathering

The empirical data collection for this article is based on two strands of fieldwork. The first strand was conducted in France, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden between 2012 and 2014, where I interviewed more than a hundred diaspora members, entrepreneurs and returning migrants from the first and second generations of the diaspora. I have also been to Iraqi Kurdistan twice; the first time was for the WKC in October 2012 and the other visit was a three-week fieldwork trip in April 2013 where I interviewed KRG diplomats, members of parliament as well as returnees who came back to Kurdistan permanently or temporarily. In these visits, I concentrated mostly on interviewees in Erbil but I have also visited Suleimaniyah and other small towns surrounding Erbil such as Shaqlawa.

The second strand of research in 2016 focused on returnees in the KRI and included follow-up interviews with the KRG Representation in London and prominent diaspora entrepreneurs. I prepared a semi-structured interview template in consultancy with my research assistant³ based in Duhok. The interviews were conducted by the research assistant in three provinces, Suleimaniyah, Duhok and Erbil. In total 26 interviews⁴ were conducted with diaspora returnees who lived outside Kurdistan for at least ten years and who returned after 2003. Only Kurds who voluntarily returned to the homeland were included in the study. As a common practice in investigating return migration (Rock, 2017, p.206), I have used purposive and snowball sampling. I supplemented the interview data with official declarations by KRG policy-makers, diaspora organizations' press releases and website blogs as well as information from diasporic and homeland's media outlets. Overall, this multi-sited research gave me the opportunity to observe the sustainability of diaspora return as well as the opportunity structures developing in Kurdistan for diaspora and returnee engagement during a five-year period characterized by ebbs and flows in Kurdish politics and socioeconomic structure. Finally, I have conducted follow-up interviews⁵ with academics from the KRI in 2018 in order to validate certain aspects that emerged from this research.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq

The Iraqi Kurds have suffered under various Iraqi regimes, especially during the Saddam Hussein era. However, third party interventions in the Middle East's internal and international conflicts made it possible for the Iraqi Kurds to flourish since 1991.⁶ Particularly after the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, Iraqi Kurds have been successful in formulating self-rule in Northern Iraq and moved towards establishing a *de facto* state.

Since 2003, the KRG has managed to exploit the "shifting opportunity grounds in Iraq to attract and vest a number of international interests", establish diplomatic representations around the world and gain recognition as a crucial actor in the region (Soguk, 2015, pp.964-5). It has its

³ I thank Dr. Bayar Dosky for conducting the interviews in the KRI as part of this project.

⁴ Our sample included 9 female and 17 male interviewees. One of the reasons we found it hard to reach female interviewees was that in most cases men return and bring their families afterwards or they leave them in the host countries. Secondly, the research assistant was male and he found it hard to reach female interviewees in Kurdistan's relatively conservative setting.

⁵ Two of these interviews were conducted face to face in London and three of them were conducted via skype with academics who are based in the KRI.

⁶ For more information on the KRG's "success story" and the recent economic and political crises see Soguk (2015) and Sumer and Joseph(2018).

own judicial system and makes its own laws, runs its own security services, has its own parliament and runs its own elections. Until 2014, it had a rapidly growing economy and revenues from the oil sector brought about the possibility to expand its infrastructure. Since then, however, the KRG found itself in a dire security and financial situation including tensions among the Kurdish parties, conflict with the central government, a drop in oil prices, and fighting with ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant). The KRG held a referendum in September 2017 when more than 90% voters supported independence from Iraq, though the KRG failed to receive significant support from the international community.

Since 2013, at least 700 foreign companies went bankrupt, leaving around 200.000 people unemployed.⁷ KRG officials have been struggling to pay the salaries of teachers, Peshmerga fighters, oil industry workers and other civil servants. Moreover, after the independence referendum, international flights were temporarily banned by the central government and the KRG has lost the control of economically significant territories including Kirkuk to the Iraqi Army. The referendum also brought internal disputes to the fore, as the Kurdish political parties other than the KDP demonstrated a lukewarm approach towards the referendum. These developments will surely create strains in the KRG and have significant implications on diaspora investments and return migration in the long run.

Spheres of Iraqi Kurdish Diaspora Engagement Before the Fall of Saddam

Since 1960s, large numbers of Kurdish refugees have been forced to flee Kurdistan (Wahlbeck, 2013, p.44). There have been two significant waves of conflict-induced Kurdish migration from Iraq. The first one happened in 1988 when thousands of Kurds fled from the genocidal Anfal offensives⁸ by the Saddam regime. The second wave occurred in 1991, when Kurdish rebellions were brutally suppressed by the Iraqi regime after the Iraqi Army's defeat in Kuwait (van Bruinessen, 1998, p.43). Kurdish leaders went into exile and started establishing transnational networks which connected Kurdish voices to the rest of the world. These migration flows have also grown in size due to family reunification, and gradually Kurds abroad have come to constitute one of the largest diasporas in the world.

⁷ <http://www.basnews.com/index.php/en/reports/349883>. (Last access 28 March 2018).

⁸ The Anfal Campaigns refer to the Saddam Regimes genocidal campaign against the Iraqi Kurds between 1986 and 1989, killing almost 200.000 people. The Halabja chemical attack occurred on 16 March 1988 and killed more than 5000 Kurdish civilians.

While struggling with statelessness and feeling of victimhood, these Kurds managed to create a transnational network and used their exile experience to influence the situation back in their homeland. Van Hear and Cohen (2017, p.172-3) suggest that “the variety of characterizations of the role of diasporas in conflict might be explained by differentiating forms of diaspora engagement and the public and private spaces in which they occur”. Although they admit that these suggested categories might overlap, they theorise diaspora interventions by distinguishing three spheres of engagement: a) the household/the extended family sphere, b) the “known community” and c) the imagined community. In this section, I will analyse Iraqi Kurdish diaspora interventions in the KRI following this categorization.

The Household/Extended Family Sphere: Van Hear and Cohen (2017, p.173) investigate the manners in which diasporans engage in private and personal transnational relations. Diasporans send money to nuclear families so that they can survive under pressing conditions. My interviews with Iraqi Kurdish diasporans also revealed that, especially in the beginning of the exile experience, the household/family sphere was given the utmost importance. One interviewee who returned to the KRI recently stated that “Well, at the time I was the main chance of economy for our family at that times. We sent hundreds of dollars to the family that family could survive. I’m talking about 1990s and 2000s so economically (*it*) was good.” The importance of remittances also echoes in Lisa Pelling’s excellent study (2013, p.3) on the Kurdish Diaspora. Since 2003, physical visits and family reunions also became highly feasible, especially thanks to the introduction of direct flights from European capitals to the KRI.

The Known Community Sphere: Here a diaspora member’s engagement focus on known community including encounters in schools, neighbourhoods, workplaces, markets and shops, and mosques among other places. The Kurds established local associations which usually organized cultural activities such as the *Newroz* celebrations (Wahlbeck, 2013). A majority of my interviewees stated that they regularly attended such local organizations rather than political ones. The main activities revolved around culture and language which helped them keep their “Kurdishness” and transfer their identity to the next generations. My interviews also show that these associations are often the first stops for newcomers who do not know their way around in the hostland. Apart from the associations, the known community networks also helped the newcomers establish businesses, engage in business partnerships as well as finding spouses.

The Imagined Community: This category includes membership of political parties in exile, support for insurgent or loyalist groups, advocacy networks and lobbying. As Wahlbeck (2013, pp.51-2) has observed, diaspora Kurds were highly politicized and have established political organizations to support the Kurdish cause. Political parties opened branches and political rivalries back in the homeland also surfaced in diaspora spaces. Dominant political parties in the KRI opened branches in several European countries and tried to shift the agenda of the diasporans towards their aims and interests in the transnational space. The KDP and the PUK have existed for a long time while during the recent years, the Gorran movement also gathered significant supporter base in the diaspora.

Political mobilisation for the homeland took different shapes and forms in Kurdish diaspora spaces. Diasporans first and foremost tried to draw attention to the massacres against Kurds in Iraq (e.g., the Anfal campaigns of 1987-8) by organizing protest events and lobbying European governments to stop the persecution of Kurds. The first comers also established institutions which are highly influential even today. One example is the Kurdish Institute, which was established in 1983.⁹ Diaspora Kurds also established TV channels, which Hassanpour (1998, p.53) defines as “sovereignty in the sky”, new technologies and diaspora mobilisation created “Kurdish flags from satellites.”

As Natali (2004, p.111) argues “shifts in international norms, active and influential diaspora networks have semi-legitimized the idea of Kurdish statehood”. The patriotic behaviours of diaspora Kurds have sustained a longing for a “free Kurdistan”, in the words of many interviewees, and the “myth of return” - which is an essential component of the diasporic psyche - has been kept as a vivid goal. A majority of interviewees stated that when they left they perceived their departure as temporary and planned to return to Kurdistan “when the time is right”. My observations reveal that although after the 1990s some Kurds did return to their homes, for the majority of them the fall of Saddam regime and a politically and economically thriving KRG have been perceived as major turning points in return decisions.

Diasporas as Agents of Change?

⁹ Interview with the President of the Kurdish Institute, Kendal Nezan, November 2013, Paris, France.

The growing importance of diaspora politics has been gathering increasing interest during the last decade as their leverage in both home and hostland politics have increased due to “new technologies and the rise of global media and communications that allow dispersed populations to engage in transnational politics in real time” (Adamson, 2006, p.291; van Hear and Cohen, 2017, p.172). Diasporas are believed to act as bridges between the home and host countries (Nielsen and Riddle, 2009, p.436) and they are “perceived as both insider and outsider in their countries of origin” (Sheido, 2012, p.1688). Moreover, diasporas accumulate human, financial and social capital in their hostlands, and if these valuable skills could be transferred to the homeland, it might be a cure for under-development and aid post-conflict reconstruction (Williams, 2018, p.6).

As Brinkerhoff (2009, p.79) suggests, diasporans are more likely to invest in economies of post-conflict homelands while other foreign investors might find it too risky. Similarly, Nielsen and Riddle (2009, p.435) state that as post-conflict economies are often found too daunting by foreign investors, many nations reach out to their diasporas for much-needed foreign investment capital. Besides, Kuschminder (2011, p.4) suggests there is also increasing evidence of non-economic contributions on issues such as human rights, good governance and capacity building in the homeland. They might act as advocacy networks and establish relationships with various stakeholders to contribute to short and long-term development needs and democratization in the homeland (Budabin, 2014; Brinkerhoff, 2009; Kent, 2006).

International organizations, as well as home and host states, often fund temporary return programmes which facilitate diasporas’ short-term return to the country of origin to train peers or transfer knowledge (Kuschminder, 2011, p.4). Moreover, as shown in the case of WKC, the homeland policy-makers might issue a “homeland calling” (Baser, 2018) to invite the diaspora to return to contribute to the rehabilitation process. However, realities and expectations do not always meet in the middle when it comes to encouraging return. While “wealthy people from the diaspora” (Brinkerhoff, 2009, p.78) might return with high expectations and get disappointed when they do not receive the heroes’ welcome “they deserved”, others might return with no intention to turn themselves into “diaspora heroes”. Van Houte and Davids (2014) reveal that return experiences are heterogeneous and not all returnees have the capacity or the will to act as agents of change. Moreover “motivations of return define an important part of the post-return experience” (van Houte and Davids, 2014, p.77). Therefore, while some returnees who returned out of failure might choose to keep a low profile; others who want to

transfer their success story back to the homeland might expect a heroes' welcome. "Most diasporas demonstrate commitment to their homelands through repeated small scale charitable acts" (Kent, 2006, p.457) and they keep their emotional attachments to their homelands. However, economic investment entails other factors besides these psychological reasons (Brenick and Silbereisen, 2012). Nielsen and Riddle (2009) suggest there are three main motivations for diasporans to invest in their home countries, financial, emotional and social. These motivations, as well as the conditions of the receptions of their engagement, creates the space for them to make a difference in their homelands.

Challenges of Diasporic Homecomings

Once policy makers in the homeland are aware of the potential of the diaspora to contribute to homeland interests, they usually formulate policies to create an institutional relationship which can harness diasporas' resources. Homeland politicians' discourse towards the returnees and diasporans are highly important in this regard. Additionally, home states as well as international organizations "need to create an *enabling environment* to put in place the conditions that will create incentives and facilitate the efforts of diasporans" (Brinkerhoff 2009, p. 75). Especially in cases where the diaspora remained isolated from the homeland due to conflict, then navigating bureaucratic red tape and establishing new businesses can be a highly challenging task for the diasporans (Nielsen and Riddle 2009, p.443).

Financial incentives can stimulate diaspora interest but they are not enough to sustain it, as other challenges occur along the way. Nepotism, a lack of transparency, political connections and differences might also determine the limits of diaspora engagement in homeland affairs. In Afghanistan, van Haute (2014, p.578) identified three distinct ways that the returnees adapted to deal with these problems: changing, avoiding and rejecting. In her words, "the changers were returnees who wanted to combine their European higher education, working experience and ideas with their identification in Afghanistan and the desire to reclaim an influential (political) position" (pp.578-79). However, not all her interviewees had a desire to challenge the long-established structures, and they opted for avoiding them by seeking opportunities elsewhere such as in the private sector and international NGOs. Others have rejected incorporating into the new context altogether (van Haute, 2014, p.580). Paasche (2016a, 2016b) also revealed that corruption in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq constituted a barrier to the reintegration of Kurdish returnees from Europe. A neutralised return, free from

politics could be more appealing to the diaspora members who plan return (Shindo, 2012, p.1699), however it is rarely the case.

While so much attention has been given to how diasporans and returnees can engage in homeland development activities, little research has been carried out on how locals who stayed during the conflict actually perceive such interventions (Rock, 2017, p.205). As previous research shows, ethnic ties do not necessarily bring a feeling of shared destiny and future (Rock, 2017; Baser and Toivanen, 2018). Diasporas can only contribute fully when there is harmony between the homeland policies, expectations and capabilities of both sides, and also when there is a working relationship between the locals and the diasporans/returnees.

Does the KRG Have a Diaspora Strategy?

As Ancien et.al put it, “a diaspora strategy is an explicit and systematic policy initiative or series of policy initiatives aimed at developing and managing relationships with a diaspora” (Ancien et al, 2009, p.3). The KRG adapted both “tapping and embracing” (Gamlen, 2015, p. 168) approaches at the discursive level. At the same time, no legal/institutional framework about returnees has been implemented so far despite the abundance of diaspora resources. Many politicians also referred to the potential of diaspora contributions for state-building in Kurdistan. For instance, KRG’s Head of Foreign Relations, Falah Mustafa Bakir stated that: “The KRG has always encouraged those with experience and expertise to return to their homeland and contribute to our ongoing success and help us improve the performance of our government and the services we provide to our people.”¹⁰ In another interview, he referred to the diaspora Kurds as the “ambassadors of Kurdistan”.¹¹ My interviews with high-ranking politicians in 2013 also included talks on a potential Diaspora Ministry as a sub-unit under the Ministry of Foreign Relations, which would deal specifically with this policy. The KRG, however, is yet to formulate such policies.¹² Dr. Sardar Aziz, who returned to take a position as a senior advisor to the KRG, states that the current economic difficulties crippled government from taking any step in that direction and the diasporans hesitate to return now for reasons of security, economic crises and lack of services.¹³

¹⁰ <http://cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?l=12&s=02010200&r=73&a=45562&s=010000>. (Last access 28 March 2018).

¹¹ <http://www.rudaw.net/english/interview/10062017>. (Last access 28 March 2018).

¹² For more information on KRG’s diaspora engagement policies see Baser (2018).

¹³ Author’s interview with Dr. Sardar Aziz, June 2018.

The KRG's diplomatic missions are responsible for its paradiplomacy and public diplomacy efforts and work in close cooperation with the diasporans (Baser, 2018). The diasporans were also allowed to vote at the independence referendum in 2017¹⁴, which could be interpreted as an incipient external-voting right practiced by the Kurdish quasi-state. It is also no surprise that, after the independence referendum, the former President of the KRG, Masoud Barzani turned to the diaspora and made a historical call to diaspora Kurds to stage protests and engage in civil activities in a legal and peaceful manner to garner support for the KRG.¹⁵

The KRG has expectations from its diaspora, especially in the economic realm (Baser, 2018), but at the same time does not create the incentives to facilitate diaspora engagement as suggested above by Brinkerhoff (2006) and Nielsen and Riddle (2009). My interviews with the Chamber of Commerce and the Board of Investment in Kurdistan revealed that although the KRG has invested significant effort in determining in which areas there is need for investment, diasporans were still treated equally with other foreign investors and do not receive specific advantages by law to invest in the KRI.¹⁶ Facilitation of diasporic returns with regards to investment, then, has been dependent on who has connections to ruling political parties and who can easily receive permits and land necessary to establish their business.

One of my main observations is that the KRG engages with its diaspora in an ad-hoc rather than a sustained manner, a finding echoed in other studies on KRG-diaspora relations. (e.g., Eccarius-Kelly, 2018, p.18). My interviewees in Europe complained that party networks and clientelism played an important role in determining which diaspora member can be included in the joint projects with homeland policy makers. When asked about the role that the diaspora can play, interviewees usually stated that the KRG has to formulate policies to facilitate

¹⁴ Diaspora Kurds also have the right to vote or to be elected if they are Iraqi citizens and can provide the necessary documentation required to practice these rights.

¹⁵ <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/201020177>. (Last access 28 March 2018).

¹⁶ The KRG has introduced various laws including the Investment Law (July 2006) which stated that foreign investors shall be treated as national and local investors. The law did not provide any exemptions to the diaspora therefore diaspora entrepreneurs were treated the same way as nationals or foreign investors, unless of course they have a special agreement with the KRG via personal initiatives and contacts. See the law: <http://cabinet.gov.krd/p/print.aspx?l=12&smap=010000&p=293> (Last Access June 2018). Currently the KRG is introducing new tax systems for private sector therefore these laws might change in the short run. See: <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/economy/7543c01a-6b71-438f-91c6-b3fe6c205a28>.

diasporan's entry into social and political spheres in the KRI. For some interviewees, the KRG itself was the barrier preventing diaspora engagement: "If the government let them..." or "If they are given the chance..." were some of the phrases used by the sceptics among diasporans and returnees. One interviewee also suggested that the divisions within the diaspora may also prevent them from effectively engaging: "Having a Kurdish community there was effective, sometimes it could solve problems, but sometimes diaspora itself was a problem."¹⁷

The Iraqi Kurdish Diaspora in Europe: Nation and State-building from afar in the Post-Saddam Era

I have conducted interviews with diaspora Kurds between 2012 and 2014 when the KRG was still thriving and the economic and political crises remained dormant. The KRG's autonomous status was perceived as a highly significant achievement and its profile eased the pain caused by statelessness while they were in exile. The majority of interviewees showed patriotic motivations above anything else. The KRG's eventual goal of independence gave diasporans a target to work for.¹⁸ A majority of the interviewees stated that they started visiting the region quite often, but that they had not made immediate return decisions. They had established businesses or stable jobs in their host countries and were also concerned about the future of their children. I observed a trend of male diaspora members' paying a couple of visits to the KRI, or even engaging in circular migration in order to test the waters in Kurdistan before making the decision of permanent return. For those who were politically active in exile and had close connections to the ruling parties, return was a preferred option as they took highly prestigious positions either in the parliament or as advisors to high-ranking politicians.

Diaspora groups which were close to the KDP started following the political agenda set by the KRG. Those who were aligned to other parties still joined lobbying and advocacy networks, taking a step back at times when they perceived a clash of interests. For instance, the members of the Gorran party in Berlin told me that they felt sidelined by the KDP when there is an event in Germany.¹⁹ There are, however, other platforms which bring all groups together and raise

¹⁷ Interview with a returnee from Germany, Erbil, April 2016.

¹⁸ Although patriotic motivations played big role in convincing the diasporans to return, the political situation in the KRI as well as the economic crisis compelled many to re-return to their host countries. This shows that initial motivations might not be sustained after return and priorities might be reshuffled depending on the ever-evolving situation in the homeland.

¹⁹ Author's interview with Gorran Representatives in Berlin, April 2013.

the profile of the KRI as a whole such as the Kurdish Institute in Paris²⁰ as well as commemoration events for Halabja. In fact, one of the most influential activities of the diaspora, in collaboration with KRG diplomatic representations, was to push for the recognition of the Anfal as genocide. Receiving support from Kurdish-origin MPs in Sweden, Norway and the UK, Kurdish diaspora prepared petitions and lobbied host country governments to discuss this issue in their parliaments. Recognition of the Anfal as genocide might also serve for legitimizing the Kurdish quest for statehood, and the diaspora put it at the centre stage of its transitional justice efforts (Baser and Toivanen, 2017). Most recently, many Kurds organized large protests in the USA, Canada as well as Europe to condemn the KRG's loss of control of disputed territories in October 2017. These recent developments made diaspora diplomacy and advocacy all the more important again; they are needed to legitimize the quest for statehood in the eyes of the international community by lobbying, protesting and constantly negotiating with national and supranational institutions.

Diaspora entrepreneurs were usually recruited by the KRG and were invited to contribute to specific projects in sectors which the KRG seems important for building a state. For instance, an interviewee in Sweden testified that he had received an invitation to contribute to the development of the healthcare sector in the KRI. He founded the "Swedish Hospital" in Erbil with the support of both the Board of Investment in the KRG and Swedish companies. Previously, many Kurdish patients who had heart disease or diabetes had been travelling to Jordan, Lebanon or Turkey for treatment. Although he had hoped the project would create employment opportunities for local Kurds, he was unable to find sufficiently qualified locals to work in a hospital and had to source workers from Turkey, Romania, Slovenia and Iran. He felt that in the absence of systematic training and other educational possibilities he was unable to contribute further to the local economy.²¹ Examples of this sort can be multiplied. For instance, other returnees opened cafes in Ankawa, a posh neighbourhood in Erbil, or restaurants and supermarket chains in different districts of KRI. The presence of oil sector workers and constant visits of diplomatic missions and foreign investors also created demands for hospitality industry. Among my interviewees, there were returnees from the US who opened hotels in Erbil which became popular for visitors from the US. Others have returned to become

²⁰ Interview with Kendal Nezan, Paris, November 2013.

²¹ Author's interview, November 2012, Stockholm, Sweden.

language teachers in private schools which are usually preferred by the political elite as well as the returnees.

According to Newzad Hirori, the president of the Kurdish Library in Stockholm, Iraqi Kurdistan needs all sorts of infrastructure and human capital and the Kurdish diaspora is a great resource to address this gap. However, Hirori asserts, the KRG has not created a systematic or strategic way of tapping into the resources of the diaspora. Echoing the previous interviewee, he suggests that the diaspora could train the locals, thus empowering locals to develop the region themselves.²² An interviewee, who is a doctor in the Netherlands, complained that although she had interesting ideas to develop the health sector, she could not find anyone to encourage her and move the project forward because she had no political connections.²³ Some interviewees also complained that getting things done in Kurdistan was a “bureaucratic nightmare”. A business permit approval might take up to a year, there is bribery involved and despite the tax relief incentives, many diasporans simply give up before they complete the business projects they had in mind.

Socially, diaspora Kurds also engage in a variety of projects that are supported by the KRG. For instance, many diaspora Kurds are taking part in projects supported by the Swedish humanitarian aid organization QANDIL, which has an office in Erbil.²⁴ The Kurdish Womens’ Association in Sweden has organized a number of seminars in the KRI teaching women about their rights and the “Swedish model” of democracy. Other interviewees reported that the dysfunctional education system of the KRG is significant subject of debate amongst diaspora Kurds. Teacher training programs, short term staff exchanges as well as vocational training is a top priority on the agenda of diaspora organizations. There are also many diaspora initiatives which aim at strengthening civil society and women’s rights in the KRI. Iranian and Kurdish Women’s Rights Organization which was founded in the UK in 2002 or the Kurdish Women’s Rights Watch are just a few examples of a larger spectrum of initiatives.²⁵

The social sphere sometimes becomes the only sphere for the critics of the ruling parties in the diaspora to make their contributions as the economic and political sphere is controlled by the

²² Author’s interview with Newzad Hirori, November 2012, Stockholm, Sweden.

²³ Author’s interview, October 2013, Rotterdam, The Netherlands.

²⁴ <http://www.qandil.org/>. (Last access 28 March 2018).

²⁵ See: <http://ikwro.org.uk/>. (Last access 28 March 2018).

state elites with no room for dissident voices. Therefore, diaspora and returnees' social remittances become all the more important to push for development of civil society and human rights as well as democratization in the KRI. Overall, diaspora contributions are more visible in government, education and private sectors in addition to media and civil society. Nonetheless, transformation via knowledge and skill transfer from the diaspora is a long process that is difficult to detect immediately and will bear fruits in the long run.²⁶

Returning to the “Homeland”

There is still no systematic study of the number of the returnees and their potential economic, social and political contributions to a post-2003 KRI. The KRG officials I have interviewed confirmed that they do not have reliable statistics on how many people have returned since 2003 and how many are potentially participating in circular migration. The lack of data on this matter also makes it hard for the international organizations to develop projects accordingly. International organizations such as the IOM (International Organization for Migration) are organizing assisted return programmes for the Kurdish refugees who are settled in the UK, France and the Netherlands. During my interview with the representatives of IOM offices²⁷, I was told that it is actually very hard to find people who want to return - even temporarily - to give vocational training to the locals or to set up small businesses. A systematic mapping of the diaspora is therefore in order to tailor policies both by the governments and host-country national or international actors.

Having tried to map the profile of returnees during this research, I have become cautious of making generalisations – in reality, the group is notable for its heterogeneity. As in the case of Afghanistan and Iraq, many diasporans went into exile and come back for political reasons. They were always engaged in homeland politics and when the time was right, they returned. For instance, Dr. Fuad Hussein, who was an exile in the Netherlands and returned to the KRI to become the Chief of Staff to the KRG Presidency, states: “since 2005 I am a member of cabinet and we had some cabinets- %80 of them were from the diaspora... now perhaps half of them.” He stated that many Kurds in exile actually went on with their education and studied in Europe, now they come back as experts in their field. “That is why”, he says, “diaspora plays

²⁶ Author's interview with Dr. Sardar Aziz, June 2018.

²⁷ The interviews took place in London (December 2012), Paris (November 2013), In the Hague (September 2013), in Geneva (May 2016), in Germany (April 2016).

a big role in administration.”²⁸ These examples can be multiplied. Dr. Dlawer Ala’Aldeen, who lived in the UK for many years, returned to Kurdistan to take a post as the Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research in the KRG. Before that, he founded the Kurdish Scientific and Medical Association, which lobbied US and UK governments for Kurdish causes. Qubad Talabani, a son of former Iraqi President and the leader of the PUK, Jalal Talabani, served as the PUK’s representative and then KRG’s representative to the US until 2012. He then returned to take a position as the Deputy Prime Minister of the KRG in 2014 (Eccarius-Kelly, 2018, p.26-27).

Apart from political remittances, returnees could also remit economically to the newly developing region. Many managerial jobs are currently taken by foreigners in Kurdistan, and foreign expertise is often imported (Hautaniemi et.al., 2013: 81). The diaspora offers an important asset to break this cycle. In order to facilitate this, the KRG has opened an official website which informs first and second-generation diaspora Kurds about how to return and potential job opportunities in Kurdistan. The website also shows testimonies from previous returnees who give a positive outlook about their experience and advice about what to and not to expect.²⁹

The returnee accounts from my own interviews also revealed that many first and second-generation diaspora Kurds who returned state altruistic reasons as their primary motivation. One of the interviewees said: “They need people like me who lived abroad, who can speak different languages, familiar with different cultures.”³⁰ Another returnee from the UK said: “I was constantly encouraged by my parents to think about my future in Kurdistan.”³¹ It became clear to me that these diasporans never cut relations with their homeland, and the second-generation who were born in Europe actually grew up with transnational attachments to the region and its history. A returnee from the UK explained that he returned after living abroad for the last 20 years because he feels the urge to transfer his skills and knowledge into the Kurdish region.³²

²⁸ Author’s interview with Dr. Fuad Hussein, April 2013, Erbil, KRI.

²⁹ <http://kw.krg.org/en/diaspora>. (Last access 28 March 2018).

³⁰ Author’s interview, Erbil, April 2013.

³¹ Author’s interview, Erbil, April 2013.

³² Author’s interview, Erbil, April 2013.

The secondary motivation that came to the fore during the interviews was the economic opportunities in Kurdistan. According to one of the interviewees³³, the economic crisis in Europe was a “blessing in disguise” for the Kurdish Region as many young Kurds from Europe felt frustrated with the declining opportunities in various European cities and decided to come and try their luck in Kurdistan instead. Lastly, especially among the 2016 fieldwork cohort, there were a high number of interviewees who also stated that they returned for family-related reasons. Therefore, in parallel to what van Houte (2014) suggested, motivations for return and capacities to politically, economically and socially remit vary.

Especially between 2012 and 2014, the interviewees mentioned that they found jobs in public sector due to their academic degrees or language skills. When I visited the Foreign Affairs Headquarters in Erbil, it seemed to me that most of the civil servants working there were young people who returned from abroad. They immediately took key positions in foreign affairs and the oil sector because they also connected their host countries’ policy makers to the KRG, acting as bridges. Their language skills helped them work as translators during diplomatic meetings and gave them the opportunity to be employed as interpreters by foreign companies. At the same time, the KRG’s diaspora management falls short of institutionalizing this kind of a return practice. Many interviewees complained that obtaining work permits and bureaucratic matters took too much time, creating an atmosphere of deterrence. The process usually takes place within the realm of personal contacts, prior political party loyalties and family and friend networks. Having said that, the returnees underlined that they observed progress in that realm, and that merit-based employment has been increasing. In particular, private firms in the oil business are increasingly hiring people through websites or job portals, and agencies offer merit-based recruitment opportunities.

Although the economic boom painted a rosy picture of Kurdistan until 2013, some problems were already a cause for concern as far back as 2003. As mentioned, people without prior connections and job possibilities have found it hard to come back. Secondly, the ones who have returned face a variety of problems. First of all, return migration, especially after exile, is not a simple homecoming and requires seriously tailored policies and strategies (Hautaniemi et.al., 2013) Especially among the 2016 interview cohort, we have observed complaints about reintegration policies for returnees. For example, education remains one of the many problems

³³ Author’s interview with a returnee from the UK, Erbil, April 2013.

for the returnee families. Their children cannot speak perfect Kurdish and they usually go to the “expat schools” as one of the interviewees called it.³⁴ Some interviewees also mentioned that although they returned thinking about Kurdistan’s future, they sometimes feel that they had put their children’s future at stake.

My findings confirm the previous finding that returnees perceive corruption as a major issue in the KRG (Paasche 2016b, p. 129). Interviewees in 2016 stated that “there is no law and there is high level of corruption”³⁵ and that they found it morally hard to integrate since they were used to European way of life and do not know their way around in a different setting. - In the case of the KRI, three categories of returnees’ reactions to corruption - *changing, avoiding and rejecting* were all present (van Houte 2014, p. 578). This moral dilemma (Paasche, 2016b, p.134), created a significant amount of frustration for some of the interviewees, while some others had a “give it time” approach. I have also noticed some interviewees found a way to deal with disappointments by simply adapting a “loving Kurdistan with its imperfections” approach, while others interpreted what is happening as a “wasted opportunity” for the future of the Kurdish nation. Another matter that came up frequently in the interviews was the question of patronage and its impact on any types of diaspora and returnee engagement, (also observed by Paasche 2016b, p.133). Especially in the testimonies conducted in 2016, there is a noticeable resentment against nepotism as well as the damaging rivalries between different political parties for the future of Kurdistan.

One of the most striking elements of my fieldwork in the KRI in 2013 was to see that a sizeable number of the returnees referred to themselves as “expats” or as “internationals”. As returnees, they “continued their negotiations on history, identity and nationhood” which shows that “the construction and reconstruction of identity is a never-ending project” (Chan and Tran, 2011, pp.1101-2). What Chan and Tran (2011, p.1108) called the “cultural territory” was very much present for many returnees, erecting invisible barriers between themselves and the locals. I could observe that some of them would be the new middle class in the KRI and they seemed as if they were parachuted to a new reality. They preferred to attend European style cafes and restaurants where foreigners go, and live in gated communities where foreigners live. While

³⁴See also: <http://www.kurdishglobe.net/article/017FBFC47C78EE5341560187F4FBBDD3/Returning-Kurdish-diaspora-students-seek-KRG-s-attention.html>. (Last access 28 March 2018).

³⁵ Interview with a returnee from the UK, Duhok, April 2016.

others seemed to have adapted immediately as if they were grown up there. I have not, however, detected a correlation between their new attitudes and their integration levels in the host country. For instance, a returnee could be very well-integrated into his/her host country but at the same time can adapt easily to the new conditions in Kurdistan upon return. While another returnee who returned due to failure of integration in the host country might find it very hard to adapt to the new conditions in Kurdistan. A confluence of many factors such as age, education, motivations for return, class, networks both at home and abroad determined the experience of return.

When it comes to relations with the locals, the interviewees gave varying answers. On the one hand, some of them talked openly about frictions with the locals. A returnee from UK said the following:

“I brought with me loads of experience in the UK... I want to teach them, help them with what I know...But, you have to do it in a very subtle way...you can’t make it as if you are condescending and you show the cultural and class gap... if you do that, there is no dialogue. This is very very dangerous...”³⁶

A returnee from the USA stated that: “I know people who told me now that Kurdistan has money... that is why you are coming back from USA and Europe”.³⁷ For another interviewee who returned from the USA a couple of years ago, there was a massive gulf between the locals and the “internationals.” On the other hand, a high number of testimonies revealed no tension whatsoever. For instance, a returnee from Canada mentioned that the locals “always care about returnees” and they asked her many times whether she feels good in Kurdistan.³⁸ Another interviewee added that “I am learning a lot from the Kurds here, from political, cultural and social perspective... It doesn’t exist in Europe.” For him reintegration was a two-way street and both locals and returnees should adapt to each other as they have a lot to learn from each other.³⁹

Conclusion

³⁶ Author’s interview with a returnee from the UK, Erbil, April 2013.

³⁷ Interview with a returnee from the USA, Erbil, May 2016.

³⁸ Interview with a returnee from Canada, Duhok, April 2016.

³⁹ Author’s interview with a returnee from the Netherlands, April 2013.

The KRG's desire to reach out to its diaspora is not exceptional. Many home states have been formulating policies to tap into their diasporas' material and non-material resources for many years. What is interesting in the KRG's case is its ambiguous status as an autonomous entity within war-torn Iraq. This post-2003 atmosphere gave incentives to Iraqi Kurdish diasporans who had been living in exile in the USA, Europe and elsewhere to either return or contribute to the prosperity of the homeland from afar. In line with Cohen and van Hear's (2017) three frameworks that examine diasporic identity, one can argue that diaspora Kurds kept their attachments to the homeland in their family circles, known and imagined community, while at the same time trying to influence politics at home and abroad. Since 2003, they managed to transfer skills and know how to their homeland either with engaging from afar or returning to the homeland temporarily and permanently. The most visible contributions occurred in government, education and private sector in addition to media and civil society and time will tell their long-term impact on Kurdish politics and society.

This study confirms findings of the previous studies in on the subject of return. Echoing van Houte (2014), I found that the motivations of diasporans vary and the returnees do not have a single profile. Some return because of failure to integrate in the host country, while others have more altruistic or financial motives which determine their decisions, which begs for further research to examine varying reasons for return. Similar to Paasche (2016b, p.132), I have also found that the diasporans usually had the will and the capacity to transfer knowledge and values to the KRI, however they lacked a clear strategy to do so. As in the case of many state-led diaspora initiatives (Williams, 2018), the KRI also felt short in creating an enabling environment for the diasporans to contribute more effectively. While, the KRG has made a discursive commitment to collaborate with its diaspora in a variety of areas, it does not yet have an institutionalized diaspora policy.

Considering the current crisis that the KRI has been facing since 2013, it is possible to argue that the diaspora and returnee contributions matter more than ever, as other types of foreign direct investment will likely decline. However, the opportunities that the KRI can offer to the diasporans and returnees have also been affected by these recent developments. The KRG could not pay the salaries of civil servants for a long time, the unemployment rate is strikingly high and the KRG still does not offer diaspora-specific incentives for economic investments. Returnees complain about corruption, nepotism and rivalries among Kurdish political parties as the biggest problems that the KRI must address in the future. There is a risk that these

problems could trigger a re-return to the host countries (Baser and Toivanen, 2018). It has also been reported that many young Kurds have started to leave Kurdistan during the last five years (Eccarius-Kelly, 2018). Recent developments show that the KRG urgently requires a more systematic and sustained diaspora engagement strategy which will re-energise diaspora-homeland relations and create more avenues for cooperation. The post-referendum developments can trigger “diasporic patriotism” (Ancien et. al 2009) and, if used in a structured and targeted way, can rekindle diaspora interests in advancing the homeland’s prosperity at a time when it is needed the most.

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