

Where do Iraqi migrants get their information and how does it impact their migration experiences?

Findings from migrant needs assessment study in Iraq

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Executive Summary

In recent years, Iraq represents one of the main countries of origin for migrants to Europe seeking better livelihoods, and particularly in terms of asylum claims and irregular migration routes. The country has also witnessed significant movements of people within and across different provinces due to conflict and instability, with many Iraqis becoming internally displaced. ICMPD's Migration Needs Assessment research study¹ examined the information needs of prospective Iraqi migrants, IDPs and returnees, across six provinces: Anbar, Baghdad, Basra, Erbil, Ninewa, and Salah Al-Din.

- The study finds that the **lack of security, job prospects and worsening economic situations** are the main drivers for migration outside of Iraq, with many citing preferences for **North America, Western Europe** and some neighbouring countries as their preferred countries of destination.
- Migrants are **highly aware of the risks that irregular journeys** and routes entail but this awareness does not act as a deterrent.
- Information is dealt with differently depending on the background of migrants, with **gender and locality** being important factors.
- **Information on family reunification modalities** is one of the main information needs mentioned by Iraqi returnees, and a determinant for their return decisions.
- Institutions working on migration face a number of challenges, among which their **reach** within the country, and the lack of **coordination** among different actors. The citizens' lack of **trust in government institutions** is an important hurdle in reaching migrants through official channels.

¹ The study is based on desk research, interviews with potential migrants, returnees and institutional and organisational stakeholders conducted between November 2020 and January 2021. More on the study and methodology in (IRFAD Foundation for Development Research, 2021).

Current Context

Over the summer of 2021, increased numbers of migrants from Iraq arrived via the Eastern Borders Route to Lithuania through Belarus to seek asylum in the EU. The emergence of this new route has been categorised as “instrumentalisation” of migration by a third country, in this case namely Belarus. Accounts of Belarus issuing tourist visas to Iraqis upon arrival date several months prior to the summer, with state-owned travel agencies allegedly supporting the organising of flights and transport to the border regions with Lithuania and Poland. The role of social media has also been highlighted as magnifying the emergence of this route: there have been reports of Facebook groups informing Iraqi migrants routes and modus operandi, with membership skyrocketing in the same period. While the costs were initially low, supporting the development of this pathway, some migrants reported paying up to 15,000 USD to smugglers to make their way to Lithuania through Belarus. However, in the months since, EU and Iraqi policy responses have worked to “close” this route. Nevertheless, Iraqi asylum seekers in Lithuania are still experiencing concerning conditions in migrant centres, in addition to the uncertainty and “information vacuum” due to the limited number of interpreters available, highlighting persistent issues for this route.

Another important contextual development in Iraq is the closure of IDP camps, which was initiated in 2019. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, the closures were put on hold and resumed towards the end of 2020, with some reclassified as informal sites. This is an important development as considering that a significant proportion of IDPs may be candidates for international migration at a later stage, according to this needs assessment.

Key Findings

Migration drivers and destinations

Among the drivers cited, migrants strongly emphasised the **lack of security** and the instability in the country, the **deteriorating economic conditions** and **lack of job prospects**. Unemployment has been a key driver noted by Iraqi migrants recently making use of the Eastern Borders route.

Moreover, Europe remains an important destination: the vast majority of potential Iraqi migrants interviewed prefer to migrate **outside of Iraq** rather than internally to a different province. They cited countries in **Western Europe** and **North America** as their preferred destination, in addition to neighbouring countries such as **Jordan** and **Turkey**.

Information Channels and Outreach

Among the stakeholders interviewed, many mentioned that they provide information to different migrant groups through a variety of platforms, including **social media, television commercials, telephone and field campaigns** aimed at raising awareness. This is particularly

relevant as some potential migrants highlighted using social media accounts of government entities and international organisations, in addition to informal channels to acquire information on migration. For returnees, many emphasised their reliance and sometimes preference for government and international organisations' websites, including contact information to request support or information. In Kirkuk particularly, many returnees indicated their preference for information through official websites and phone number for official entities to contact directly.

Trust feeds into selection of sources of information

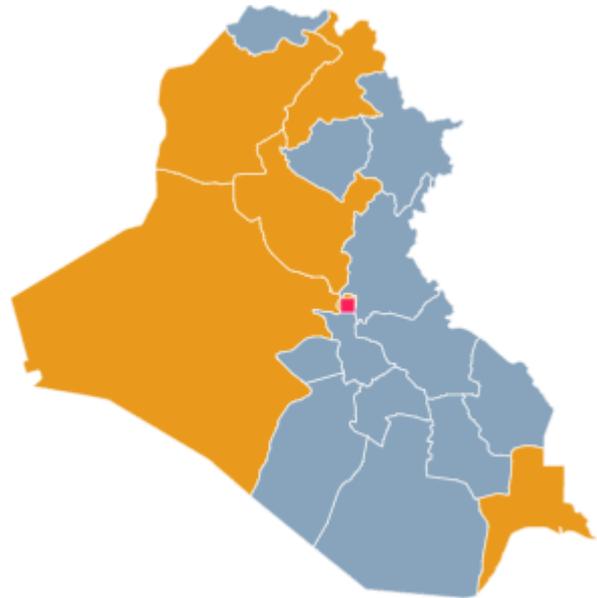
Sources of information differ between potential migrants and returnees as a result of their differing experiences and expectations. While potential migrants rely heavily on information provided by family and friends, returnees tend to trust information provided by official/international organisations such as UNHCR and IOM. Although many potential migrants interviewed mentioned having made arrangements for their migration journeys or were in the process to doing so, many highlighted that they relied mostly on **word of mouth**, and **friends** and relatives to inform themselves. This is visible in the more recent flows of migrants from Iraq to Europe through the Eastern Borders route. At the same time, among the returnees interviewed, many admitted that, while they thought the information they had pre-departure was sufficient, they realised on arrival that it was inaccurate. In terms of information needs, potential migrants mentioned needing more information on **legal pathways** to migration, including migrant rights and asylum procedures, as well as the **living conditions in countries of destination**, more specifically on societal integration, employment and housing.

High awareness of risk is not a deterrent from irregular migration

The study has shown that many potential Iraqi migrants are very aware of the risks the journey entails and many explicitly expressed their concerns about enduring physical and psychological harms as well as financial losses while migrating. Potential migrants also highlighted their fears of being denied entry into other territories or having their asylum claims denied but insisted on their need to undertake the journey irregularly regardless, due to lack of other opportunities. One of the reasons cited was that the expected financial cost of an irregular journey would be less than a regular one. However, returnees who migrated irregularly had a more expensive journey than anticipated, with additional costs extorted from them by smugglers along the route. Thus, while awareness of physical risk may already be present, potential migrants may have less (accurate) knowledge on the financial or other risks.

Gender and locality as a determining factor in accessing and using information

There are variations across migrants and returnees in the ways they acquire and deal with information on migration. These variations depend on the backgrounds of individuals, including their educational level, age, cultural background, and gender. More specifically, stakeholders interviewed mentioned that men seem to have better resources to access and make use of information compared to women. This refers to critically engaging with information, and accessing a wider range of information sources to assess information accuracy and reliability. More generally, they also mentioned that those living in cities are able to acquire and use relevant information better than Iraqis living in rural areas.



Map of Iraq showing the selected study provinces

Informational needs of returnees

Among the returnees and stakeholders interviewed in Iraq, there was a clear consensus that many returnees to the country did not wish to undertake a migratory journey again, citing that they would not want to experience the same circumstances and uncertainties en route and in countries of destination. Stakeholders mentioned that one of the drivers for return was lack of access to family reunification measures, a prospect that could not be implemented for many Iraqi migrants after they reached Europe. The returnees interviewed highlighted that knowledge of family reunification modalities and eligibility, as well as ways to access financial and legal support are essential for a successful migration journey.

Institutional Challenges

Institutions and non-governmental organisations working in Iraq face a number of challenges that hinder their outreach to potential migrants and returnees and the impact they could have on different communities.

One of the main challenges is the the **limited geographic and demographic outreach**, specifically to communities in need of information. Minority groups, women and those living

in rural areas, were identified as requiring additional efforts to raise awareness and provide support. Another challenge hampering efforts is the **security situation in many provinces** including areas such as Ninewa, Anbar, and Kirkuk, provinces where many potential migrants live and are trying to escape the deteriorating safety conditions. Another important aspect related to the landscape of institutions and organisations and the lack of legal umbrella, as well as the **limited integration and cooperation** between institutions, whose mandates sometimes **conflict**. These factors could be considered particularly relevant to the current context with regard to camp closures and reintegration of IDPs into home and host communities.

Finally, **citizens' distrust of government institutions** creates an additional hurdle to building public confidence and carrying out any activities and operations for potential migrants and returnees. The majority of potential migrants and returnees doubted the ability or willingness of the Iraqi Central Government and the Kurdish Regional Government to provide support in terms of migration information needs. This has been a key factor cited by Iraqi migrants from Kurdistan who availed themselves of the recent Eastern Borders route.

Recommendations and Areas of intervention

- To increase outreach efforts to remote and other communities in need, field staff would have to be deployed and trained to specifically target particular subgroups such as women, religious and ethnic minorities and rural citizens. Such outreach should focus on informational gaps among these communities.
- Efforts should be made to address the underlying drivers of migration, primarily looking at the security situation in particular provinces and the overall living standards of vulnerable migrants and returnees. Efforts to improve trust with institutional stakeholders would support migrants' improved access to accurate information on migration.
- The role of the Migrant Resource Centre and other information outreach activities in Iraq should encompass both highlighting dangers of irregular migration as well as guidance on safe and regular migration pathways, including visa regimes and migration arrangements both in person and through social media platforms. Where information outreach highlights risks to migrants, focusing on financial risks may be more effective than physical and security risks in the Iraqi context. Providing balanced information and focusing on where migrants lack accurate information already would support

migrants in their decision-making process and potentially redirect them to safer routes.

- Organisations working on providing support to potential migrants and returnees should work on increasing their visibility and outreach. None of the potential migrants and returnees were aware of support opportunities or the institutions providing them.

Iraq remains an important country of origin and return, with relevant implications for both Iraq and European countries of destination. As demonstrated by the most recent migratory trends through the Eastern Borders route, the need for information provision through various channels, including social media, is essential in order to maximise outreach to prospective migrants. Additionally, the need to understand the drivers and vulnerabilities of different migrant groups in the country, including IDPs, female migrants, and ethnic and religious minorities, is essential in addressing their informational needs.

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