Living on the Edge: Syrian Kurdish Refugees in the KRG

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In what follows, I examine the conditions of Syrian Kurdish refugee in Iraqi Kurdistan (KRG), how they manage to cross the border into the KRG, and the changing regulations that govern their movement. I draw on observations made from mid-2012 to 2014. Syrian Kurds began to flee to the KRG in mid-2011. Military deserters and those who wanted to avoid conscription were among the first to enter the KRG. Stateless Kurds, those whom the Syrian government had stripped of their citizenship in the 1960s, also constituted a large group of refugees. As the conflict in Syria intensified and fighting spread to the country’s major cities, Kurdish families began to flee Damascus and Aleppo. Their ethnic, familial, and cultural affinities with Kurds on the Iraqi side motivated Syrian Kurds to choose Iraqi Kurdistan as a sanctuary.

It is worth mentioning that the presidential decree with regard to granting citizenship to stateless Kurds did not make a clear reference as to whether it indeed includes the ‘Maktumin,’ a second-class stateless category. Maktumin, literally meaning ‘the muted,’ are mostly the descendants of stateless Kurds who are considered foreigners (or ajanib). According to Rudaw TV, of the 250,000 Syrian refugees more than 70 thousands are Maktumin in the KRG (8 November 2013).

When I first visited Domiz Camp, located just west of Duhok, in the fall of 2012, it hosted more than 15,000 residents. Upon my second visit in 2013, the camp had expanded drastically. Currently, there are nine camps for Syrian Kurds in the KRG. They are Domiz, Qoshtapa, Basirma, Kawergosk, Darshukran, Erbet, Gawilan, Akre, and Miqobile. The last of these, Miqobile, was built in 2004, in the aftermath of Qamishli uprising/events, and it still hosts around 70 families. In addition to these camps for Syrian Kurds, the KRG also hosts three camps for Iranian Kurds and one for the Kurds of Turkey called Makhmour. Over the years, the camps of Makhmour and Kawa have transformed into small towns and hardly resemble conventional refugee camps anymore. The residents live in houses made of concrete or mud bricks. With their own schools, shops, and other civil services, the two camps have developed their own economies.

The Syrian Kurds’ camps are developing their economies slowly as well. “We have all kinds of shops here in Domiz Camp: barbers, bakeries, clothing stores, electronics shops, and cafes.” With a mischievous smile on his face, Rezan a thirty-year old resident added: “The only shops missing here are jewelry shops!” The camp administration allows each tent to operate one shop. Inside the camp, shops of all kinds are on the main street dividing the camp into two areas. Even the roads dividing the camp into small sections have shops. The last time I visited Domiz camp, which was in January of 2014, shops were being opened at both sides of the street leading to the camp’s main gate.

According to the UNHCR’s April 2014 report, more than 55% of the refugees are not living in camps. This is especially the case for the youth and young professionals whose qualifications enable them to find work in Iraqi Kurdistan’s larger cities. Syrian Kurdish youth often accept employment at restaurants, hotels, and the numerous malls which have opened in the cities of Duhok, Erbil, and Sulaimani. Some of the deserters of Syrian military service are trained by the KRG.

In general, the KRG does not impose strict rules on the refugees’ movement inside its territory. From my observation over one year, restrictions on refugees’ movement are often adopted when the KRG and PYD have political disputes, or in times of emergency. For instance, on 26 September 2013, when the KRG’s capital Erbil was rocked by six suicide bombings, the refugees of Domiz camp were not allowed to travel outside of the Duhok governorate to Erbil and Sulaimani, and those registered in Sulaimani and Erbil were not permitted to enter the Duhok governorate.
Before the Syrian uprising of 2011, the Syrian-Iraqi border was under the tight control of the Syrian authorities. Travelling to and from the Kurdish region in Iraq had to be done secretly. As the uprising continued and the grip of the Syrian government on its border with Iraq weakened, many Syrian Kurds were able to travel across more freely. Border crossings were relatively easy from 2011 to mid-2012. However, as the political landscape changed in the Kurdish areas of Syria (aka Rojava) and the PYD emerged as the leading power, growing political disputes began to affect the flow of people. Currently, the KRG and the PYD are in complete control of the Syrian-Iraqi border in the Kurdish areas.

Between 2011 and 2013 the border was closed at least three times. In addition to making entering the KRG difficult, the border closure entailed that if relatives were visiting refugees on the other side of the border they were stuck. At times, they were involuntarily registered as refugees themselves. Such closures also ended labor-visits. Prior to 2012, a number of Syrian Kurds would come to the KRG to work for Turkish companies in and around Duhok for short periods of time (usually for three months). Afterwards, they would return home. Zana, a father of three children, was one such migrant worker. I met him in October 2013. He would enter the KRG, avoid registering with UNHCR, and look for work. Those registered with UNCHR cannot return to Syria. Otherwise, they will not be accepted as refugees when they re-enter the KRG in the future (should the situation deteriorate).

Late 2013, when the sister of Narin and Zozan passed away in Derik (or Malkieh in Arabic) in Syria, the two women wanted to attend her funeral. When they crossed the border into Syria, they did not hand in their UNHCR forms at the checkpoint (as that would have meant that they are no longer in need of asylum). Exiting the KRG involves less bureaucratic scrutiny than entering. The two sisters stayed in Syria for two weeks after which they decided to re-join their husbands who had remained on the Iraqi side. While the two sisters were in Syria, a new dispute had broken out between the KRG and PYD, which resulted in stricter border patrols on both sides. The two sisters, therefore, tried to enter the KRG through the Syrian-Iraqi border near the disputed areas between the KRG and the central Iraqi government. The journey took them eight hours since they had to travel to Mosul and then to Duhok, where Domiz camp is located – as opposed to two or three hours had they entered from the closer border checkpoint. In addition to taking longer, the journey was frightening for the women. They worried about being arrested. Moreover, being smuggled cost them 500 USD. This is a rather large amount of money, considering that refugees typically earn between 200 and 500 USD a month.

The KRG and PYD’s disputes have led recently to the establishment of a 17 km trench (30 km by other reports) along the Syrian-Iraqi border, making crossings even more difficult. The KRG claim the trench will prevent extremists from entering the KRG with their vehicles, which might carry...
explosives. The PYD views the trench as part of a coordinated plan with Turkey to impose economic and political embargoes on the autonomy they declared in the Kurdish areas of Syria. It is worth noting that the KRG does not recognize PYD’s declaration of autonomy in Rojava on the grounds that PYD does not share authority with other Syrian Kurdish parties. Like most disputes between the KRG and PYD, it is likely that refugees and Kurds on the Syrian side will bear the brunt of the difficulty posed by the trench as it entails stricter rules with regard to movement.

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