A small country for more men?
Iraqi Kurdistan and recent inflows of migration

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Abstract

In this article[2] I intend to deal with recent trends of migration into the areas under the control of the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq (KRG, Erbil). In the last decades, Iraq saw significant inflows and outflows of refugees across its borders with neighboring countries. The latest developments in Iraq/Syria – the interconnected problem of sectarian war, the Syrian crisis, and the emergence of ISIS – forced people with different ethnic and religious backgrounds to seek shelter in the Kurdish Regional Autonomy of Iraq (KRA) (in the territory governed from Erbil, but legally under the control of the central government in Baghdad). Approximately 1.5 million Arab people have thus fled to this relatively peaceful part of Iraq causing a huge demographic, social and economic burden for a *de facto* autonomous territory with an indigenous population of around 5 million. As a consequence, the once minority Kurds now shelter their Iraqi Arab compatriots who form the ethnic majority in Iraq. As many as 85% of the newcomers are from the non-Kurdish part of Iraq (mainly Sunni Arabs). The issue received further significance with the independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan on 25 September 2017. Other recent issues, such as the liberation of Mosul with its humanitarian impact, make for strained relations between Erbil and Baghdad.

In this complex political and security environment where the legal, political and social boundaries are fluid, the questions I am interested in examining in this article include whether the KRG seeks to instrumentalise (in any way) or securitise (to any extent) the presence of displaced persons in its territory?

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How can the situation between the local Kurds and their Arab guests be characterised? And in general: What is the status of the displaced people in Iraqi Kurdistan?

Keywords: Kurds, Iraq, IDPs, refugees, Syria, securitisation, small power

Introduction

The Middle East saw significant population movements related to displacement in the last decades. In this regard, the latest and most influential issue, the Syrian crisis forced millions of people[3] to seek shelter in the neighboring countries, including the already war-torn Iraq. The rise of the so-called Islamic State led to a paradox situation in which hundreds of thousands of refugees flowed from one warzone to another. The repeated movement of people was made possible by the fact that even in Syria and Iraq there were areas of relative peace with a capacity to house refugees and IDPs. Within Iraq this is true primarily in the KRA. Concerning the behavior of the KRG, I analyze four questions in this article: Is the presence of IDPs instrumentalised in any way by the KRG? Is the issue of refugees and IDPs securitized by Erbil? How can the situation between the local Kurds and their Arab guests be characterized? And finally: What is the status of these displaced people in Iraqi Kurdistan?

In the first part, I provide some background information on the latest movements of people. The second part will elaborate on the nature of the KRA, while in the third part the different policies of Erbil toward the newcomers will be discussed from the perspective of securitisation and "smallness" (with a view to the focus of the journal issue). This is followed by the evaluation of the status of refugees and IDPs.

A nation on fire, people on the move

Throughout their history, Kurds always lived in buffer zones of larger empires and nations: Arabs, Turks and Persians/Iranians. This status of "in-between-ness" made them vulnerable. After World War I the Kurdish-populated areas of the Middle East were divided among four countries. This led to the experience of the Kurds "themselves being and receiving refugees" (World Bank, 2015: 72). The leadership of Iraq in the 1970s used repression and sought to reshape the ethnic composition of Northern Iraq. The process of "Arabization" intensified during the Iraq–Iran War (1980–1988) when the Kurds in Iraq were regarded by the government of Baghdad as a fifth column of the Iranian forces.

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[3] According to the latest data (as of 19 October 2017 and 6 July 2016, respectively) provided by the UNHCR, the number of Syrian refugees is 5,306,503, and there are approximately 6.5 million IDPs. See (UNHCR, 2017) and (UNHCR, 2016).

Up until the 1990s these issues were only regarded as domestic problems by the international community. Only the genocidal actions of the Iraqi forces against the Iraqi Kurds between 1986–1989[4] made the Western powers realize the necessity of intervention and the provision of assistance for the Iraqi Kurds against the majority Arab population (UN Security Council Resolution 688 of April 1991). Thus after the Gulf war of 1991, the Iraqi Kurds came under international protection that practically meant relative autonomy in the northern part of Iraq. According to the agreement, the international community secured Iraq (by introducing a no-fly zone) north of the 36th parallel (ORSAM, 2010: 8). This provided the opportunity for the Iraqi Kurds to get rid of the Sunni administration of Saddam Hussein. However, during the 1990s the Iraqi Kurds suffered from the consequences of double economic embargoes: on the one hand there was an economic embargo imposed by the UN on the whole country; on the other hand the central Iraqi government also implemented economic restrictions towards the northern part of the country (Abdulrahman, 2017: 1).

In 2003, the tables turned when the US-led intervention brought relative safety and prosperity for the once persecuted Shiites and Kurds.[5] The pace of emigration from Iraq slowed down until the reescalation of violence after 2003 in the central areas of Iraq. The new Iraqi constitution of 2005 recognized the KRG as a distinct political entity (in a federation) with its own rights (Khidhir, 2017: 147) and gave Erbil the right of comprehensive self-governance. This relative independence did not, however, save the Region from the repercussions of the worsening security situation in Iraq even as the Kurdish-inhabited areas were largely free of kidnapping, rape and terrorist attacks. Between 2007 and 2014 one million people were added to the population of the KRA. This 23% growth (relative to 2007) is due the repeated waves of Arabs fleeing from the constant infighting in the central areas of Iraq and the return of previously displaced Kurds from neighboring countries (World Bank, 2015: 52).

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[4] The retaliation (the so-called "Anfal campaign") reached its zenith with the massacre in the Kurdish town of Halabja on 16 March 1988 when the Saddam Hussein regime (1979–2003) killed almost 5,000 people during a gas attack. "Between 1980 and 1988, the Ba'ath [Saddam's party] regime destroyed some 4000 villages, displacing up to a million people, and eviscerating rural Iraqi Kurdistan" (Fawcett and Tanner, 2002: 9). As a consequence of these years, 1.5 million Kurds fled to Iran and half a million to Turkey by the time the Gulf War of 1991 began (Thibos, 2014:3).

[5] Right before the invasion, there were around 600,000 IDPs in the Kurdish part of Iraq and 300,000 Shia people displaced in the central areas of Iraq (Thibos, 2014:4.)

The constant state of crisis around the Region has risen further in the summer of 2014 with the emergence of the so-called Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The terrorist organisation threatened the very existence of the Iraqi Kurds, but they were capable of capitalising on the memories of the international community about the infamous Anfal campaign and could thus mobilise assistance.[6] The KRG received weapons and training from different Western countries and with Western air support managed to stop ISIS by August 2014.

After the fall of Mosul to ISIS (during 4–10 June 2014), 131,400 people fled to the Region. Two months later, this was followed by an additional 492,000 people from the territories north of Mosul (ekurd, 2014a). As a result of this mass inflow of people, within a year (until March 2015) the population of Iraqi Kurdistan has grown by 28% (ekurd, 2015a). Concerning the religious and ethnic composition of the displaced people, there arrived Christians, Sunnis, Shias, Alevis, Kurds, Syrians, Iraqis and Turkmen. From the Turkmen-majority region of Tal Afar, nearly half a million people arrived. Together with the 400,000 Yezidi Kurds escaping from Sinjar district, they were the first victims of ISIS' brutal campaign. KRG sources estimate that about 200,000 Iraqi Christians were forced to leave their homes (ekurd, 2017a). A pattern emerged whereby Shia Turkmen fled mostly to the central and southern parts of the country where Shias constitute the majority, while Sunnis chose the predominantly Sunni region of Iraqi Kurdistan (van Zoonen and Wirya, 2017: 12). This same pattern repeated in the case of other refugees and IDPs as well. Christians and Yazidis fled to Iraqi Kurdistan due to its proximity and its relatively tolerant religious atmosphere. The longer this redistribution of people is to last, the more the separation among religions and ethnicities will be reinforced (Thibos, 2014: 2).

As for the population movement from Syria, the first arrivals can be dated to the intensification of the Syrian conflict: by August 2012, about 16,000 Syrians arrived to the Domiz refugee camp in the northwestern part of the KRA (IAU, 2012), but a year later their numbers reached 150,000 (BBC, 2013). The rise of ISIS gave a push to these movements: only within a week in the end of September 2014, when the siege of the Syrian Kurdish city, Kobane, started, 130,000 Syrian refugees were transferred through Turkey to the KRA (Thibos, 2014: 9). These Syrians were predominantly from the Kurdish parts of Syria (YouTube, 2013). They speak the Kurmanji Kurdish dialect, and have closer social and economic ties to Duhok province in the north where they took refuge (cabinet, n.d.a).

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[6] The case of Kurds fleeing from the security forces of Saddam Hussein contributed to the development of the notion of humanitarian intervention in that the notion of responsibility gained ground related to it: that responsibility should be taken by all governments for the wellbeing of their citizens. The emergence of the notion of "human security" in the 1990s may also be interpreted as a part of this process.

The reconquest of Mosul between 16 October 2016 and 17 July 2017 signified the conclusion of the fight against the Islamic State. As a result of the siege by the Iraqi forces, a total of 830,000 people were displaced (as of September 2017), and more than 150,000 people were hosted in five camps at the border of Erbil governorate (Khidhir, 2017). Although ISIS seems to be no imminent threat anymore, the stabilisation of the situation is a process that will probably take at least a few more years.

Sovereignty, institutions and identities in a state-like entity[7]

It is crucial to examine the nature of sovereignty in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, since the mandate to control the borders of a political entity and the regulation of inward and outward movements of people is deeply rooted in the current international system based on sovereignty (Dannreuther, 2016: 231).

The KRA has several attributes and symbols of a sovereign state[8] but certainly not all. It may be better to refer to it as a small power, since it is not fully independent. The KRA is *de iure* part of a federal state,[9] but it can be regarded as a *de facto* state as well due to effective independence in running its affairs from the central government of Iraq. Since its *de facto* independence is not recognised by Baghdad and the international community the KRA’s status remains transitional – shaped by the actual dynamics of the interested parties regionally and globally. Since the term “state” in this case is legally not justifiable, I remain committed to the use of “Region,” or alternatively “autonomous territory” and “small power.”

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[7] This is a reference to Černy who aptly writes that the KRG is a „state-like polity remaining within but at the same time apart from Iraq.” (Černy, 2017:251)

[8] Provided by the Iraqi Constitution of 2005, the KRA has “its own President, Prime Minister and parliament; its own flag and national anthem; its own army that has the right to prevent the federal Iraqi army from entering the Kurdish region; its own international airports and educational system in which Kurdish is the principal language of instruction; and even its own stamp entered into the passports of visitors.” (Gunter, 2016:136)

[9] The area of the region is 40,643 km², however, it is 78,736 km^2 including disputed territories. There is a significant growth (50%) in the territories under Kurdish control since 2014 when the Peshmerga started to advance in the fight against ISIS. (Abdulrahman, 2017:14.) The estimated population as of September 2015 is 5,472,436 (without refugees). (Rudaw, 2015)

The internal political dynamics of the KRA can be described first of all with reference to the dominance of the two families leading the two main Iraqi Kurdish parties: the Barzanis (KDP, Kurdistan Democratic Party) and the Talabanis (PUK, Patriotic Union of Kurdistan). The division of powers between them originates from the conclusion of a round of civil war between them in 1998. It resulted in the institutionalization of the already existing[10] parallel structures of governance.[11] A client-based party structure contributed to the formation of top-down institutions loyal to the parties and blurred the lines between political and economic classes as well as the ruling party and the state (Hassan, 2015: 5–6). In this "sultanistic system"[12] where Masoud Barzani as the President and his nephew Nechirvan Barzani as the Prime Minister have the most influential roles, people are often more inclined to act based on partisan identity (*jamawer*) than on the national one.[13]

However, there was a significant shift in the influence of the two parties with the emergence of a new, ideologically committed party, the Gorran Movement, in 2009. This new formation hit hard on the PUK in two elections, while the KDP managed to capitalise on the economic boom in the KRA after 2004. The shift in the balance of power led the KDP to use the deadly riots in Suleymaniya in 2015 to condemn the Gorran Movement "as an existential threat to Kurdish societal and national security." Allegedly, they were planning a coup against Masoud Barzani. In October 2015, Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani therefore dismissed the ministers belonging to the Gorran Movement from the cabinet (Hama and Connelly, 2017: 10).

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[10] For the Iraqi Kurds the last quarter of century is about self-governance, thus they have a certain degree of "state" experience.

[11] "In many respects, this style of governance is closer to resembling a security dilemma than a consociation." (Hama and Conelly, 2017:4.)

[12] With reference to Hassan, 2015

[13] With regard to the question of identity Hama and Connelly (2017:6) writes that "Kurdistan's society encompasses multiple intersecting, and competing identities including family, tribal, religious and ethnic identities." Barzani's "ideology can be described as post-modern, where several layers of sovereignty overlap… complement each other', and are constantly renegotiated". (Černy, 2017:250–251) This can be best illustrated by the fact that not only the Iraqi state itself, but Iraqi Kurdistan also has territories with "different levels of stability and styles of governance" under its control. (Paasche, 2014:2129.) Paasche calls this phenomenon not as a failed state, but a "postcolonial security state" which is a plural area of different non-governmental actors where "de facto arrangements rework and produce landscapes of power and territorialization." The complexity on the ground in this respect can be illustrated by the situation in the Qandil Mountains: this is the area controlled by the main representatives of Kurds in Turkey, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). This situation is a result of an old deal between Masoud Barzani and the PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan. In reality it means that the KRG de iure controls the territory and responsible for the citizens, however, the PKK has the de facto monopoly over the security forces. (Paasche, 2014:2126.)

Although the KRG cannot override the sovereignty of Iraq by its own legislative acts, the political relations with the central government (Baghdad) can be best described by the lack of clarity in dividing responsibilities (Abdulrahman, 2017). The undefined nature of several disputed issues (oil and gas resources and exports, finances,[14] territorial questions[15]) causes continuous political tensions between the two governments.

In terms of its international outlook, the KRG has been pursuing an active paradiplomacy[16] as the only legitimate governmental representative of the Kurdish issue. For example, Masoud Barzani visited Obama in May 2015 (Gunter, 2016:136) and he built ties with key neighbour Turkey. Today, all five permanent member states of the UN Security Council operate consulates in the KRA (Zaman, 2016: 3). The Kurdish military force, the *Peshmerga* is a key ally of the United States in the fight against ISIS.[17]

Border control: challenges for the military sector

The Peshmerga and the Kurdish intelligence service, the *Asayish* are responsible for the military security of the Region. For screening all the incoming people, there are many checkpoints at the borders and inside the country. Regulation concerning registration and the issuance of residency permits varies in every governorate of the KRA (WANA Instiute, 2016: 43). In principle, those Iraqi citizens that are not registered in the KRA need to have a supporter in the region that provides an invitation (Paasche, 2014: 2120).

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[14] According to the constitution, the KRA is entitled to 17% of the federal budget of Iraq. (In 2013 this amount totaled $18 billion) (Zebari, 2013). Since 2014, however, the Iraqi government rejected to transfer the money to Erbil. To make matters worse, Erbil may only receive funding from international financial institutions (World Bank or IMF) through Baghdad (Noori, 2016: 13).

[15] In the so-called disputed territories the population consists of Kurds, Arabs and Turkmen. In these cases, the Kurds refer to the historical “Kurdish characteristics” of these lands – the most important of them being the city of Kirkuk due to its oil and gas resources. These territories went through the process of “Arabisation” during the Saddam era, thus making it impossible now to find a clear ethnic boundary between Arabs and Kurds that would be acceptable as a federal border for both parties. Although both Baghdad and Erbil lay claim to the disputed territories, these lands suddenly turn into no man’s land when it comes to governmental assistance to the population. In the same manner, the central government is often reluctant to coordinate the return of the Arab IDPs to their places of origin. Beyond intentional delay, the reasons can be the limited availability of necessary resources to tackle the problem, and the fact that the central government has to cope with the crisis not only in relation to the relatively small Iraqi Kurdistan, but across the entire country. To illustrate the scale of the ongoing process of return: “By March 2017, nearly 1.6 million individuals have returned to their places of origin, primarily in Anbar, Salah al-Din, Diyala and Ninewa” (IOM, 2017:1). Even before the rise of ISIS there were some instances of disagreements between the Iraqi and Kurdish security forces. These fights were limited in their nature, but showed the constant tensions between the two governments and risked the development of a full-blown war (Gunter, 2016: 136).

[16] Paradiplomacy is the conduct of international relations by subnational actors such as regional governments.

[17] In January 2017 the US announced that they are planning to build the biggest consulate in Erbil (Rudaw, 2017a).

It must be noted that security forces seem to inherently have a security-centered behavior, casting suspicion on newcomers as potential criminals and terrorists.[18] It is their task to look for the so-called "sleeping cells" of ISIS who may hide among the refugees and IDPs (ekurd, 2014a). Moreover, the recent fighting came with swift territorial changes. Related to this, Arab officials speak about the Peshmerga implementing a "scorched earth policy under the pretext of fighting ISIS" to the detriment of the Arab population in areas reconquered/taken from ISIS (Khidhir, 2017: 154).

Likewise, there are cases when the Peshmerga do not (or only selectively) allow the return of IDPs to certain territories referring to the threat caused by the ISIS. According to Human Rights Watch, this happened in the city of Makhmur, where Kurds were allowed to return, but the Arabs were not (ekurd, 2015c). In May 2017, Kurdish officials allegedly gave a deadline for the Arab residents to leave the contested territory of Kirkuk (ekurd, 2017b).[19]

Economic crisis: The end of "the other Iraq"?

The analysis of economic problems[20] sheds light on another face of the KRA as a small power. With a view to changes in its economic performance, the management of the refugee crisis management may be better understood as challenge faced under scarcity.

After 2005, the Iraqi Kurdistan region was often labeled as "the other Iraq," making a distinction between Erbil and Baghdad not only in terms of security, but also concerning governance and economic achievements. The fact that between 2004 and 2012 the KRA managed to reach a yearly increase of around 10% of gross product clearly shows the difference. Besides, in 2014, as much as 55% of all the investments coming to Iraq took place in the Kurdistan Region (WANA Institute, 2016: 30). However, even behind this economic boom, there were several structural problems that made the KRA vulnerable. These issues are interlinked with the institutional characteristics of the Region described above. The whole economy is organized through party lines and has close connections to party politics. Protectionism and nepotism work through party patronage networks, thus corruption penetrates every aspect of society.[21] Oligopolies hinder the emergence of a competitive and efficient business environment and contribute to the lack of a middle class and civil society. Without them, none of the Region's economic sectors can compete with Iranian and Turkish service providers.[22] There are huge discrepancies in wealth distribution (in horizontal and vertical terms as well): 50% of the state budget is allocated to the payment of public employees and pensions, albeit 85% of the recipients are not poor (Hama and Connelly, 2017: 9). Most importantly, the KRA is a resource economy meaning that the state budget is excessively based on oil incomes,[23] and the negative consequences of the oil price shock of 2014 showed that the economic layout of the KRA cannot provide a flexible answer to this external challenge.

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[18] IDPs coming from Mosul to Iraqi Kurdistan are potential "security threats" according to a Peshmerga commander (ekurd, 2016b).

[19] Human Rights Watch also accused the KRG of plundering the homes of Iraqi Christians under the guise of counter-terrorism. Between June 2014 and February 2015, the Iraqi Kurdish intelligence service detained 322 people in Erbil province suspected of terrorism (ekurd, 2015c). There were also reports about restrictions of free movement that the IDPs settled in camps around Kirkuk had to face (ekurd, 2016c).

[20] This section is mainly based on MERI, 2016, if not referred otherwise.

As a result of the crisis of 2014, the government was forced to enact austerity measures to tackle the emerging problems and prevent the catastrophic failure of the Region. As a consequence of the sharp reduction of public expenses, public salaries have gone unpaid for months and 720,000 government employees received only less than half of their monthly salaries since the end of 2015 (Khidhir, 2017). Because of the rise and destructive presence of ISIS, there was a significant drop in investment flows as well, causing the Region's real estate bubble to burst. According to estimations, the previous economic growth of 8% fell back to only 3% in 2014, and the poverty rate jumped from 3.1% to 8.1% (World Bank, 2015: 60).

Under these harsh circumstances the reception of refugees and IDPs seemed even more a challenging task. The incoming flow of people also had a negative impact on economic security. The rising demand for rents puts an upward pressure on the housing sector making poor households even more vulnerable.[24] (In Erbil, rent prices doubled between 2009 and 2014.) Also, there is a serious lack of employment opportunities, and the problem is even worse concerning the fact that the newcomers are mainly a population of potentially active workers (World Bank, 2015: 54). They are more desperate than the host community, thus often taking jobs for less money. In the KRA, 69% of the Syrians work in the informal sector doing low-skilled or manual work. (WANA Institute, 2016: 43).

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[21] Corruption shows itself in the management of the humanitarian situation as well: there are reports that thousands of "ghost" IDPs and refugees reside in the territory of the KRA (ekurd, 2016d). Officials can use these higher numbers to receive more aid from the central authorities and the international community.

[22] "By 2013, more than half the 2,500 foreign companies in the Kurdistan Region were Turkish-owned. About 85% of KRG trade activities comprised imports from Turkey, valued at over $10 billion" (Khidhir, 2017: 148).

[23] The origin of approximately 90% of the government budget is either transferred from Baghdad (until 2014) or coming from oil resources (MERI, 2016: 24). After 2014, when the oil exports through Baghdad were halted and the use of the Kirkuk–Ceyhan pipeline through Turkey began, the KRG changed the dependency on Iraq to a dependency on Turkey (Noori, 2016: 2). By this move, the KRG has chosen alliance with a regional power "over their ethnic brethren across borders" (Khidhir, 2017: 159). The downside of this relationship is that the Turks are interested in the *status quo* in the KRA, since from their perpective there is a delicate balance between the acceptance of the KRG as a political and commercial partner and the rejection of its independence (Zaman, 2016: 20). This attitude can be seen in the negative reactions of Ankara after the Kurdish independence referendum of 25 September 2017.

[24] In Sulaymaniyah province of Iraqi Kurdistan the purchasing power of the Arabs was so strong that the local council introduced new regulation restricting purchase of property by "non-Kurds." In legal terms they referred to the constitution that clearly prohibits any attempt that seeks to change the demographic

On the positive side: the presence of more people means more opportunity to trade, and around 50% of the Arab IDPs have a salary, therefore they can participate in the commercial market of the cities (ekurd, 2016e). There are further avenues of possible cooperation between the locals and the “foreigners”: in some sectors (e.g. in the agriculture) the Syrian refugees have better work experience, and the utilisation of this potential could enable the transfer of certain skills and know-how that the local population lacks (WANA Institute, 2016: 67).

Social connections and public perception

Due to the limited capacity of camps and unavailability of funds, only the most vulnerable families of the refugees and IDPs can go to camps[25] (YouTube, 2017), although they are not entitled to the social benefits provided by the KRG (pension, cash allowances, health care, and social security) (MERI, 2015:5). Refugees are not eligible to own land, property or run a business outside the camp (MERI, 2015:28). Syrian refugees can freely move in and out of the camps to seek work opportunities. For formal employment they need a temporary residency card, which as many as 90% of the Syrians possess (MERI, 2015: 34). Both in the refugee population and the host communities around 32% are employed between 16 and 59 ages. This data shows not only a significant amount of inactive individuals, but also refers to striking gender disparities: while 57% of males are employed, only 6% of the female population has a job (MERI, 2015: 25).

In certain areas of the KRA (including the disputed territories), the demographic layout totally reversed[26] (YouTube, 2015). For example, since 2014, approximately

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fabric of the country (ekurd, 2015d). However, the constitution also states that “Iraqis are entitled to work and live in all the 19 provinces of Iraq without any distinction based on their religious or ethnic backgrounds (ekurd, 2015e). Finally, on 16 June 2016 after nine months, the local council withdrew this legislation.

[25] Extremities of the weather mean huge challenges for both the camp residents and those living in urban areas. (MMP, 2017b:3) Intermittent service of electricity poses a serious problem in summertime: the deficiencies in the proper cooling of food and the constant heat in the cramped, overcrowded tents often lead to diseases.

[26] The province of Dohuk in the northernmost part of Iraq is affected by the humanitarian crisis the most: refugees and IDPs arrived here constitute half of the local population. To accommodate the newcomers, the

38,000 Arabs from Fallujah (Central Iraq) arrived to the city of Shaqlawa, a city northeast of Erbil, with an original population of 25,000 Kurds (YouTube, 2016). Beyond this extreme case, it is also a negative development for the Kurds that the predominantly Arab newcomers arrived mainly to the disputed territories, thus threatening the Kurdish plans to alter the demographic characteristics of these areas by their presence.[27]

Naturally, after these conspicuous examples, there were negative statements from officials commenting on the ethnic threat that the newcomers bring. Anwar Tahir, a member of the provincial council in Sulaymaniyah contended that “the demographic map of Kurdistan is being silently altered” (ekurd, 2015e). In the capital, young people demonstrated against the growing number of refugees and IDPs (YouTube, 2014).

However, “Iraqi Kurds of all ages have vivid memories of being displaced themselves, many of them multiple times, and the empathy and understanding of the plight of forced displacement is therefore wide-spread and deep-rooted” (World Bank, 2015: 74). Since the Kurds share more or less similar socialization patterns with the Arabs and a majority of them have the same Sunni religion, language and culture are those factors that really distinguish the newcomers from the host community.[28] The existence of cross-border community ties (through mixed marriages) also helped manage the difficulties (WANA Institute, 2016: 48).

A recent publication brough light to the perceptions of the Syrian refugees toward the host community (MMP, 2017a). According to the report, there are serious deficiencies in terms of the most basic needs of the refugees, not only because of the insufficient funding [half a billion USD for Iraq as a whole in 2017] (FTS, 2017), but more importantly because of the high level of bribery, corruption and favoritism as well. Discontent of the Syrian refugees and IDPs from Iraq is palpable in every respect (food, healthcare, employment, housing, general services). Yet, even so, the recipients account of a high level of respect by the authorities and the host community toward them (MMP, 2017b: 11–12). Likewise, Syrian refugees feel relatively safe in the camps, with only 9% of them reporting the feeling of insecurity (MERI, 2015: 34).

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authorities had to use public buildings, (ekurd, 2014a) but it was necessary for this large amount of people to occupy unfinished buildings where they were exposed to the forces of nature. (ekurd, 2014a) According to estimations, 40% of the refugees and IDPs live in these buildings. (ekurd, 2014b)

[27] The feeling of threat is expressed in fear of Kurds from Sunni Arabs still being loyal to the ISIS. In this sense, the terrorists managed to achieve one of their goals by spreading fear among people of the same country.

[28] Since Arabic is an official language in Iraqi Kurdistan, the language barrier is not insurmountable.

Securitisation and nation building

In this final section, I intend to answer the initial question regarding the securitisation of the refugee issue in Iraqi Kurdistan. The author accepts the subjective perception of security[29] and maintains that security is not a static phenomenon, but a process that has an ever-changing nature. The levels of security can be various, and its meaning (perception of security) is always different for every actor.

According to the concept of securitisation, an issue may rise to the level of securitisation, becoming a question of survival, by way of an effort by key (usually government) actors to convince their audience of the need for this. With support (or the lack of a challenge in this respect) from the audience, leaders may then be entitled to carry out extraordinary measures with a view to the theat (Marton, Rada and Balogh, 2015: 19-46; Szálkai and Stepper, 2015: 16). If this concept is applied in the context of the inflow of IDPs in the region of Iraqi Kurdistan, it might be argued that the KRG did not even engage in attempting to securitise the issue.[30]

Based on the above overview of the dynamics of the situation in the Region, and perceptions of the host community related to it (i.e. the people and government of Iraqi Kurdistan), a conclusion may be reached that the KRG did not try to benefit from the current humanitarian situation in terms of shaping the discourse along negative lines. Although there is an "us-them" distinction on the ground referring to the different ethnic background of Kurds and Arabs, the KRG does not use refugees and IDPs in its rhetoric to securitise relations between the communities. One explanation can be the claim that there is no need for strengthening the separation, because the Kurdish nation has its own well-defined, distinctive identity by now. The other interpretation is that an aggressive rhetoric might be counterproductive in a region where peaceful cohabitation with the Arab (and Turkish and Persian) neighbors is indispensable for survival.[31] As a third reason, Marta Silva mentions the inherent threat of making an enemy: "by demanding a concentration of efforts over the community constructed as a threat, the state loses the capability to deal with other issues or to address other problems" (Silva, 2015: 212). The KRG has to cope with other crises as well and as a small power there is not enough capacity on its part to approach the mass movement of people in a seucritised manner, and to monopolise the discoursive arena around the issue. For the Kurdish leaders, the international financial and military support[32] is more important; and the alienation of international public opinion by the massive discrimination and persecution of non-locals would be a suicidal strategy. It would not bring the KRA any closer to overcoming this crisis.

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[29] "…the sense of threat, vulnerability and (in)security are socially constructed rather than objectively present or absent" (Buzan et al., 1998: 50–51)

[30] The most "striking" comment of the President was when he called 1.5 million refugees and internally displaced people a "heavy burden" (Slavin, 2015).

[31] Interestingly, both the securitisation of the question and the peaceful settlement of the issue can be derived from the idea of survival. The latter is verified by the reasoning that the history of the Middle East and the Kurds is full of persecution and conflicts, therefore the most "secure" strategy for the future of the nation and its government is to not refrain from helping neighbors by all means available. This approach is also supported by the idea of hospitality deeply rooted in Islamic culture. Likewise, the significance of the extended community as a safety net for people in need is evident in the broader Middle East (MERI, 2015: 4). As it was shown, ethnic, social and religious affiliations play a huge role in determining the way refugees and IDPs move.

The official websites of the KRG thus address the question of cohabitation in a quite sympathetic narrative: "relations between refugees and the surrounding communities have been cordial for the most part" (cabinet, n.d.b); "there has been a reportedly sharp increase in antisocial behavior (i.e. petty crime, prostitution/'curb-crawling', licentiousness, larceny, begging) which is at least partly attributable to refugees being in an unfamiliar environment with strained economic resources" (cabinet, n.d.b). There is no mention of racial, ethnic or cultural distinction at all.

Moreover, these official sources even acknowledge the deficiencies of the governmental management of the refugee and IDP question, conceding that there is space for improvement (cabinet, n.d.c). By this "narrative of sincerity," the government reinforces its dependency on foreign donors with the aim of keeping the Kurds close to the international agenda.[33] This strategy of smallness and helplessness has the utmost importance, as these behaviors constitute the only source of legitimation that the KRA might receive from international actors.[34]

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[32] Acccording to the government, international organizations provide only 22% of the financial costs of the humanitarian crisis (cabinet, 2017).

[33] By uniting the cathegories of refugee and IDP, the KRG intends to portray its outstanding humanitarian efforts to its best advantage. By using this technique, a chart shown by following the reference below (dated from 2015) places Iraqi Kurdistan right behind Syria in the ranking of countries hosting the largest number of dislocated people. The same data in proportion to the local population of the recipient countries shows the KRA in the second position after Syria and ahead of Lebanon (Thekurdishproject, n.d.). Numbers and statistics are really important in the fight for the allocation of humanitarian aid and dominance in the discoursive field around refugees and IDPs. In the end of 2016, Baghdad and Erbil started a "war of numbers" concerning the refugees and IDPs they host. In this debate, Baghdad stated that there are less than one million displaced persons in the KRA, whereas Kurdish officials claimed that the Region hosts almost two million of these people including those Arabs who have fled to the region between 2003 and 2004 after the collapse of former regime (230,000). Now, they are not really IDPs, since they are integrated into the host community and "share the KRG's public services as any resident in the Region" (Rudaw, 2016)

[34] This may be illustrated by the non-supportive gestures of regional and global actors in the wake of the independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan (and the disputed territories) on 25 September 25 2017.

Nation-building through virtual enlargement – in lieu of a conclusion

The growing international legitimacy of the Kurds is the result of a successful project of brand management implemented by the KRG. Politically and militarily the KRG is not large enough to unite all the Kurds. However, the Region itself formulates the most important part of the Kurdish ethnicity: Iraqi Kurdistan is the largest Kurdish entity, led by quasi-independent representatives of the Kurds, and successfully utilises a "Kurdish" brand that was clearly manifested in the fight against the Islamic State.[35] As a consequence of external and internal issues (of which the refugee and IDP question is but one), the KRA enjoyed larger international attention[36] than could have been expected based on its size and status – even if the actual governmental role in this process was more or less passive.

After the disappearance of the direct threat of ISIS, the (Iraqi) Kurds have to shift the focus of the brand by capitalising on the issues of moderate political direction, secularisation, protection of religious minorities and women[37] (cabinet, n.d.d), democratic institutions,[38] and the image of reliability in general – ideas that have a basis within Iraqi Kurdistan. These values constitute a niche that the Kurds (and especially the Iraqi Kurds) can, in the environment of the Middle East, utilise to stand preeminent among the neighbors and thus rise beyond the scope of a small power.[39] Practically speaking, the region does not have significant potential based on knowledge or innovation as a factor of production, or even substantial economic performance that could make them non-reliant on the material and immaterial goods provided by external actors, including neighbouring countries.[40] However, Kurds can be the "beacon of western values and a faithful ally of the United States" (Hama and Conelly, 2017: 3) instead. For this purpose, they may use soft power and remain committed to the solution of the humanitarian crisis taking place within and outside the Region.

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[35] Iraqi Kurds could distinguish themselves from the (Sunni) Arabs by the "narrative of innocence", i.e. by implying that they have no connection with ISIS, neither individually, nor collectively.

[36] It must be noted that even before the rise of ISIS, Iraqi Kurdistan depicted a benign picture of itself: it may be remarkable indeed that there were no casualties taken by US forces in Iraqi Kurdistan (Kelly, 2015). There were only two bomb attacks in Iraqi Kurdistan over the course of the last decade, in 2007 and in 2013 (Paashe, 2014: 2114).

[37] Ankawa in the northern part of Erbil city will host the largest church of the KRA. At present, the total number of churches and shrines is 127 and 34, respectively (Rudaw, 2017b).

[38] This argument is based on relative performance. As it was shown above, the KRG's record cannot be described as good governance at all, but compared to the other countries of the Middle East, the KRG had a tendency toward democracy before the crisis of 2014.

[39] Due to its special position among larger neighbors some call Iraqi Kurdistan "the Israel of the Arab States" (Kelly, 2015).

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[40] Out of three neighbors, Iran and central Iraq are competitors of the KRA in the field of oil and natural gas.

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