

**REPORT FROM A FACT-FINDING
MISSION TO NORTHERN IRAQ,
SYRIA AND JORDAN**

27 August – 11 September 2003

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Introduction

This report is based on information compiled by a Norwegian and Swedish delegation during a stay in northern Iraq from 31 August to 10 September 2003. The delegation visited the cities of Erbil, Mosul, Suleimaniya, Halabja, Biara and Tawellah and interviewed a number of sources in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), political parties, UN organizations, NGOs¹ and journalists (a detailed list can be found at the back of the report). The delegation held 33 meetings in Kurdistan. Some of the delegation members held four meetings in Damascus on arrival and three meetings in Amman after leaving Iraq. The Norwegian section of the delegation consisted of Dag Petterson, head of section and Elin Nordtug, adviser, from the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration and Sidsel Wiborg, adviser with the Immigration Appeals Board. The Swedish participants were Magnus Ryden from the Swedish Migration Board and Johan Stigenberg from the Aliens Appeals Board.

The purpose of the trip was to collect information about the situation in the Kurdish areas of Iraq (Kurdistan) after the war leading to the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. The aim was to collect updated information that can provide the basis for processing asylum applications from Kurds and other ethnic groups with origins in northern Iraq in view of the new situation in the country. In addition to information on the security situation in the area, particular interest was placed on information about the humanitarian situation and conditions for vulnerable groups, such as women and children. It was, moreover, important to clarify the opportunities for a return to northern Iraq, both for those who would like to return voluntarily and in connection with forced return.

The report is organized according to topic areas, and in those cases where a number of sources provided the same information, a summary of the information provided on each topic area will be given. The report is a reference and description and only includes information that is relevant for the immigration administration's processing of cases involving Iraqi Kurds. The names of the various Kurdish regional authorities, other parties and organizations are rendered in English. As they themselves go by their names in English, it must be assumed that using the English names will obviate any misunderstandings as to who the delegation has interviewed.

The members of the Swedish delegation will be writing their own report.

The security situation

There is no disagreement on the fact that the general security situation for the inhabitants in the Kurdish autonomous areas was good and stable prior to the war. Conditions in these areas improved substantially after 1997 when the military conflict between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) ceased. The positive development was further strengthened after the agreement between the parties in Washington in 1998. The Kurdish regional authorities have since cooperated and been able to provide protection for their inhabitants. Due process of law and respect for human rights have been placed on the agenda, and both local and international observers have agreed that there has been a significant improvement in the human-rights situation in this area in recent years.

¹ Non-Governmental Organizations

On arrival in northern Iraq the delegation was immediately informed by the Minister of Domestic Affairs in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) that information had just been received that plans had been uncovered for actions in northern Iraq as well, allegedly with the aim of destabilizing this region of Iraq as well. In the days that followed, the delegation was able to see that the Kurdish authorities implemented a number of security measures, particularly in those areas where foreign nationals lived or worked, such as the hotels where the delegation stayed. The day before the delegation left Iraq (9 September), a bomb detonated in a residential area near Erbil where Americans lived. An Iraqi national was killed and 47 were injured, among them six persons connected to the American Department of Defence. No one has so far claimed responsibility for the bomb. However, this appears to be the only action of this kind aimed at targets in the Kurdish-controlled area of Iraq since the war.

The attack on the UN's building in Baghdad on 19 August 2003 has, as we know, led the UN to withdraw such a large number of its personnel for security reasons that it has caused a dramatic reduction in the organization's activities in Iraq. This reduction has also included their activities in the Kurdish areas. The Swedish assistance organization Qandil and Norwegian People's Aid have not, however, cut back on their activities in Kurdistan. Representatives of these two organizations deemed security for their international staff to be satisfactory, and currently found no reason to believe that the unrest in the south would spread to the Kurdish areas.

The representative for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Suleimaniya believed that primarily representatives of the Iraqi authorities and representatives of the international presence in Iraq had reason to fear for their safety, but that the safety of these groups was substantially better in Kurdistan than in the rest of Iraq. The ICRC has reduced its activities to the same scale as the UN in the south, but has retained relatively more people in the north than what the UN has done.

Representatives of the Kurdish authorities claimed that they have the security situation in the Kurdish areas under control. They are cooperating with the Americans, but are not dependent on the Americans to provide safety for inhabitants in the areas that have been under the control of the Kurds since 1991. Kurdish leaders expressed a positive attitude to the Americans and spoke of them as cooperation partners, facilitators and advisers. They felt that the Americans were confident that the Kurdish regional authorities have the ability to handle their own security. The delegation did not see American soldiers operating in the areas that have been under Kurdish control since 1991.

In the Kurdish areas that until the war were under the control of Saddam Hussein's regime, including the cities Mosul and Kirkuk, the situation is somewhat different. The Tigris river splits Mosul into an Arabic and a Kurdish section. A joint administration has, nevertheless, been established in the city where the Governor is Arabic and the Deputy Governor is a Kurd. Assyrians and Turkmens are also represented in the administration of the city. The Kurdish authorities claim to have full control of Kirkuk and the other areas and that the inhabitants' security is good. The American presence there and in Mosul is greater, however, and the delegation personally witnessed American soldiers going into action against a car when entering Mosul.

A representative of the security service in Suleimaniya stated that the terrorist organization Ansar al-Islam has carried out only one action in the Kurdish areas after the war, when the

second in command of the security service was killed in an ambush on 30 August. This murder arose in connection with the fact that Ansar members apparently wanted to negotiate terms for surrender.

As to persons with connections to Saddam Hussein's regime, the Kurdish authorities stated that only those who committed criminal offences as a function of their positions under the previous regime would be prosecuted. The Deputy Governor of Mosul stated that when the Kurdish forces conquered the Kurdish areas that had been under control of the previous regime, virtually all Ba'ath members went underground. However, the majority reappeared when it became clear that only persons responsible for criminal offences would be arrested. The Deputy Governor repudiated the allegation that in Mosul there had been lynching or killing of persons connected to the previous regime.

The Kurdish representatives concurred that Kurds should not decline to return for security reasons, and that today there are no Kurds who need protection outside Iraq. In this connection we would like to add that the UNHCR's office in Damascus has not been visited by Iraqi nationals wishing to register as refugees.

The overall impression of the delegation based on observations and information from a broad range of sources is that the security situation in the region today is at least as good as it was prior to the war. This was confirmed by the delegation's Swedish members who had also been on a fact-finding mission to northern Iraq in October 2002.

The humanitarian situation - health

The situation for the health service in Kurdistan and the supply of medication and equipment was discussed with three interlocutors in Erbil, the Minister of Health and Social Affairs in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the Swedish aid organization Qandil and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the Minister of Relations and Cooperation in Suleimaniya.

The health service

Public hospitals and clinics are owned by the state and administered by the regional Kurdish authorities. There are also privately owned hospitals and clinics.

There are 12 hospitals in Erbil province, whereof five are in the city itself. Two are general hospitals with 400 beds each. The others are a clinic for women, a military hospital and an emergency clinic.

Dohuk province has seven hospitals, whereof two are in the city itself. Suleimaniya province has 26 hospitals. There are also 160 health clinics in Erbil province and 100 in Dohuk. There are 25 hospitals in Suleimaniya province. The delegation was unable to obtain information on how many health clinics are found in the rural districts. In general, though, conditions are not worse than in the other Kurdish-controlled areas.

Health services for psychiatric care in Kurdistan are very limited. In the city of Erbil there are three psychiatrists, in the city of Dohuk one and in the city of Suleimaniya two. These five are connected to universities and hospitals. There are only a very few psychologists. A number of hospitals have psychiatric wards, but there is no home for the chronically mentally ill. The only institution for the mentally ill in Iraq is in Baghdad.

Kurdistan has three universities with medical faculties. Erbil also offers nursing training, dental medicine and pharmaceutical studies, while nursing training and dental medicine are available in Suleimaniya.

According to the Minister of Health and Social Affairs in the KRG, a prioritized task is to upgrade and modernize the health service and strengthen the ties to the Ministry of Health in Baghdad. While the health service in Kurdistan does function, it has deficiencies and is old-fashioned in many areas. The basic training for doctors and other health service personnel is satisfactory, but a major problem is that for many years it has not been possible to take part in international research or send personnel abroad for further training. Moreover, specialists are sorely needed, as most of those who once were there have left Iraq and settled in Western countries.

According to the Minister of Relations and Cooperation in Suleimaniya, public hospitals are worn down and over-crowded and the supply of medication is unstable. However, the situation for the health service is showing signs of improvement, and the universities are training a number of doctors and other medical personnel.

According to a representative of Qandil, the training, books and other facilities have not been upgraded in many years. There is a great lack of modern technology and also of maintenance of medical equipment.

A new 100-bed hospital has been built in the city of Halabja (in Suleimaniya province, near the border with Iran) with a good standard and a separate maintenance budget. This hospital will probably satisfy the local population's primary needs for the next 20 years.

The health situation

The health situation is generally the same in the three Kurdish-controlled provinces of Dohuk, Erbil and Suleimaniya. In general the situation is better than it was during the 1990s and better than in the rest of Iraq. For example, the Minister of Health and Social Affairs referred to how malnutrition among children had declined significantly. Until 1994 malaria was a major problem in Kurdistan with 4000 cases in Erbil alone that year. In 2002 the figure was less than 100. No cases of cholera have been registered since 1999, and no cases of polio since 1998. All children are inoculated, including children in the rural districts. Infant mortality, the number of children who die before reaching the age of five, and the number of women who die giving birth are far lower in Kurdistan than in the rest of Iraq. The Minister emphasized that this positive development is a result of conscious efforts by the regional authorities. The quality of the drinking water in Kurdistan is also better than in southern Iraq. HIV and AIDS are practically unheard of. One case of HIV has been registered in Mosul and two cases in Kirkuk. In the Kurdish autonomous areas no cases have been registered, and there is systematic checking of blood donors. Substance abuse is very limited, and Kurdistan cannot be said to have a narcotics problem.

Medicines and medical equipment

Medical treatment and medicines are free in the public health system. Returned refugees are automatically conferred the same rights as others in this context.

The availability of medicines varies. There are problems with supplies, transport and distribution. The public health system has an inadequate number of ambulances, insufficient medical equipment and there is also a lack of spare parts for the equipment they have.

There is a greater supply of medicines in the private health service, but they are expensive and the quality varies. No medicines are produced in Kurdistan, and there are no laboratories that can check the medicines imported by the private health service. However, there is a private initiative to start production of medicines in Kurdistan which the public authorities are considering positively.

According to a representative of the aid organization Qandil, medicines, equipment and various medical examinations are more easily available in the private health care system than in the public health care system. Services in the private sector may be better, but the quality is generally more uneven than in the public health sector. It is also common for Kurds who can afford it to go to Syria or Iran for medical treatment that cannot be obtained in Kurdistan.

Kurdistan Save the Children pays for health services for children who have ties to the organization's various projects when private services are required. If necessary, the children are sent to one of the neighbouring countries for treatment. Save the Children then covers the expenses.

After the war, the IOM has initiated a project aimed at assisting patients who cannot be treated in Kurdistan so they may receive the necessary treatment abroad.

The human rights situation – special groups

Women

The topics of the position of women in Kurdish society, assistance focused on women and protection for vulnerable groups were discussed with the Deputy Governor of Mosul, the manager of a women's centre, the Hawlati newspaper and the party Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) in Erbil, and with three women's organizations, the Iraqi Communist Party (Toilers Party), the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) and Norwegian People's Aid in Suleimaniya.

When asked about the position and opportunities of women, the Kurdish Deputy Governor in Mosul stated that in his opinion Kurdish women in general had better conditions than other Iraqi women. As with the rest of Iraq, the Kurdish community is dominated by a tribal mentality, tradition and social conservatism, but in contrast to the rest of Iraq there is an active Kurdish women's movement that is supported by the regional authorities. He believed that an expression of the willingness of the Kurdish authorities to strengthen the position of women was the fact that around 40% of parliamentary employees in Erbil are women.

Representatives of the leadership of the Iraqi Communist Party (Toilers party) stated that the politburo does not have any female members. Nonetheless, women have other high positions and their own organization within the party. The representatives described Kurdistan as a backward society with respect to the position of women, and that it is progressing far too slowly in this area. The party platform calls for equal rights for both genders.

According to a representative of the Islamist KIU, the party believes strongly in the participation of women. There are three women in the party leadership and almost half of the members are women.

The Khatuzeen Center for Social Action in Erbil is a training and activity centre for women in a difficult financial position. The centre was founded in 2000 and has a café, day-care centre and outdoor playground for children and 15 employees, including a female psychologist. The regional authorities are positive and the head of the centre informed that the undertaking has the full support of the KRG. US aid funded the establishment of the centre and the KRG contributes funding for rent and employee salaries.

The centre arranges computer classes for women who have had schooling, reading and writing classes for women with no educational background, sewing classes for those who wish to contribute to the family economy (by, for example, sewing clothes for their children), cookery courses and aerobics classes. Around 100 women visit the centre each day and there are long waiting lists for the classes. The requirement for participating in the centre's activities is that one comes from a difficult neighbourhood in the city.

According to the head of the centre, poverty, lack of education and lack of awareness of one's own rights are the major problems for Kurdish women. She also believed that Kurdish women had advantages over other Iraqi women when it comes to participation in the new society that is to be built after the fall of Saddam. After 1991, Kurdish women have organized socially and politically to an extent that women with other ethnic backgrounds in Iraq have not done or had the opportunity to do. A Kurdish woman is a member of the new Government in Baghdad. Kurdish women have also contributed a number of proposals to the new constitution propounding a secular state and a free and modern society in the new Iraq. They have also proposed modernization of the Act relating to personal status and legal capacity and the penal code.

According to the head of the centre, abuse is not a topic of discussion at the centre so far, as no women have raised this issue. The head believed that this is an issue that requires time and trust, but that violence within marriage may become a topic of discussion in time. Women who are subjected to violence may turn to the protection centre Khanzad's House, the only one of its kind in Erbil. Khanzad's House was established by women in the KDP and other organizations for women. This centre, which receives support from the German aid organization WADI, has between six and ten women staying there at any particular time.

When asked about the effect of the Act relating to honour killings that was amended in Erbil and Dohuk provinces in August 2002², the head of the centre stated that she could not answer questions because she did not have adequate information. She had nevertheless noticed that currently this issue is more in the public eye and that newspapers occasionally feature articles on it.

According to the editor of Hawlati, the newspaper is concerned with raising awareness on women's issues and it has a number of female journalists. Much is written about the need for education, women are encouraged to enter politics and women who wish to express their views in print are allowed to do so. The newspaper also writes about honour killings, forced marriages and women who commit suicide, and this has not caused any problems for the

² In Suleimaniya province a similar amendment to the act was introduced in 2001. The amendment means that so-called honour killings are considered on equal footing with any other murder in the eyes of the law.

newspaper. The editor did not know about anyone who had been sentenced for an honour killing after the Act had been amended in August 2002.

The Women Information and Cultural Center was established in 1997 and has its headquarters in Suleimaniya. All the 25 employees are women. The organization has information activities, publishes a newspaper twice a month, produces radio and TV programmes and arranges seminars. A lawyer is connected to the main office.

The organization has projects for women in 52 villages with different types of programmes aiming to raise the awareness of women ("awareness programmes") and health projects. The activities are financially supported by foreign aid organizations, and they also receive some funding from foreign governments. According to the head of the centre, Kurdish women have good opportunities for development in a positive direction due to the many women's organizations and because the Kurdish regional authorities have a positive attitude.

The organization does not have a special protection centre, but employees take women who need refuge home with them. As one employee put it, "Our homes are shelters". According to the law, men who abuse their wives may be convicted and moreover risk having to pay compensation. The organization's representatives believed these measures might have a preventive effect.

Honour killings are discussed in public in Kurdistan, and the women's organizations and Hawlati both write about it. Statistics show that there are three times the number of honour killings in rural areas as in urban areas. In cities, most honour killings occur in districts where the inhabitants have moved from the countryside and where the environment is traditional and conservative. A number of such honour killings have occurred in one such district in Suleimaniya in 2003. The amendment to the act has yielded some but not much effect. There are, nonetheless, examples where a father, brothers and cousins have been sentenced to life in prison for honour killings, but these sentences are under appeal.

When asked whether there is any kind of public mediation body, it was stated that there is a type of public conciliation and mediation board under the Bureau for Social Affairs which is then under the Ministry of Justice in Suleimaniya. This board has the authority to resolve property disputes and conflicts between and within families outside the legal courts.

ASUDA - Combating violence against women was established in 2000 in Suleimaniya. The organization is not affiliated with any political party. Norwegian People's Aid and US AID provide financial support for its activities and operations. The PUK regional government contributes funding for watch duty.

ASUDA's aim is to raise awareness, collect data on such things as honour killings and provide protection for women who are subjected to violence. Two lawyers, one man and one woman, advise women who ask for assistance.

The head of ASUDA felt that the situation for women in Kurdistan is difficult. Many are subjected to abuse and violence in the family, and a number of women fall victim to honour killings each year. ASUDA operates a protection centre that can house up to 15 women and children.

The Cultural Center for Learning Women was established in 1996 in Suleimaniya. The organization has no political-party affiliation and receives financial support from a German organization. In addition to the main office it also has a centre in Germia. Only women are allowed to work for the organization.

The main office has a café, day-care centre and library. They offer social activities, awareness raising activities, computer classes and reading and writing classes. A lawyer connected with the organization provides legal counselling. The organization also has projects in health and legal counselling for women in prison.

In Hanakim city the organization has various projects in health, legal counselling and reconciliation activities between Arabs, Turkmens and Kurds. Seminars for women are also held. According to the head of the centre, improving the financial situation of women and raising the awareness of men are vital factors in improving the future for women in Kurdistan and elsewhere in Iraq.

According to a representative of Norwegian People's Aid, violence against women has increased in recent years. Political conditions and the financial and social pressures in the Kurdish society have placed strong pressure on the male role. Many people have been displaced from their homes due to the hostilities, the Anfal campaign³ and Saddam Hussein's Arabisation programme. It is claimed that there are around 800 000 internally displaced persons in the three autonomous provinces. She believed that these events, together with the general modernization of the Kurdish society, have led to a greater need for self-control in the male population. Women have support in the law, but implementing the law in a society with strong patriarchal tendencies is difficult. Women need a great deal of support to be able to seek recourse in the law. The intensifying conflict level between the genders has also led to a rise in the number of women who commit suicide by self-immolation.

Norwegian People's Aid is funding a recently established centre for women in the village of Diana where both Christians and Muslims live. Parts of the population have previously been refugees in Iran, and socially, the area is very conservative. This centre is the first of its kind in Diana, and will be a meeting-place for women with emphasis on social activities and various training courses and classes.

In addition to the protection centre operated by ASUDA, there are two more centres in Suleimaniya. ARAM is operated by PUK and focuses on women who are subjected to or threatened with physical violence and sexual abuse. NAWA, primarily funded by the German organization WADI, focuses in particular on women who have been psycho-socially traumatized.

Women in prison

According to a representative of the International Red Cross in Suleimaniya, women who have been sentenced to prison and juvenile criminals are incarcerated in a prison administered by the Ministry of Social Affairs in Suleimaniya. In Erbil women and juvenile criminals are incarcerated in a prison administered by the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs. Conditions in the prisons are acceptable in the opinion of the representative.

³ Anfal – Saddam Hussein's genocide against the Kurds in northern Iraq in 1988.

Ethnic and religious minorities

The delegation visited the city of Mosul⁴ in Ninive province where the population is composed of a number of ethnic and religious groups. Mosul was under Saddam Hussein's control up to the American invasion in March 2003, and is the city in northern Iraq that has the largest Arab population.

Issues concerning the relationship between the ethnic groups were raised with the Deputy Governor and the head of the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) in Mosul. Issues relating to the Christian minority and the relationship to the Kurdish regional authorities and the Islamic majority population in general were raised with the head of the ADM in Mosul, the Assyrian Minister for Industry and Energy in the KRG, as well as representatives of the ADM in Erbil. The situation for the Mandaean minority was discussed with a Western diplomatic source in Amman.

Around 1 250 000 people live in the city of Mosul. Ethnic Arabs constitute the majority at around 52%. Around 40% are Kurds, around 4% are Christian Assyrians and around 4% are Turkmens. There are no villages consisting only of Turkmens, they live dispersed in cities and villages. Yezids⁵ dominate the districts of Sinjar and Schehan where they constitute around 70% of the population. The remaining 30% are Muslim Kurds.

Ninive province has more than three million inhabitants. Assyrians constitute around 10% of the total population, and there are seven villages where only Christians live. In the area between Erbil and Mosul one finds virtually only Kurdish Shia Muslims, who belong to the Shabak tribe that emigrated from Iran around 500 years ago.

Assyrians

According to the head of the ADM, Assyrians in and around Mosul have no problems with the Yezids or other local Kurds and Arabs. There have, however, been problems with Arabs from southern Iraq who were moved to the area as part of Saddam Hussein's Arabisation programme.

Assyrians had problems in Basra in the early summer. Shots were fired at a church, and two people were killed, allegedly because they sold alcohol. The situation calmed down after this, and the head had not heard of any further problems in Basra. In Baghdad, Christians are not more subjected to harassment than others. More than 600 000 Assyrians live in Baghdad. Many of these have properties in Dohuk and Mosul where their families originally hail from. Overall, more than one million Assyrians live in Iraq.

Many Assyrians have emigrated to Western countries from Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey, and the representatives assumed that around 400 000 – 500 000 Assyrians live in the USA, generally in Detroit, California and Chicago. Assyrian communities can also be found in Sweden, France, Belgium, Germany and Great Britain. As one interviewee expressed it, "All of us here have someone somewhere." Assyrians are very well organized in Western countries.

⁴ Around 75% of the high-ranking officers in the former Republican Guards came from either Mosul or Saddam Hussein's hometown of Tikrit. The Arabic community in Mosul is considered to have been a strong centre of support for Saddam's regime.

⁵ The Yezids are ethnic Kurds. Their religion is a mixture of Christian, Islamic and ancient Iranian elements.

Around 15 000 Christians live in the city of Erbil. There are three Assyrian ministers in the KRG. After 1992 Assyrians have established their own private schools and published books in their own language, *Syriac*⁶. Around 3500 pupils have Syriac as their language of instruction and Kurdish, Arabic and English as second languages. Three upper secondary schools have been established in Erbil, Diana and Dohuk. The Assyrian New Year is celebrated on 1 April with a large carnival in Dohuk and Erbil each year.

The ADM has a collective leadership and is the largest and leading Assyrian party. It publishes a weekly newspaper in Arabian and Syriac, and owns a local TV station and six local radio stations in Dohuk, Baghdad, Kirkuk, Mosul, Zakho and Erbil.

Assyrians consider themselves a separate ethnic group. In connection with the new constitution in Iraq, they are working to be recognized as an *Assyrian-Caldean* nationality, not only as a religious group. A conference in Baghdad is being planned for Assyrians from all over the world in the autumn of 2003 to discuss the rights of Assyrians in Iraq.

All the Assyrian interlocutors emphasized that they are now against emigration. They wish to preserve this old Christian culture in Iraq and consider the presence of the Assyrians as an important element of the population and important for the development of democracy in Iraq. It is not desirable that Western countries help Assyrians to emigrate. The ADM wishes to help Assyrians remain in their country and wants as many as possible to return now that Saddam Hussein is gone. They felt that re-integration would not be a problem.

The ADM has a good relationship with Iran, and it is easy for Assyrians to receive a permit to cross the border for family visits or medical treatment in the city of Orumiyeh.⁷ No passport is necessary, only an identity card and a recommendation from the ADM. The ADM's representative in Orumiyeh will then contact the local Iranian authorities who issue the permit.

Mandeans

The issue concerning Mandeans⁸ was raised with a diplomatic source in Amman. The source characterized Mandeans as "pre-Christians", as they believe in John the Baptist, but not Jesus. There are around 100 000 Mandeans in Iraq. The majority live in Baghdad, the rest in and around Basra. In Baghdad Mandeans have their temple and social centre in an exclusive area close to a so-called high-security area. They were treated very well by Saddam Hussein who spoke of them as his friends in public. Mandeans for their part translated their holy scriptures into Arabic and gave them to Saddam as a gift. Some of them were also members of Saddam's security forces. According to this diplomat, claims by Mandeans in Western countries of being persecuted by Saddam do not hold water. So far their close relationship with Saddam Hussein's regime has not resulted in problems for them as a group. Today Mandeans must be said to be in the same situation as the Christians Assyrians. Their rights as a minority are respected and the situation is considered good.

⁶ Syriac or Aramaic, an ancient Semitic language.

⁷ There is an Iranian Assyrian minority in Orumiyeh in Western Azerbaijan province, close to the border of eastern Turkey.

⁸ *Manda* is Arameic and means wisdom. Mandeans are the only Gnostic sect that has survived post-antiquity.

Children

The question of aid measures for children in difficult situations and their families was raised with the Deputy Minister for Health and Social Affairs in Erbil, Kurdistan Save the Children,⁹ Norwegian People's Aid and the Women Information and Cultural Center in Suleimaniya.

The Deputy Minister stated that around 68 000 families in Dohuk and Erbil provinces receive direct financial assistance from the regional authorities each month. He also stated that together with a local Kurdish NGO called "New Life" the authorities have launched a project entitled "The Family Care Project", which helps families that for various reasons cannot manage on their own. Around 38 000 families are in the project. All are followed up by a social worker. Each social worker is responsible for ten families and has regular meetings with all of these twice a month. The social workers are organized in groups of ten with a leader reporting to the Directorate of Family Care.

In addition to financial assistance the project deals with conflicts between families and within families, such as conflicts between spouses and incest cases. The project also operates four centres for work training and two centres for street children in Erbil. A study two years ago showed that there are more than 5000 working street children in Erbil. Six hundred of these were sent to school and 15 to work training in 2002. In this connection fathers and older brothers had to sign a pledge that they would not send the children out to work again. If this were to happen the case would be sent to the courts. According to the Deputy Minister, child labour is not only caused by poverty, but rather that in Kurdish culture a long-lived and broadly held perception is that those who do not work while they are children will never manage to work properly as adults. For this reason even families with an adequate financial situation send their children out to work.

Kurdistan Save the Children has its headquarters in Suleimaniya, but after the war it has also been involved in Kirkuk and Baghdad. The organization receives funding from several parties. It operates a number of cultural centres and a large youth centre in Suleimaniya where children and young persons may spend their spare time taking part in various courses, for example music or sports, or receive reading and writing training. The centre also arranges youth festivals.

One of the most important tasks for Save the Children is to help to reunite children and young people who for various reasons have been separated from their parents or help reunite them with any other family member who may function as a caregiver. The organization can trace identities and addresses of children and their families all over Kurdistan, provided that the information supplied is correct.

In 2003, Save the Children gives financial assistance to 2865 children who either have been re-united with their families or are in a process where this is happening. These are children who have lost their father but their mother or other caregivers in their family are alive. Those who do not have family or relatives are placed in orphanages that take care of their health and education. After they turn 18 there are other institutions that can take care of young persons with no family.

Street children have been one of Save the Children's main projects for several years. Around eight years ago around 100 street children were registered in Suleimaniya, and many of these

⁹ Kurdistan Save the Children – Children's Fund

were criminals and violent. In 2003, all of these are off the streets and the street environment, and there are few new street children. Specially trained personnel are trying to help these children. Suleimaniya has a special juvenile court and a separate police station dealing with juveniles involved in crime.

When queried about sexual abuse of children, Save the Children said that they are working on this problem. The issue is nevertheless extremely sensitive in the Muslim and Conservative Kurdish communities. To help them in this work Save the Children has developed a programme that teaches children about sexual abuse and how to avoid it. This training is undertaken in a number of cultural centres operated by the organization.

Violence against children is a punishable offence. Suleimaniya has a special police force that deals with such cases. When it is proven that a parent is abusing his or her child, he or she must initially sign a binding statement declaring that there will be no recurrence of such abuse. If the abuse continues, the case will proceed to the courts.

When asked about the scope of forced marriages, the representative for Save the Children responded that in his opinion there is little of this in the urban population, particularly in Suleimaniya, which he characterized as more sophisticated than other Kurdish cities. In earlier times, forced marriage had been the norm. It continues in rural districts, but he believed that the number of forced marriages was also declining there. Education and raised awareness, as well as access to the outside world via TV, mobile phones and the Internet have made Kurdish girls more aware and better equipped to resist pressure.

When asked about the opportunities any returning refugee children have for schooling and upper secondary education, the Save the Children representative pointed to the fact that an English-language school in Suleimaniya receives Kurdish children who have returned from abroad. This is a very good school with well-qualified teachers. In the autumn of 2003 the school has 150 pupils, whereof 15 have returned from foreign countries. Children and young people would otherwise be referred to regular schools.

A representative of the Women Information and Cultural Center stated that the organization gives financial support to orphans so they may pursue an education. The organization also provides some financial support to university students of both genders, enabling them to complete their education.

Islamites

The position and influence of Islamites were discussed with the party Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) in Erbil, the parties Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the Hawlati newspaper and representatives of women's organizations in Erbil and Suleimaniya.

According to the representatives the delegation met, the KIU is a moderate Islamite party and believes in dialogue, pluralism, female participation and freedom of speech. The party does not have *jihad* (holy war) in its political platform and opposes violent methods.

The KIU has established itself in a number of cities in Kurdistan and operates local TV stations in Suleimaniya, Erbil, Halabja and Ranja. The KRG Minister of Justice is from the KIU. After Saddam's fall the party has also established itself outside of Kurdistan, in Mosul, Baghdad and Kirkuk. The party has taken part in all democratic processes since 1991, sits on

the Iraqi Governing Council, has a Minister in the new Government in Baghdad and is a member among those working on the proposition for a new constitution. The party also has representation in Syria, Great Britain, Iran, Turkey and Sweden.

According to the representatives, the KIU has a good relationship with all the parties in Kurdistan. The party participates as the only Islamic party in a coalition of five parties together with Christians, Communists and social democrats. They believed that the KIU has good support in sections of the population, and referred to how they received 22% of the votes in the local elections in 2000. The party also received around 40% of the votes at the student election. When asked by the delegation about the number of members, the representatives answered that this information was secret and not available.

The representatives stated that they find their political principles in a special understanding of Islam, as one of them said, "Islam is in our hearts". They claimed they are under no influence from religious groups or powers outside Iraq. They also believed that the KIU may have a moderating influence on violent Islamic groups. When asked whether the party has members who were previously members of Ansar al-Islam, they answered in the negative.

The representatives emphasized that the KIU is a Kurdish party seeking a democratic, pluralist and federal system in Iraq. Such a system will resolve the nationality problems in the country. The party does not want to force religion on the people and only wants an Islamic rule if the majority of the population so wishes.

On the other hand, the party does not want common secular family legislation for all citizens. The KIU wants family legislation to be regulated by religious belonging, and that for Muslims this should be based on *sharia* because this is Allah's immutable law. The KIU is also in favour, in principle, of introducing the *huddud* provisions in the Islamic penal code, but only if the majority of the population wants this. When asked by the delegation about the harsh penalties under *huddud* (such as whipping, the death penalty by stoning and cutting off of hands) the representatives claimed that Islamic law works preventively, discouraging people from committing crimes. In a true Islamic community there will be very few crimes and little need for the penalties mentioned above.

When asked whether the party operates special welfare programmes, the representatives stated that members of KIU work in Islamic organizations operating welfare programmes.¹⁰ These build mosques, hospitals and schools and distribute food to the poor, especially during Ramadan.

When asked whether the women's movement feels pressured by Islamites, the head of the Khatuzeen Center for Social Action in Erbil answered that the situation is noticeably better than at the end of the 1990s. Islamites no longer scare girls in schools with Doomsday and hell to make them cover up in the Islamic fashion. Girls dressed in Western-style clothing are no longer harassed and attacked with acid (acid in syringes, put under the clothes) on the streets and in marketplaces. Recently a three-day women's conference was arranged where for the first time it was possible to speak freely, including about religion. All newspapers and TV covered the conference, and the name "Empowering Women Again" attracted a great deal of attention. Islamites did not participate at the conference, nor were they invited.

¹⁰ The KIU did not provide information about who finances the welfare programmes, nor did the delegation ask any questions about this. Other interlocutors maintained that the funding generally comes from Saudi-Arabia and other Islamic networks.

Neither the head herself nor the centre for women has ever received threats. According to the head of the centre, it is fully possible in Kurdistan today to speak critically against religion as long as it is done in a "soft" manner. When asked about differences between Christian and Muslim women, the head answered that Christian women do not cover their hair and they socialize with men more than Muslim women do. Similarly with the rest of the Christian community in Erbil, Christian women are under the protection of the KRG. After an attack on a church some years ago in the Christian section of the city, the KRG condemned this and made it very clear that they would never accept anything like that.

When asked about the relationship to Islamites, the head of the Women Information and Cultural Center in Suleimaniya answered that the organization occasionally had problems with Islamites in villages where they operate projects for women. A number of projects were subjected to bomb attacks some years ago. Current problems are primarily of a social nature as the villages are very conservative areas where traditional values and local religious leaders have strong positions.

According to the chief editor of the Hawlati newspaper in Erbil, the newspaper has no problems with Islamites. The newspaper publishes their viewpoints similarly to those of secular and liberal persons. He believed that harassment of girls dressed in Western-style clothing has ceased. The role of the Islamites is less important than previously and their popularity has declined. However, the editor did not rule out the possibility that the Islamites will conduct themselves in a non-democratic manner and use violence if they were to gain real political power in the future.

According to the editor, the Hawlati in Suleimaniya has not experienced any threats from Islamites. Rather, the relationship has always been good. The editorial line is that Islamites should not be banned or excluded but rather be given the opportunity to take part in politics and general society based on democratic principles.

A number of representatives of the Kurdish regional authorities believed that all Islamites in Kurdistan are *wahhabites*¹¹ and potentially dangerous, and that all Islamic groups in practice function as kindergartens for Islamic fundamentalism. This also applies to legal Islamic parties that officially do not have *jihad* in their political programmes. Several representatives claimed that the Islamic parties and groups speak out of both sides of their mouths, and that in their dealings with Western representatives, they consciously hide their real political aim of establishing a fundamentalist Islamic state in Iraq.

The delegation was able to observe that many women in Suleimaniya did not wear the Muslim headdress *hijab* and were wearing Western-style clothing. The city also has many highly visible shops with large windows and glass doors selling hard liquor. In many of these stores bottles of liquor were on display in the windows. The city also has a number of video shops, photo shops and hairdressing parlours with pictures of women that appear to be "non-Islamic". According to representatives of Kurdish authorities this is visible confirmation of the fact that the Islamites have neither the political power to prevent these kinds of things that they dislike from flourishing nor represent a threat against law and order in everyday affairs.

¹¹ Wahhabites, orthodox and strictly conservative Muslims.

The PKK

The delegation had prior knowledge of the fact that soldiers from the Turkish PKK¹² are still up in the mountains between Dohuk province and Turkey and Suleimaniya province and Iran. The issue of the PKK presence in Kurdistan after Saddam's fall was raised with the Deputy Governor as well as the head of the ADM in Mosul, the Ministry of the Interior and the UNHCR in Erbil and the ICRC in Suleimaniya.

According to our interlocutors, there are still some thousands of PKK soldiers in the mountains, probably around 4000. They remain quiet, operate no military activities on Iraqi soil and are not considered a security problem. There are several camps for former PKK soldiers and their families. A total of 6 – 7000 people live in these camps that are administered by Kurdish authorities. These are persons who either will not or cannot return to Turkey without the risk of reprisals from the Turkish authorities. Moreover, the PKK does not accept anyone leaving the organization. Those members who escape and surrender to the Kurdish authorities are placed in camps after a brief stay in prison.

Communists

The position of the various communist parties in the Kurdish areas and elsewhere in Iraq was raised with a Western diplomat in the capital of Jordan, Amman, and three interlocutors in Suleimaniya, the Iraqi Communist Party (Toilers Party), the Kurdistan Communist Party and the editor of the Hawlati newspaper.

Under Saddam Hussein's regime the death penalty was imposed for being a member of the Iraqi Communist Party, and according to the diplomatic source the party lost many members during the previous regime. Ideologically, the communist party must be counted more as a social democratic party, and is the only party in Iraq with democratically elected leaders. After the war the party has established itself in a number of cities across the country, including in southern Iraq. The party is very active, profiles itself on issues connected to the rights of women, and is the only party in the former government-controlled Iraq with a separate women's organization. The problem for the communists is that the party is without any political clout and has a total lack of influence on those who decide in today's Iraq.

According to representatives of the Kurdistan Communist Party, the parent party Iraqi Communist Party was founded in 1934. Its activities commenced in southern Iraq and it has traditionally been supported by many Shia Muslim Arabs. The party was established in Kurdistan in the 1940s. The Kurdistan Communist Party was established in 1994 as a Kurdish branch of the traditional Communist Party and works closely with the Iraqi Communist Party. The relationship to other parties in Kurdistan is good, and the party has connections with communist parties abroad.

According to representatives of the Toilers Party, the party had offices in Erbil up until 1996 when Saddam Hussein's army moved in with the endorsement of the KDP.¹³ After 1996 the KDP has not given the Toilers Party permission to have an office in the city because of the harsh criticism the party has levelled at the KDP for its (brief) cooperation with Saddam Hussein during the attack on Erbil. The Toiler's Party does not consider the lack of representation in Erbil a serious problem. As expressed by one of the representatives, "We have not raised this as a serious problem; Kurdistan does not need that kind of problems right

¹² PKK is the abbreviation for Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan – the Kurdish Labour Party.

¹³ This occurred in connection with the fighting between the KDP and the PUK.

now". The party receives public funding and is represented in the parliament and in the PUK-dominated government in Suleimaniya.

Relations with the other parties in the Kurdish-controlled areas are good, and the party is a member of a five-party coalition working for reconciliation in Kurdistan. Other parties in the coalition are the ADM, KIU, WCPI and the Kurdistan Socialist Democratic Party (KSDP).

When asked about the Worker Communist Party of Iraq (WCPI), it was stated that this is a very small group in Suleimaniya, a maximum of 15 persons. After the conflict with the PUK in 2000, the WCPI has not had an office in Suleimaniya. According to representatives of the Kurdistan Communist Party, their party has very little contact with the WCPI today, but both provided shelter when members needed help during the conflict with the PUK in 2000. They claimed that the WCPI could blame no one else but themselves for the conflict in 2000. The party brought unnecessary problems upon itself by disrespecting the political opinions of others and by not showing respect for the cultural and religious attitudes in Kurdistan. The representatives did not know of any members of the WCPI who were incarcerated today, or of any of them being arrested after the summer of 2000. In their opinion no Communists are being held as political prisoners in the Kurdish-controlled areas.

According to the editor of Hawlati, the WCPI is officially illegal in Suleimaniya, and the party's house for women continues to be closed. In practice the party nevertheless has a presence and has some degree of activity, but without the PUK intervening. Members of the WCPI occasionally write articles in Hawlati without this causing any problems for the newspaper or the members.

According to the editor of Hawlati in Erbil, the WCPI re-opened its office in the city in 2003 after the office was closed in 2002. The party's newspaper is published in Erbil. After the war the WCPI has also opened a small office in Nasiriyah (in southern Iraq) and in Baghdad, and it has organized small demonstrations.

De-Arabisation

Questions concerning de-Arabisation after Saddam Hussein's fall were raised with the Deputy Governor of Mosul, the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) in Mosul and Erbil, the Swedish aid organization Qandil and the Deputy Minister of Humanitarian Aid and Cooperation in Erbil.

According to the ADM in Mosul many Assyrians also were victims of Saddam Hussein's deportation and Arabisation policy. No one yet knows how many Assyrians have claims for the return of their houses and properties. In the opinion of the ADM, these problems should be resolved legally, and the establishment of legal procedures is expected.

According to representatives of Qandil, the Americans (the Coalition Provisional Authority - CPA) would like a national programme of de-Arabisation. However, in rural districts many of these problems have already been resolved. In the area around Makhmur with its 182 villages, for example, there was only one conflict after the war, and this has been resolved. It has proven to be easy to solve land disputes in villages because everybody there knows who owns the land.

In the areas along the "green line" that divided the Kurd-controlled area from the Government-controlled area prior to the war, all the Kurds were displaced by Saddam

Hussein. After virtually all the houses had been destroyed, Arabic Bedouin families were moved in or the areas were used for military purposes. The Bedouins withdrew before the war, and displaced Kurds have been able to move back to their properties.

However, in cities, and in particular in Kirkuk, the restoration of properties has proved to be more difficult to resolve. This is due to the fact that during Arabisation many Kurds were forced to sell their houses and properties for symbolic sums. The Arabs who took over the houses are today legitimate owners. They do not want to move before they receive financial compensation.

The Deputy Minister also stated that most Arabs who were moved in by Saddam Hussein have left the areas around Kirkuk. Those cases where Arabs bought houses in a formally correct way from displaced Kurds will be resolved by settlement in court.

Tribal and clan conflicts

Questions regarding tribal and clan conflicts were raised with a Deputy Minister in the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs in Erbil, a representative of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) at the party's office in Erbil and the Minister of Relations and Cooperation in Suleimaniya.

According to the Deputy Minister, Erbil continues to be a very conservative tribal community, and he says, "people live in the old structure". Even though it has more than 700 000 inhabitants, Erbil is not a metropolis in the modern sense of the word. In many ways Erbil consists of many villages as people from the same villages have formed their own city districts. Suleimaniya is a city with a longer metropolis history, and appears to be more modern and to have a more urban population.

The KRG attempts to resolve conflicts between clans and families peacefully through mediation. According to the Deputy Minister, Kurdistan is a society with laws, police administration and courts. The KRG has successfully negotiated agreements and reconciliation in family, clan and tribal conflicts. This also applies to cases which according to tradition could trigger blood revenge. The Deputy Minister said that the KRG has contributed to resolving more than 1000 such cases. If no resolution through mediation is possible, the case will go to court. Blood revenge still occurs, but there is much less of it than previously. Blood revenge and honour killings are penalized in the same way as any other killings.

The representative of the PUK in Erbil downplayed the importance of tribal and clan conflicts. Kurdistan continues to be a tribal community, but he believed that in practice the political parties are more important for people's loyalty. In today's Kurdistan tribes and clans are connected to parties. This is also the case among Kurds in Baghdad. He also believed that among the Arabic Shia Muslims in southern Iraq the religious leaders constitute the most important power base.

A representative of the PUK in Suleimaniya asserted that the Kurdish community continues to have a problem with tribal and clan mentality. All Kurds belong to a clan, but in his opinion Kurds were less dominated by clan mentality than Sunni Muslim Arabs.

Hawlati

Questions concerning the freedom of speech were discussed with the editors of the newspaper Hawlati. This newspaper has two editorial staffs and two editors, one in Erbil and one in Suleimaniya where the newspaper is also printed.

The editors stated that Hawlati is an independent opposition paper. It receives no public financial support. The newspaper sells 7000 copies weekly, more than any other newspaper in Kurdistan. When asked who the readership is, the editors said that there is no special group, rather the readership comprises average people who are interested in news and who like the press to be critical of the KDP and the PUK. They felt that the newspaper has great popular support, and that also Kurdish NGOs and small parties support the paper. The newspaper considers its primary task is to contribute to the development of a democratic Iraq.

The Erbil editorial staff received a number of threats in 2002, which they believed came from Saddam Hussein's agents. After the war the newspaper has not received any threats. Both editors stated that the freedom of speech generally has reasonably good conditions in Kurdistan and particularly in Suleimaniya. The system there is more open and modern, and it is easier to get interviews with politicians and bureaucrats. Hawlati is, however, very critical of the KDP and the PUK, which they regard as not very democratic. Like all the other parties in Kurdistan, they have the baggage of an authoritarian heritage, and "the culture of the Ba'ath Party is still with us", as one of them put it. The editorial staff has experienced being put under pressure a number of times when the criticism of the KDP and the PUK has touched on particularly sensitive matters, such as the security services of the parties, secret prisons or high-level corruption. The parties in these cases have verbally attacked the newspaper, both directly to the editorial staff and in their own press. A couple of years ago one of the journalists was arrested a number of times in Dohuk, and was kept in detention for a few hours each time. The newspaper has not been subjected to other types of reaction such as bans, searches or closure. The newspaper has, on the other hand, been brought to court for violating the Freedom of the Press Act, but was acquitted.

Return - repatriation

Questions in connection with return and repatriation to the Kurdish areas of Iraq were discussed with the Deputy Minister of Human Aid and Cooperation in Erbil, the Head of the Travelling Department in the Ministry of Human Aid and Cooperation in Erbil, the Minister of the Interior in Erbil, PUK's representative in Erbil, the Deputy Governor in Mosul, a representative of the ADM and the Minister of Relations and Cooperation in Suleimaniya.

Entering and exiting Kurdistan

Before the war the Kurdish autonomous authorities had agreements with the neighbouring countries of Syria, Turkey and Iran that made it possible to enter and exit Kurdistan without inspection by the authorities in Baghdad. Kurds could travel to Syria and Iran without a passport when the purpose was to apply for family reunification in another country. The requirements were to have a valid Iraqi identity card, to have a recommendation from one of the Kurdish parties and to be furnished with a *laissez-passer* (safe-conduct pass) from the embassy on entry into the country where the reunification was to occur. These schemes ceased when the war broke out. The Head of the Travelling Department in Erbil stated, however, that these schemes have gradually been resumed after the war. It was believed that

in the course of August the arrangement with Syria would have been restored, while Turkey would continue to maintain certain restrictions. With respect to Iran, it was assumed that the pre-war arrangement would be restored shortly.

Kurds who leave the area using the above-mentioned scheme must have an exit permit from the Kurdish authorities. The requirements for such a permit were tightened after the war. Greater demands are placed on documentation in connection with family reunification and also for those who wish to go abroad for business purposes or for medical treatment. It was pointed out, moreover, that the attitude in the Kurdish leadership after the war is that it is no longer desirable that Kurds emigrate.

It was stated that in June this year only 21 exit permits to Syria were granted compared to 240 in June last year. A total of 130 permits were granted to Turkey during the same period of time this year compared to 408 last year. The drop in numbers was explained by the tightened requirements, and by the fact that after the change of regime Kurds have gained greater confidence in a future in Iraq.

The head of the Travelling Department believed that not too many people are entering Syria or Turkey illegally without an exit permit. Agreements have been entered into with these two countries, which means that anyone who is caught will be returned to the Kurdish authorities.

The Kurdish authorities frequently find persons who are attempting to leave using forged travel documents, including Norwegian ones. It was stated that the Norwegian KDP representative was informed when forged Norwegian travel documents were found.

The head of the Travelling Department also stated that new Iraqi passports will be issued in the autumn and that all old Iraqi passports would be invalid at the end of the year. Only the H and N series of today's passports would be valid for the rest of the year.

We were also informed that after the war Kurds have started to leave via Baghdad and on to Jordan. Some also go to Baghdad and apply for a visa in the regular way at the Turkish embassy outside of the established scheme between Turkey and the Kurdish authorities.

The manner of entering and exiting Kurdistan will obviously change as Kurdistan becomes an integral part of Iraq and the relationship between Iraq and the surrounding world is normalized. The Kurdish authorities stated that the airport in Mosul will be opened to regular traffic at the start of next year. It is estimated that regular domestic flights to the Erbil airport will commence next year. It is more uncertain when there will be domestic flights to Suleimaniya.

Iraqi Kurds in Syria

The delegation had a meeting in Damascus with a spokeswoman for the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), a spokesperson for the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) concerning the situation for Iraqis in Syria after Saddam Hussein's ouster.

According to the spokeswoman for the PUK, the war in Iraq has not changed the good relationship the party has with Syria. The PUK's representatives in Damascus continue to meet high-level Syrian authorities. The authorities have not put pressure on Iraqi Kurds that are in Syria legally to return home. Apart from some bullying of Kurdish children at school

because of the support for the USA, little has changed in the lives of Iraqi Kurds in Syria because of the war.

Iraqi Kurds who are in Syria illegally are not subjected to greater problems unless they have something unsettled with the authorities. In practice this means that the person in question would have been involved in a criminal offence and has been ordered by the authorities to leave Syria.

When asked whether Kurdish women may live alone in Syria while waiting for family reunification in Western countries, the spokeswoman answered that unmarried women and married women without children or with small children always live together with male relatives until they move on. Women with one or more teenage sons may live alone without other adult male relatives. The sons would then function as the family's protection against the surrounding world.

According to the representative of the UNHCR, the majority of Iraqi refugees in Syria would like to return home, saying: "They are pushing to go home on their own". He estimated that around 300 return home on their own every day. They use the Abu Kamal border station because the unofficial border station Fish Khabour has been closed since March 2003. Even if the majority of Iraqis, Kurds and others would like to return home, there are some groups that so far do not want to return. This applies to some Christians and Communists who fear the establishment of a Shia Muslim rule and for that reason have adopted a wait-and-see attitude. Many Iraqi refugees in the neighbouring countries would also like to return home. The UNHCR believes that as many as 600 000 Iraqis in Iran are waiting to go home. These include both Shia Muslim Arabs and Faili Kurds.¹⁴

Some nationals from third countries (particularly Arabic and African nationals) who fled from Iraq before the war and are now staying in Syria are not considered to be refugees by the UNHCR. The UNHCR is trying to encourage these persons to return home.

So far the UNHCR had not received any applications for asylum from members of the former Ba'ath party.¹⁵ The PUK spokeswoman believed that there are at least 2000 known members of the Ba'ath party who with great probability have committed crimes against humanity, but who are not on the USA's lists of wanted persons.

Both the spokeswoman for the PUK and the representative of the UNHCR stated that the situation in northern Iraq is considered calm and stable.

Return

There was consensus among the Kurdish representatives that security and the opportunity of employment were the two most important conditions that would encourage Kurds to return. There was also agreement that the Kurdish authorities are taking care of the security of the population in their areas. (See also what has been written above about the general security situation.) However, the financial situation is more difficult. So far there will be few opportunities for employment, and it will take time to satisfy the need for housing.

¹⁴ Iraqi Faili Kurds are Shia Muslims and descendants of Kurdish immigrants from Iran. Saddam Hussein expelled several hundred thousand Faili Kurds from Iraq due to their Iranian descent.

¹⁵ The delegation was informed that most of those who currently approach the UNHCR in Damascus are Somali, Sudanese and Afghans who have been in Syria for some time.

The Deputy Minister for Humanitarian Aid and Cooperation emphasized that there is great need for aid for those who return from exile. The European states should contribute to projects that aim to ease re-integration, such as reconstruction and other projects that might provide employment.

Representatives of the PUK, KDP and ADM mentioned that it was vital that those who return receive financial support when they return so they may start from scratch in their country of origin without being a burden on society. They also stated that they saw it as desirable that those who had the resources to launch enterprises should return as speedily as possible. In the long term, when the Iraqi economy is properly back on its feet, they were convinced a majority would return. The new Citizenship Act in Iraq will most likely permit Iraqi nationals to have dual citizenship, and this might also encourage Iraqi nationals in exile to return home.

When the issue of return was raised, several people pointed out that Kurdistan still has a large group of internally displaced persons whom the authorities will prioritize. A group of close to 800 000 persons is to be settled in the Kurdish areas. To accomplish this, the construction of housing must first and foremost be geared up.

As to the return of **unaccompanied minors**, Kurdistan Save the Children declared their willingness to cooperate with the Norwegian authorities on tracing parents and other family. They can assist by running traces in the entire Kurdish area (Arbil, Dohuk, Suleimaniya, Kirkuk and Mosul). Save the Children will be able to find the family if the minor is from Kurdistan and has provided correct information about his or her background.

It was pointed out by a representative of the PUK that it was important that returning children were provided with documentation of schooling they had received in Norway.

Return with assistance from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM)

No one objected to programmes for voluntary return, such as Norway has established in cooperation with the IOM. However, the Deputy Minister for Humanitarian Aid and Cooperation believed that the financial support given to individuals should be substantially larger than what Norway is donating. He also believed that the IOM travel scheme should take the person in question all the way home and not only to Baghdad. It is also desirable that the IOM informs the Kurdish authorities about who is returning through their programme.

The Deputy Minister also stated that he would prefer that organized return is arranged through the UNHCR, and that agreements should be made between the Iraqi authorities and countries returning refugees as to the number returning and the amount of aid given in connection with the return. He mentioned how such agreements had been made in connection with persons returning to Afghanistan.

The IOM representative in Erbil stated that efforts are being made to set up an agreement with the Syrian authorities so that those who return may use Syria as a transit country instead of Jordan. This would make it possible to avoid travelling through Baghdad. The representative also stated that the organization has evacuated its offices in Mosul and Kirkuk due to the security situation, and that only three employees were left in the office in Erbil.

Documents - registries

The Ministry of the Interior (KRG) in Erbil stated that all population registries, the Civil Status Register, with information on births, marriages, divorces and deaths in Kurdistan are intact and are maintained by the Kurdish regional authorities. The records containing information on citizenship are also intact and date back to the 1920s.

There is no central population registry in Iraq. The registries are found in the provinces and include persons who belong in the province. The registries are paper-based. Both the PUK and the KDP pledged they would make themselves available for the verification of personal information in their respective areas. It was recommended that inquiries be routed through their representatives in Norway.

In cooperation with the Americans, a new national identity card will be developed. It is uncertain when the new card will be taken into use. Until further notice the current identity cards are being issued.

Sources

PUK's representative in Damascus
KDP's representative in Damascus
UNHCR's representative in Damascus
The Ministry of Humanitarian Aid and Cooperation – KRG Erbil
The Travelling Department – KRG Erbil
The Ministry of Health and Social Affairs – KRG Erbil
The Khatuzeen Center for Social Action – Women's centre in Erbil
The Ministry of Human Rights – KRG Erbil
IOM – Erbil
UNHCR – Erbil
Ministry of the Interior – Erbil
Ministry of Industry and Energy – KRG Erbil (Assyrian representative)
PUK's representative in Erbil
Assyrian Democratic Movement – Erbil and Mosul
Kurdish Deputy Governor in Mosul
Ministry of Foreign Relations and Assistance – KRG Suleimaniya
Ministry of the Interior – KRG Suleimaniya
Kurdistan Islamic Union – Suleimaniya
ICRC – Suleimaniya
Cultural Center for Learning Women - Suleimaniya
Kurdistan Save the Children – Suleimaniya
The Women Information and Cultural Centre – Suleimaniya
The Iraqi Communist Party (Toilers Party) – Suleimaniya
The Kurdistan Communist Party – Suleimaniya
The security police in Suleimaniya
The ASUDA – the women's organization in Suleimaniya
Hawlati – independent newspaper
Qandil – Swedish aid organization
Norwegian People's Aid

Abbreviations

ADM	the Assyrian Democratic Movement
CPA	the Coalition Provisional Authority
ICRC	the International Committee for the Red Cross
IOM	the International Organisation for Migration
KDP	the Kurdistan Democratic Party
KRG	the Kurdistan Regional Government
PUK	the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan
UNHCR	the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees