

## Executive summary

# Return Migration and Vulnerability: Case Studies from Somaliland and Iraqi Kurdistan

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The research report at hand aims at informing the development of Finnish return policy, particularly policies concerning vulnerable groups of returnees, such as women, children and ethnic or religious minorities, by engaging in comparative qualitative research in Iraqi Kurdistan and Somaliland, two areas that are of great interest for Finnish return policy. This project has sought to analyse the returnees' socioeconomic and political situations before and after return, as well as the challenges of reintegration after living in exile. In addition to participant observation, open and semi-structured interviews were conducted with returnees and civic organizations.

The personal histories both in Somaliland and Iraqi Kurdistan demonstrate that return after years of exile cannot be understood simply as a homecoming, but rather, the returnee faces various challenges of reintegration arising from the fundamental socioeconomic and political changes happening in the home societies, which are still recovering from extended conflict. In this novel situation, many experience feelings of 'double absence'. Their lives in western countries may have been burdened by structural discrimination and at times, xenophobia. It was not uncommon for our interviewees to list the inability to reunite their families in the diaspora as a central reason for considering return. However, upon return, the returnee comes to witness that the fundamental elements organising social life, such as traditional forms of economy, and the cohesiveness of kin, tribal and other localised identities have changed in a profound manner. In both contexts, this societal change has facilitated entirely new kinds of social hierarchies as well as social, religious/sectarian and political identifications, which the returnee may find difficult to identify with.

## Reasons for return

Return can be described as a *process of acculturation*, similar to what migrants go through when first moving abroad. What happens before the 'return event' is highly relevant for the success of return, as the returnee's *readiness and preparedness*, his or her vital *material and immaterial resources*, together with *social networks* which forge reintegration, are built up before returning, not after. The returnee's decision to return may have been processed for several years. It is often provoked by major life changes, or *critical conjunctures* such as retirement, the death of a parent, receiving an inheritance, marriage, or changes in the educational or professional situations of children. For some, the need to look after elderly parents or an ethical commitment to benefit the local society by engaging in developmental and social welfare programmes may be the prime reason for return.

Return is strongly based in emotional reasons, such as a personal longing for the former home country due to *cultural or religious reasons*. The hastiness of life in the West, the practical problems in coordinating work, family and friendship, a sense of cultural alienation and the lack of access to the western context as a socially accepted and equal member emerge strongly in the research material. Male returnees in particular emphasized easy-going sociability and sense of being integrated not only in the social network of kin and neighbourhood, but also in close male networks of leisure, as socially gratifying experiences, which they had largely lacked in the diaspora. For women, return may be more challenging in this regard, as they need renegotiate their public and private roles and meet diverse expectations.

Concern about cultural, especially normative upbringing of children also ranks high as a reason for promoting return. Many interlocutors had led their lives in multicultural urban contexts in the West and they had witnessed a multitude of social challenges with regard to raising increasingly 'ethnicized' and 'racialized' children in such settings. While return may often be particularly difficult for children who have spent a large part of their socialization process in a western context, the parents tend to see the social atmosphere in the return context as morally more upright and containing mechanisms of immediate social control that prevent children from being influenced by moral vices and dangers. For example alcohol and drugs were perceived to be too widely present in the western context.

In both contexts, the return of many individuals is directly associated with their inability to gain a permanent legal status of residence in their country of asylum. Such returnees reported simply choosing the less negative of two unattractive options; the psychologically extremely exhaustive life in legal and economic limbo, without a possibility to reunite one's family in diaspora, or returning 'empty-handed'. For rejected asylum claimants, return without a legal permit for re-entering the EU territory may seem to be a personal failure, and the returnee may become subject to strong social stigma. In the context of Iraqi Kurdistan, a large majority of such

returnees openly reported planning another attempt to reach the EU territory. Several interlocutors in Iraqi Kurdistan had in fact made even four or five attempts to reach Europe.

Return migrants in post-conflict settings often face severe challenges in reintegration. The country of origin may have undergone significant and unanticipated changes, such as ethnic and religious polarization, alongside population transfers with a corresponding reorganisation of the political and social arena in the society. In both Somaliland and Iraqi Kurdistan, the 'secular space' has become more limited and increased religious neo-conservatism has generated changes in for example gender roles and norms of propriety. Especially the returnees who spent several years abroad with no close contacts to their country of origin may feel alienated and even unwanted upon return.

### Voluntariness in return

Our field study indicates that returnees perceive return as truly voluntary only when the returnee has gained permanent residence in the country of the asylum, and can thus truly choose between staying and leaving. The interlocutors of this study often stressed that no person who has not gained residence in the West should be forced to choose between forced return and participation in voluntary return programs.

These findings concur with earlier reports on voluntary return migration. Applying the term 'Voluntary Return' to those returning with accumulated personal resources, and returning by their own free will as well as those returning as a result of external pressures after receiving a negative decision on their asylum claim, leads to the entire term 'Voluntary Return' becoming empty of meaning. Furthermore, the ambiguity of the meaning of 'Voluntary Return' in discourse has damaging effects on policies and practices concerning return migration, as the misrepresentation of the phenomenon can lead to misguided policy directions.

## Return and reintegration

The reintegration process may prove to be particularly difficult, and at times impossible, for certain social groups, such as sexual minorities or ethnic minorities returning to ethnically homogenized settings. Children with a refugee background, who have been socialized in the West, may also find it challenging to adapt, as many women who during the years of exile have constructed public roles for themselves which may strongly challenge the norms of propriety in their country of origin.

Particularly in the case of Somaliland, the returnees are commonly perceived as relatively wealthy and may thus be exposed to continuous expectations of providing assistance to the more needy family members. On the other hand, in many regions of Iraq, returnees may become targets of criminal groups because of their assumed economic status. Somaliland is highly dependent on migration as a whole: remittances, but also the contributions of returnees in business and administration are significant. At the same time, there is a fierce competition for resources and jobs. This causes tensions and prejudices on both sides. This especially concerns vulnerable groups – women, children and minorities.

In the case of Iraq in particular, large-scale returns may further destabilize ethnic and sectarian stances, particularly in the disputed areas, where the balance between different social groupings is a delicate political question. Not only do the receiving societies change, but also the migrants themselves change in many ways during the years of exile. Changes in behaviour, habits, perceptions, and patterns of consumption may also pose severe challenges for reintegration. It is often the case that refugee households are deeply divided with regard to their perceptions on return. Children, who have spent their critical years of socialization outside their country of origin, often lack sufficient language and social skills to orient in the new setting. For many, life before exile in the West may have been spent in the neighbouring countries for extended periods of time, or as irregular migrant in search of international protection. All these experiences may prove to be both socially and psychologically burdening factors that can hinder the process of reintegration.

Successful return and reintegration appears to be a result of a premeditated process of weighing options, accumulating resources, and careful preparation for return. Often the process of increasing one's capabilities, enforcing old and creating new social networks, building realistic expectations and gathering sufficient material and immaterial resources, may require up to several years to accumulate. Both material and immaterial support in this process can promote sustainable and successful return.

### Vulnerabilities

While each setting of return has its own distinctive context, the Iraqis and Somalis presented in this study share a fundamental characteristic; their lives, transnational mobile histories, and livelihood strategies speak of a constant flow of economic, social, and human capital that occurs in a multidirectional manner between the country of origin and the western diasporic context. Hierarchies of different kinds of political statuses (refugee, asylum seeker, asylum holder, migrant, citizen, naturalized subject etc.), are obvious and challenging issues in this global crossboundary setting, but also in individual life courses, where they tend to vary and change over time. Especially women, children and minorities experience return in different ways. Also ethnicities, religious identities and political leanings may be critical in return to post-conflict context. All women who were part of the research agreed that there are gender-specific challenges and opportunities in return. Female returnees face challenges such as difficulties in reintegration. Gender specific perceptions and normative expectations of propriety of women in the local community may have changed radically during their years in exile. Contested recognitions and identifications are at stake, revealing shifting grounds in terms of status, age and gender.

## Recommendations

Based on this comparative empirical data, the study then proposes concrete recommendations to be taken into consideration when formulating the future directions of Finnish return policy.

1. When talking about voluntary return in official Finnish and EU return policy discourses, it is vital to clearly differentiate actual voluntary return, which is grounded in genuine free will and intention, and ‘voluntary return’, which is based on external pressures of different levels.
2. It should be recognised, that return is not necessarily sustainable and lasting, if the context of return does not enable sustainable livelihoods and a ‘good life’ – subjectively speaking. The potential returnee needs to be able to gather first-hand information on his or her personal possibilities for return and reintegration. The system of return migration thus needs to be flexible and permissive of circular migration.
3. The system of return migration must take into account the special needs of vulnerable groups, such as women, children and minorities, and return should always be intentional and genuinely voluntary. Those belonging to vulnerable groups have less opportunity to influence the resources at their command, the social and economic assets, which enable successful return.
4. Family work should be developed in both the destinations and origins of return migration. Violence against women and children, as well as practices of external pressure, need to be intervened with.

5. Remittances and return migration shape the economic structure of Somaliland. In addition, many return migrants are active in development work, civic organisations and administration. They complement the traditional forms of development work. The development effects of return migration should be more widely assessed and utilised.
6. Programmes of return migration need to be closely linked with the process of asylum, so that the asylum claimant has the opportunity to accumulate work-life related skills and capabilities. Successful return is commonly based on the skills the returnee has gained in the country of exile, be they skills acquired through work experience, or competences acquired in education.



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