

Webinar „Länderkunde Irak“

Ergebnisprotokoll – Abschlusssitzung

Videochat – Montag, 23.06.2025

- 1. The current situation is very tense. Maybe you can give us a short impression of how the feeling especially in Kurdistan but also in Iraq in general is? Not only planes are not going, but generally I assume, the atmosphere in the subsequent events is very tense. Maybe you can give us an impression of how the feeling is right now in Iraq?**
 - Regarding the current situation in Iraq, people are currently not happy and are watching the situation.
 - So far, nothing has happened yet, but people are closely watching the situation, especially due to the conflict between Iran, Israel, and the USA.
 - All flights have been suspended, and currently, all airports are closed. This means there is no air traffic to Iraq or even to Syria.
 - Although nothing has happened yet, people are afraid, because the war is happening very close by.
 - The situation has had some impact on the market, because people are afraid to spend a lot of money. Even in Baghdad, they are in the same situation and they are also afraid, because the situation in Baghdad and the south central is different from Kurdistan.
- 2. You said that it is affecting the markets and the economy. Can you give us a short overview of the effects, especially on issues like tourism which have been very important for Kurdistan in the past? Because of the situation, I guess people are afraid again to travel, simply even if you go by land.**
 - In Kurdistan and Iraq, we have borders with Turkey and Iran. Yesterday, I heard that one border crossing is closed. There is a rumor that this border is closed. Out of the two or three other borders, one or two are also closed. Only a few remain open.
 - More than 75-80% of the goods are imported from Iran and Turkey to Kurdistan. The border closings hence impact the flow of goods.
 - The restricted flow of goods is affecting the market. People cannot buy, so it has effects on the prices due to the lack of the goods. Some people have started to hoard food, but overall, life still appears normal.
 - If you go to city centers – in Baghdad, Erbil, or Sulaymaniyah – things look normal. There is a lot of movement, just people remain somehow afraid that something could happen. All shops and schools are open. So far, there is no sign that it will affect people's daily lives.
- 3. Is there any fear in the country that if this conflict will become worse, there might actually be refugees coming from Iran to Iraq? Is there, from the official side, any fear or preparation for this idea that this might happen?**

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- I haven't heard anything about preparations by local authorities. However, if anything does happen, it will most likely affect the closed border area near Erbil. People would likely flee across the border in a similar way to how they did during the ISIS crisis in 2014. So, for sure, a lot of people would leave Iran and they would somehow come to Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah.
- On TV, there are reports of Iranian citizens coming to Erbil or Sulaymaniyah claiming they are tourists, but it is quite certain that they are not.

4. Can you explain the process of receiving the post-arrival package in Erbil or in Baghdad? How do they get this money in in-kind or in cash?

- The process is currently implemented under the Frontex EURP program in cooperation with different member states. There are two parts: cash assistance and in-kind assistance.
- "Cash assistance" means that before departure, the ETTC team communicates with the returnee. All information (flight information, etc.) is then uploaded into RIAT. This means that the team knows, for example, that a returnee will arrive at 2 o'clock at Erbil or Baghdad airport. The team will then go to the airport to provide the cash assistance and the welcome package. The welcome package includes brochures, shampoo, water, and a SIM card – items needed immediately upon arrival. Additionally returnees receive 615 €, converted into the local currency according to the terms of the contract.
- After that, they receive an appointment for the first and second counseling sessions. During these sessions, ETTC's counsellors gain information about the returnee's living situation, economic background, and education. Based on this, a reintegration plan is created and entered into the system. It takes about one week for the reintegration plan to be approved. If it's not approved, it will be validated as soon as possible.
- When we get the approval, we start with the implementation. All of this assistance is provided in-kind, based on the business plan indicated. There are different things you can use the in-kind assistance for: business start-up, job placement, education, medical assistance and more. For example, if the returnee wants to open a mini-market, all goods related to the mini-market will be included in the reintegration plan. So the ETTC counsellor will join the returnee to the market to purchase the goods according to the business plan and then we will collect the receipts and save the bills and the returnee will receive the goods to open the shop.

5. If a potential returnee wants to go back to Erbil and has been living in Germany for ten or twelve years, but doesn't have a place to sleep in Erbil nor any family or friends there; does ETTC have some facilities there to support those kinds of people?

- ETTC can provide support according to the returnee's cash assistance. They can use this money for urgent needs.
- We also have a space in our office that can be used for one or two nights if needed, but normally we try to rent an accommodation for up to one week. 99.99% of people do have relatives in Iraq. When we have established the contact with them, the returnees can normally sleep preliminarily at their houses. Many returnees initially claim they have no one, but when they arrive in Erbil or Baghdad, we usually find out that they do have someone and can use their cash assistance for their first night.

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- We are ready to support returnees by helping them rent an apartment, find a location, and look for a job during this period. It is our responsibility to follow up with the returnee and to take care of the returnee for a one-year period. In many cases, we complete the implementation within one month.
- ETTC is available to assist the returnee at any time. They are free to visit our office, contact us, and ask questions. We are here to guide them.

6. We received feedback from returnees for example in Azerbaijan that it takes a very long time until their business plans have been approved in Germany. How is the process in Iraq? Do you also need approval for the business plan and how long does that usually take?

- It depends on the returnee – their motivation, interest, and cooperation. For example, if a returnee arrives and is ready and wants to start directly, then we schedule the first counselling session two or three days later. Then, maybe one week later, we hold the second session and finalize the reintegration plan. In the case of a returnee from Germany, for example, the plan is entered into the RIAT system and submitted to the German decision point. The German authorities take one week to approve or reject it. If they reject it, we respond quickly and revise the plan if necessary. If the returnee is cooperative and ready, the process can be completed within about 20 days or even sooner.
- On the other hand, some returnees don't come to the office for two or three months. If they don't come to the office, we can't finalize the reintegration plan.

7. Is it possible for people who live in Shingal or Mossul to get in touch with ETTC without coming to Erbil?

- ETTC has several offices throughout Kurdistan and Iraq. At those places where the next local office is too far away, ETTC also has a mobile team which goes to remote places. But if all of the above doesn't work, we can arrange the sessions via Skype or WhatsApp using a mobile phone.

8. I have some clients saying they will have problems with their government if they return. For example, a family went back to Erbil because they had only two options: deportation or voluntary return. They told me they would be arrested or face problems through the government. Is there any information about cases of people being arrested after their arrival in Kurdistan or Iraq?

- As we offer airport pick-ups we would see if returnees got arrested at the airport. Sometimes, if the authorities at the airport are not very sure about the documents, they check them by doing one or two hours of investigation. But so far, we have not experienced any returnee being arrested at the airport.
- One time, a returnee in Baghdad was held for a weekend in the airport because he didn't have the proper documents. Once his family made guarantees and the authorities knew where he would stay, he could leave. But in Erbil, we are always going to the airport to receive the returnee and provide the cash assistance.
- This however applies only to voluntary returns. I am not sure about the situation of deportees who come with charter flights. ETTC only receives voluntary returnees at the

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airport. Also charter flights with deportees only go to Baghdad because the Kurdish regional government hasn't signed the readmission agreement.

9. How well are returnees informed when they arrive in Iraq? Do you feel the pre-departure counselling informs them adequately or do returnees arrive frequently with wrong expectations?

- This is an important point. No matter if outside or inside of Iraq I speak about this topic during presentations. I don't know how the counselling works in European countries, but sometimes we face situations where the returnee arrives for the first counseling session and has no understanding of the program. Sometimes they have wrong expectations on the kind of support they receive. They might think that they receive everything in cash or that they receive a bigger amount than they actually get. However we don't know if that results from inadequate counseling or if it's a strategy by them trying to receive more.
- Proper counseling in the host country is essential – it lays the foundation for ETTC to conduct the first and second sessions and implement the program successfully. I think the counselors should be aware of the situation in the return country and the program (e.g. EURP) and how it works. A proper information during the predeparture counselling facilitates our work a lot. Here it is important to point to the biggest part of the assistance being provided in-kind as well as the differences in the amount of support according to the number of family members and the host country (sometimes even the federal state in Germany). Further it is also crucial that returnees understand that the cash assistance provided in the post-arrival package (650€) is paid out in the local currency and exchanged according to the official exchange rate. In some countries the official exchange rate and the black market exchange rate differ significantly.

10. Is it a problem if returnees change their business plan after the arrival?

- We are very flexible. It does not matter. If he/she wants to do the same business idea, he/she is welcome to do so. If not, we will give him/her time to think about it and we will support and give individual counseling.
- Sometimes we have three counseling sessions and often ongoing communication with the returnee. It doesn't matter whether a plan has already been submitted in RIAT before the departure. We can always adapt the plan if they for example want to start a different business.

11. You monitor the returnees for a year. From your experience and the data you have collected however, how many of these, especially self-employment activities, still exist after two or three years? We always talk about sustainability, so what is their success rate, if you could put any number on that?

- Around 70 % of the business start-ups are successful. We have many videos of success stories available on our website. Some returnees even expanded their business and hired other people to work for them.

12. What has changed since the dissolution of the PKK? How has that affected the situation of the Kurdish government in northern Iraq? Because you were talking

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before about how important the relations to Turkey are, and I believe that it may have facilitated the relations. So how does that affect the political life and the life of the people on the ground?

- No war between the PKK and Turkey means more sustainability for the region. I believe there is now an agreement between the PKK and Turkish authorities. Further, it will be easier for people to cross the border.

13. What can you/your team recommend to people who don't have any idea what they can do with the money from the kind assistant?

- It is our responsibility and our role to guide and advise the returnee. Many times, returnees choose business ideas that we know are not sustainable and where they could lose the money. In those cases, we give advice.
- It's all about advising and guiding the returnee on how to use the kind assistance. Many returnees will come and say that they don't know how to spend the money, so we will open the door and say: "This is the way to spend" and ask/say: "What is your skill, what are the skills of the family? We will advise you with this business plan and we support it".

14. At the moment, especially in Kurdistan, which branch is good to start a business for example?

- For small businesses, mini-markets are easy and there is no need for a lot of skills. Taxi businesses are also popular. Mobile phones and mobile phone accessories businesses are now famous and there is a market for such things. There are some fast-food businesses, but it is not easy sometimes if you don't have skills in a restaurant. But for the mini market and for others, it is very easy to start a business.

15. I remember one video you can watch from ETTC where someone started beekeeping and has now expanded it, producing honey, which is always nice as a product. So, he has become a producer of food. If you have the competence and some experience, is every idea okay?

- Yes, if you have experience in a niche, that is very helpful. For example, there was a case of returnees from France who had experience running a gym before they left. They returned with the support of ETTC and opened a gym. Just one month ago, we visited them in Baghdad. Now, they have over 15 employees working in that gym.

16. As the counties are neighbors and the situation as a post conflict is also in some ways comparable, could you say a few words about your activities in Syria? Because EURP has started or will very soon start to accept returnees to Syria and you also have – to my knowledge – a national contract with the German and Austrian government to support returnees to Syria. Maybe you could give us some information, because the information is maybe not as widely spread in Germany as it is supposed to be.

- ETTC started a pilot project with Germany, the Netherlands, and Austria during the ERRIN program. After that, we expanded our program in Syria. Currently, we have a

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national program with Germany and up to date, we have more than 970 cases under this program and more than 300 cases completed.

- We have a partner organization as well as our own ETTC offices.
- Currently, there are two service providers under EURP in Syria: IRARA & ETTC.
- We have access to Aleppo airport and Damascus airport, where we provide the post-arrival package accordingly to Iraq. However, the airports are currently closed, so we are waiting for them to reopen.
- We have a lot of cases, especially from Germany and we expand our resources and offices in Syria. I think we are working very well now in Syria in receiving the returnees and providing their assistant and we have a very good relationship with the local authorities. We are also active in Kurdish-controlled areas, so we operate across all of Syria.

17. Do returnees receive a call from you after they submit the EURP application before they leave Germany? In the case of Syria, for example, they receive a call from an ETTC employee before they leave Germany. How do you know when they arrive in Kurdistan?

- It is the same situation in Syria and Kurdistan. If they are registered in the RIAT system and everything (flight ticket, the time, the date, the documents, the ID, ...) has been uploaded, then we can contact them before the flight and meet them at the airport.

18. But that is not the case for forced returnees?

- No we only work with voluntary returns.

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