

Kurds Are Fleeing Iraq in the Face of Uncertainty

by [Yerevan Saeed \(/experts/yerevan-saeed\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Yerevan Saeed \(/experts/yerevan-saeed\)](#)

Yerevan Saeed is a Ph.D. candidate at the Carter School of Peace and Conflict Resolution, George Mason. He previously served as White House Correspondent for Kurdish Rudaw TV and has worked for news agencies including the New York Times, NPR, the Wall Street Journal, the Boston Globe, the BBC, and The Guardian as a journalist and translator.



Brief Analysis

There are economic, corruption, and governance factors at play in the migration of Kurds to Europe, but the most acute issue is the collapse of trust in the political future of the Kurdish Region.

Recently, the Kurdish migrant crisis on the border between Poland and Belarus dominated the international media, with migrants stranded in the brutal cold becoming a hot **geopolitical tool** (<https://time.com/6119488/belarus-poland-border-dispute-humanitarian/>) for Minsk to gain concessions from the European Union. Thousands of migrants from the Middle East and elsewhere have crossed into Poland via Belarus in the last twelve months. Yet thousands of others became stuck between the two countries as Poland fortified its borders, leading to a tragic humanitarian crisis.

I have made three trips to the Kurdistan Region during this period. With each trip, I have noticed both the Kurdish leadership and the public expressing an increasing sense of uncertainty about the future due to U.S. repositioning its military power towards Asia. This collapse of confidence in the future cannot be overemphasized as a strong motive for migration from the Kurdistan Region. The White House Middle East Coordinator Brett McGurk's recent remarks that the United States would return to the "**basics** (<https://www.thenationalnews.com/gulf-news/bahrain/2021/11/25/brett-mcgurk-us-going-back-to-basics-with-middle-east-policy/>)" likewise did not inspire confidence. In fact, the speech further emphasized to its audience that Washington's strategic interests have shifted away from nation-building in the region. As such, the U.S. commitment to the protection of its allies is under serious question.

Thus, with the GCC countries **concerned** (<https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-11-26/saudis-and-uae-are-caught-in-the-middle-of-the-u-s-china-cold-war?srnd=opinion&sref=tp95wk9l>) and seeking to normalize with their adversaries while diversifying their relations in response to a perceived shift in Washington's priorities, a vulnerable autonomous entity like the Kurdistan Region has every reason to be deeply concerned about

what a future with a lighter U.S. footprint might hold.

This concern stems in part from the history of the Kurdistan Region itself, having been under Western protection since 1991. This protection granted Kurds a chance to establish a government with a functioning albeit defective democracy, build their infrastructure, and make the northern region of Iraq the country's most attractive place for foreign investment. These achievements are now under threat, especially with the growing Kurdish conviction that Iraq is not on the United States' list of priorities. As such, Kurds fear that they would lose their protection from Western countries as a consequence and be left to face their own fate in one of the most treacherous and hostile geopolitical areas of the Middle East.

The Kurdistan Region is landlocked and surrounded by aggressive neighbors that seek to undermine the political, economic, and cultural independence of the Kurds. In Iraq, militia groups are more powerful than the state and the army and have already targeted the Kurdistan Region multiple times. Drone attacks on the regional capital of Erbil on September 11, 2021 and earlier rocket attacks in February are just a harbinger of what Kurds are likely to face when the Western military troops vacate Iraq.

That some Kurds are choosing to migrate in response is not a surprise. Kurds who travel to Europe are not necessarily economically distressed. In fact, they sell everything they possess to come up with the thousands of dollars needed to pay for their trips to reach the gates of the European Union. I recently spoke with a family of four who had traveled to the EU via Belarus. The man and his wife had quit their jobs, sold their house, car, and other properties—all in order to migrate to Europe with their children.

When asked why they left, the man responded that "the future is uncertain." Certainly, each person has their own circumstances and reasons to leave. But the shaken belief in the future of the Kurdish enclave as a safe and stable autonomous region has compounded with other factors to drive this most recent wave of migration. The decision of this family mirrors that of many others, and highlights how fear has overtaken hope; jobs, houses, and cars mean nothing now under the threat of political instability.

The Kurdish migration not only harms the Kurdistan Region's human capital resources, but has also already led to security challenges and tensions between the EU and Belarus to the point that some predicted the outbreak of **conflict (<https://theconversation.com/is-the-belarus-migrant-crisis-a-new-type-of-war-a-conflict-expert-explains-171739>)** between the two sides. Moreover, the brutal conditions of the migrants have put the EU in a moral dilemma; its reputation as a paradise of human rights has taken a hit.

In order to address this issue, the EU, United States, Russia, and other countries can address the Kurdish public deficit of trust about their future by introducing a resolution at the United Nations Security Council to protect the Kurdistan region from internal and external aggressions. This insurance policy is likely to dissuade many Kurds from taking the dangerous journey to reach Europe, and there is already a precedent to prove its efficacy. The UNSC **Resolution 688 (<https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/110659?ln=en>)** in 1991, which promised to protect repressed Iraqis, paved the way for millions of Kurds to return home from neighboring countries after having fled from Iraq's military oppression. Resolution 688 restored hope for Kurds then and a similar measure can do the same now, countering serious uncertainty about what the future holds for Iraqi Kurds. ❖

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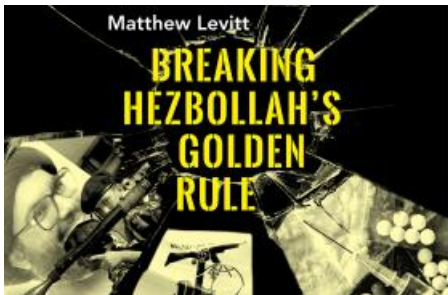
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