



OTT

*report*

# POLITICAL TRUST IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC

A SURVEY ON THE IMPACT OF COVID-19  
ON THE SITUATION OF REFUGEES IN THE  
KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ

*This project was prepared and conducted in partnership between Open Think Tank (NGO based in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq) and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Syria/Iraq Office, with funding support from the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, Germany.*

*We hereby thank all the people who took time to participate in this survey and all the collaborators who contributed to this project.*

*If you have questions about this project or would like additional information, please contact one of the project partners. Copies of this report can be found on the partners' websites:*

*[www.otto.krd](http://www.otto.krd) and [www.kas.de](http://www.kas.de).*

*January 2021*



OPEN THINK TANK  
Dara Business Complex, Floor 1, No.  
103, Barzan Highway, Asia Road 8,  
Duhok, Kurdistan Region of Iraq

[www.otto.krd](http://www.otto.krd)

KONRAD ADENAUER SHIFTING  
SYRIA/IRAQ  
23 Benoît Barakat St., Jabre Building, 5th  
floor, Badaro – Beirut, Lebanon

[www.kas.de/syrien-irak](http://www.kas.de/syrien-irak)

---

Open Think Tank (OTT) is an independent, non-partisan organization based in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. It aims to promote dialogue, discussion, and diverse points of view on issues of current interest. Established in Iraq in 2013, it aims to provide policy papers to the public in general, policy makers, and academics on issues related to peace in Iraq. The research scope of the organization includes narrative of Jihadi groups; Countering Violent Extremism (CVA); gender and peace; minorities and peace; local peacebuilding processes – including the role of local religious leaders and state officials. The organization has conducted research projects mostly in Iraqi Kurdistan and contested areas such as Nineveh plain.

---

The Syria/Iraq Office was set up in September 2015 and deals with the political and social situation in both countries, questions regarding the stability of neighboring countries, the refugee situation and security implications arising from the Syrian civil war and the expansion of the Islamic State (IS). The realization of our goals ensues through a mix of different tools, foremost through trainings, education and consultation, as well as through dialogue programs, research and publications. These projects and programs are supported through activities in Germany and Europe.

## Scientific Board

Mohammedali Yaseen Taha, PhD  
Amjed Rasheed, PhD  
Juline Beaujouan, PhD

## Editorial Board

Yasa Masood Saleem  
Havar Mohammed  
Hizel Hidayet  
Vadar Dindar Saleh

## External Advisor

Bahar Baser, PhD

## Art Director

Chang Tahir

---

## Table of Contents

6	SURVEY BACKGROUND
8	INTRODUCTION AND KEY FINDINGS
12	METHODOLOGY
15	DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS
16	LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES
	<b>DATA ANALYSIS</b>
17	SURVEY KEY RESULTS: SOURCES OF INFORMATION
18	VULNERABILITY OF SYRIAN REFUGEES
20	POLITICAL TRUST
23	WHO TO TRUST: MITIGATING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19
27	CITIES, REFUGEES AND FUTURE DESTINATION
31	CONCLUSION

## SURVEY BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in people having to face numerous difficulties worldwide, and the serious economic and social disruption encountered by institutions and the entire administrative system has, of course, impacted on the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). No individual is immune from the threat of COVID-19, but some groups in every community are more vulnerable. According to a study published jointly by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and New York University's Center on International Cooperation (CIC), the cumulative total number of COVID-19 cases in Iraq was significantly higher than in other Arab conflict-affected countries as of 25 August 2020.<sup>1</sup> Refugees in Iraq might be also more vulnerable and more subject to economic crises because they are displaced, and also Iraq itself is in crisis. Iraq is now (January 2021) short of human resources in its healthcare system. According to the WHO, the minimum required ratio of doctors to people is ten doctors per ten thousand people, but in Iraq the ratio is eight doctors per ten thousand people, so significantly below the international standard.<sup>2</sup> While a number of MENA countries are still experiencing conflicts and war, and some of their people have refugee status, we can assume that refugees will also have been impacted on by the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying curfews.

The northern region of Iraq (the KRI) hosts the majority of Syrian refugees and IDPs. The KRI hosts more than 98% of registered Syrian refugees in Iraq.<sup>3</sup> In the KRI, like anywhere else, the pandemic has more socio-economic and psychological impact among the refugee population.<sup>4</sup> According to another report published by the ESCWA,

The pandemic has more socio-economic and psychological impact among the refugee population.

---

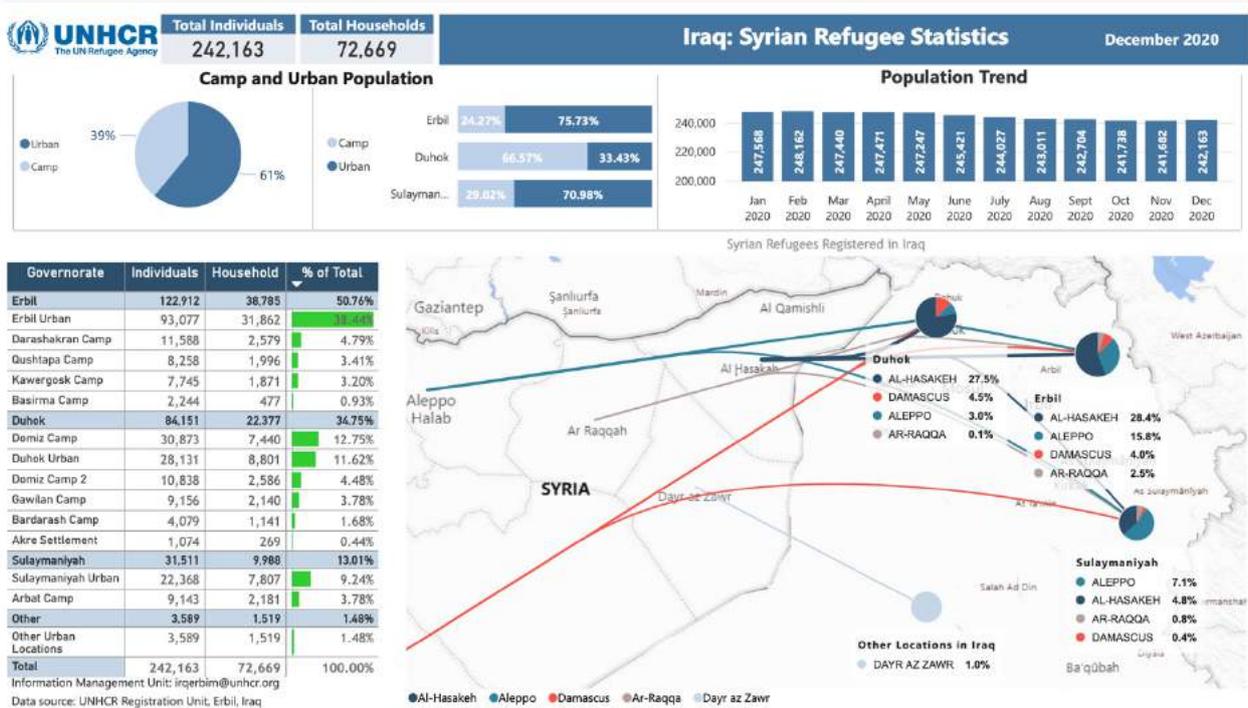
<sup>1</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia and New York University Center on International Cooperation, 2020. "COVID-19, Conflict and Risks in the Arab Region: Ending Hostilities and Investing in Peace".

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization, 2021. "Medical Doctors (Per 10,000 Population)".

<sup>3</sup> United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), 2020. "Syria Regional Refugee Response".

<sup>4</sup> UNHCR, 2020. "Syria Regional Refugee Response".

the pandemic has resulted in increased stigma, xenophobia and discrimination. According to the same source, the refugees have been constantly accused of contributing to a wider spread of COVID-19, and of having a significant impact on food security, nutrition and access to basic services.<sup>5</sup> This survey has been conducted to investigate the impact of the pandemic and its ramifications on the refugee community in the KRI.<sup>6</sup> It has been conducted solely among the refugees residing inside the camps located in three KRI governorates, Erbil, Duhok and Suleymania, which represent 39% percent of the total refugee community in the KRI. The research aims to assess the socio-political/ economic impact of the COVID-19 situation on the community which lives in the camps across the region, and focuses on the situation of the refugee population inside the camps during the pandemic. It examines (1) the challenges this community faces because of the pandemic; (2) the way the Syrian refugee communities deal and interact with the news of COVID-19; (3) the economic impact of the pandemic and the levels of self-reliance and revenues of this community; (4) this community's interest in and knowledge of the current issues; (5) the degree of satisfaction with the quality of services in the camps, and (6) general trust in the state's institutions.



Source: UNHCR, December 2020

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Danish Refugee Council and United Nations Higher Commission of Refugees, 2015. "Syrian Refugee Camp Livelihoods Assessment: Erbil Governate, Kurdistan Region of Iraq".

# INTRODUCTION AND KEY FINDINGS

## THE IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON SYRIAN REFUGEES WHO LIVE IN CAMPS IN KURDISTAN

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is not immune to the global COVID-19 pandemic. In early March 2020, cases of infection started to appear in Erbil and Suleymania. The government could not maintain the curfew and did not manage to control the spread of the virus.<sup>7</sup> From the start, the KRI took preventive measures to contain COVID-19 contagion. The region's land borders with neighboring countries were fully closed (with Iran on 21 February, Turkey on 29 February, Syria on 1 March 2020), and with the rest of Iraq by mid-March. The government also imposed a complete lockdown in mid-March, with movement restrictions between and inside governorates, and a ban on land and air travel. In fall 2020, and as soon as the confinement restrictions were lifted, the death toll reached the highest level in the region.<sup>8</sup>

Below are the more recent statistics related to COVID-19 cases from the KRI Ministry of Health.

### COVID-19: Kurdistan Region at a Glance\*

Total confirmed cases: 105,074

Total recovered: 86,785

Total deaths: 3,439

Total active cases: 14,850

\*Data include confirmed cases of COVID-19 reported by the Ministry of Health (MOH) since 1 March 2020.

Like other communities in the KRI, Syrian refugees were also affected in terms of losing jobs or finding new job opportunities. Nearly 19% of the respondents in our survey said that they lost their jobs outside the camps because of the curfew and the spread of the virus. This percentage might seem low, but it is actually very telling. The gender breakdown of respondents reveals that men were more likely to have lost their job compared to women. 9% of women said that they had lost their jobs, while 29% of men said they had lost theirs. Men are the breadwinners for refugee families and their employment is essential for the survival and economic welfare of their families.

---

<sup>7</sup> Taha, M., 2020. "Lutkeyi COVID-19 le Kurdistan [Kurdish text] Peak of COVID-19 in Kurdistan."

<sup>8</sup> Beaujouan et al., 2020. "Political Trust and Social Cohesion at a Time of Crisis: The Impact of COVID-19 on Kurdistan Region-Iraq".

Most of the refugees who work outside the camps are men, which is evident in the KRI. Our data collectors noticed that most of the stores inside the camps were managed by women. At the same time, we asked if their job was outside the camps, because we wanted to investigate the impact of the curfew. 42.5% said that they had not lost a job outside the camp though they may or may not have lost a job inside the camp. It is worth mentioning that Syrian refugee camps hardly look like camps anymore; they look like complexes now. Each camp has a Grand Bazaar, an Eastern style street, or a quarter of shops and stores. Our interview time was limited due to the administration regulations of the camp. The enumerators were only permitted to conduct interviews inside the camps during the work hours, which were 8:30 to 16:30. Had we had the chance to do interviews after 16:30, the numbers would have changed. Those who still worked outside camps were, of course, still outside, and therefore we could not interview them.

The two questions immediately following this concerned whether they had a reasonable income and whether the financial situation of their household had been affected by the measures related to COVID-19. Our scope was relatively larger in these two questions, covering those who have worked either outside or inside the camp as well as those who did not work. 25.6% of the respondents said that they had a reasonable income. At the same time, large proportions agreed with 'It was difficult to live on that income' or 'It was very difficult to live on that income', 35% and 26.7% respectively. As for the latter question, as we expected, only 15.9% said that the financial situation of their household had not been affected by the measures related to Covid-19, while 40.5% chose 'it has been affected a lot' and 37.48% chose 'it has been affected slightly'. So overall nearly 78% of the respondents had been affected. (Nearly 78% of the refugees in the KRI refugee camps have been financially affected by the measures related to Covid-19).

Most of the refugees who work outside the camps are men, which is evident in the KRI. Our data collectors noticed that most of the stores inside the camps were managed by women.

%42.5 said that they had not lost a job outside the camp though they may or may not have lost a job inside the camp. It is worth mentioning that Syrian refugee camps hardly look like camps anymore; they look like complexes now. Each camp has a Grand Bazaar, an Eastern style street, or a quarter of shops and stores.

Had we had the chance to do interviews after 16:30, the numbers would have changed. Those who still worked outside camps were, of course, still outside, and therefore we could not interview them.

%40.5 chose 'it has been affected a lot' and %37.48 chose 'it has been affected slightly'. So overall nearly %78 of the respondents had been affected.

(Nearly 78% of the refugees in the KRI refugee camps have been financially affected by the measures related to Covid-19)

The survey also asked about their expenses and what they thought would happen to their household's financial situation if the restrictions last longer. 57.2% said that they would have to reduce their expenses to be able to pay them, 22.4% of respondents chose 'I will no longer be able to pay my basic expenses', while 15.2% said that they would continue to be able to pay their normal expenses. That 15% might look familiar. Previously, we mentioned that 15.9% said that their household's financial situation had not been affected by the measures related to Covid-19. It appears that around 15% are living a more stable life, or at least are not very much affected. (Only 15% of the refugees inside the camps in KRI are financially stable) What do these numbers tell us? Are refugees panicking? Are refugees pessimistic? In two further questions, the interviewees were asked 'how long will you have to wait until you return to a normal life without the restrictions related to Covid-19?' and 'Until when do you feel prepared to live under the current restrictions related to Covid-19?'. 47.75% and 39.6% of interviewees, respectively, chose 'I don't know'. The explanation for this was at first unclear during the data analysis, but only until we discovered in the observations reported by our data collectors that there was a factor related to their religious beliefs. Our data collectors reported that the respondents frequently echoed 'God knows' (for 'I don't know') or 'May God bless us' immediately after stating their response to these two questions.<sup>9</sup> Nearly 20% of the respondents believed that it will take them more than one year until life returns to normal without the restrictions related to Covid-19.

It appears that around %15 are living a more stable life, or at least are not very much affected.

(Only %15 of the refugees inside the camps in KRI are financially stable)

Our data collectors reported that the respondents frequently echoed 'God knows' (for 'I don't know') or 'May God bless us' immediately after stating their response to these two questions.

---

<sup>9</sup> During the interviews, refugees were asked, for example, how long they think they will have to wait until they return to a normal life without the restrictions related to COVID-19. The options were 'Until the end of year 2020', 'It will take more than one year', and 'I don't know'. For such questions many of them would say 'God knows'. Our data collectors counted such answers as 'I don't know'. Even in some cases where they predicted the time when they will return to a normal life without the restrictions related to COVID-19, they would add 'may God bless us'.

We noticed a correlation between the percentage of those who believe that life will return to normal at the end of 2020 and the respondents' education level. The higher education level showed a higher percentage. The reason for this correlation is understandable. Educated people might have access to trusted information, pay more attention to global political news, have a better understanding of the nature of viruses, and know about the history of epidemics and pandemics, for instance the Spanish Flu which appeared in 1918. Finally, the level of political trust among the refugees was another important finding of this survey. Overall, a similar proportion of the interviewees rely on the KRI to combat the impact of the pandemic to the proportion who rely on their families, friends, colleagues and/or neighbors. Very few trust the Iraqi government in this regard.

We noticed a correlation between the percentage of those who believe that life will return to normal at the end of 2020 and the respondents' education level. The higher education level showed a higher percentage.

Very few trust the Iraqi government in this regard.

# METHODOLOGY

While this research aimed to highlight both levels of political trust and the multidimensional vulnerability of Syrian refugees in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown restrictions, Open Think Tank (OTT) also strived to investigate the impact of a number of other factors on the perception of the respondents. These factors, which OTT argues contribute importantly to the interviewees' views, include respondents' personal and communal experiences and interactions at the time of COVID-19. The research questionnaire included socio-demographic questions including age, marital status, whether or not they belong to so-called risk groups: those who are over 70 years old or chronically ill, with hypertension, heart and breathing problems, people with diabetes, or immuno-depressed people who can have serious issues, and those who take care of someone in the family, which can be a child, elder, or a person with special needs. Among the respondents, 50.17% were men and 49.83% women. This survey received a high number of responses from the '25 to 44 years old' age range, 56.3%, with 24.7% from '45 to 64 years old' and 14.59% from '18 to 24 years old'. 85.66% were married, and 11.14% were single, with very small percentages of widowed, separated and divorced. As for the level of education of the sample, 25.22% had none, 29.45% had primary education, 23.14% had up to secondary education, 17.79% had a high-school diploma, 4.23% had a university degree, and 0.17% were PhD holders.

## SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

### Age range of the respondents

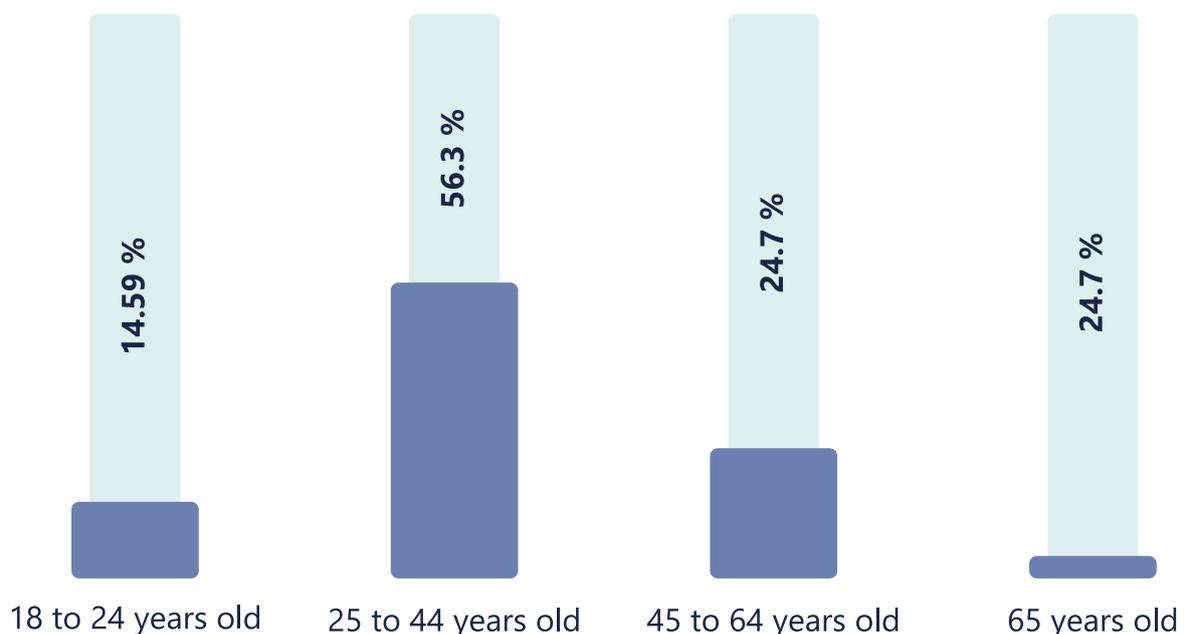


Figure 1: Age range of the respondents

## Education level of the respondents

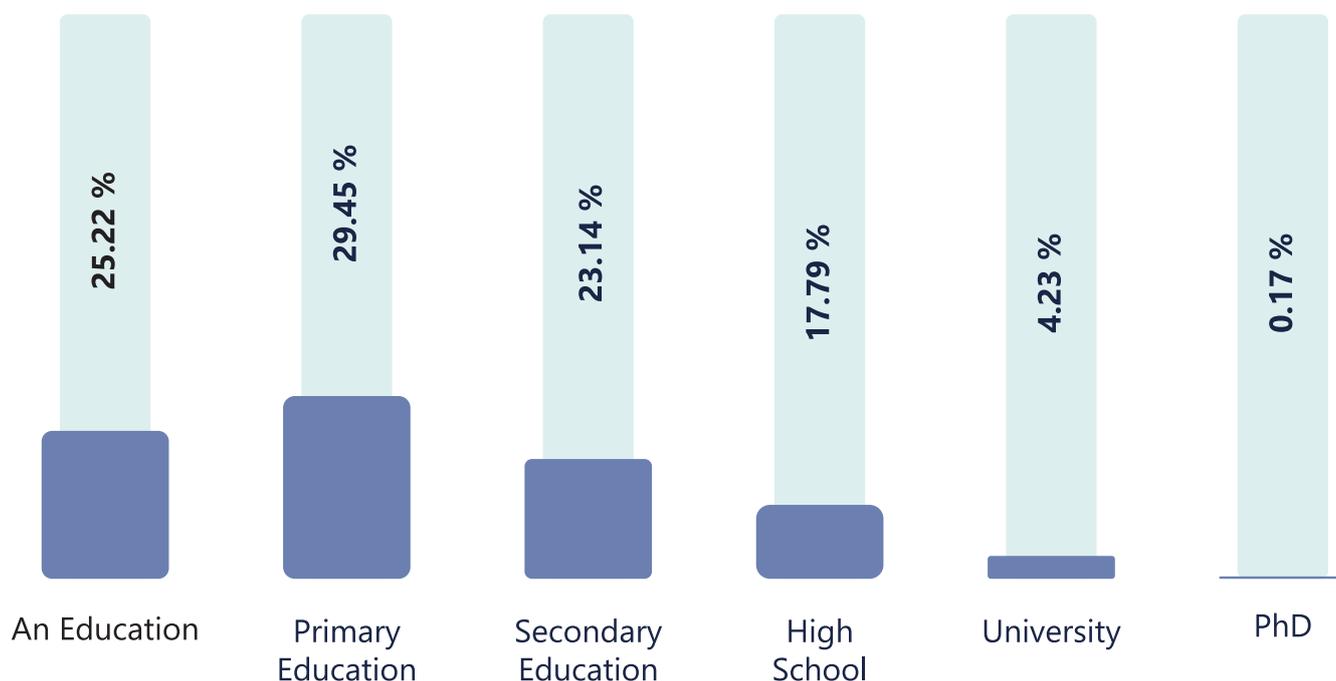


Figure 2: Education level of the respondents

The methodology used in this research is quantitative, with survey technique as a research method. The survey was carried out through face-to-face interviews with randomly selected participants inside refugee camps to ensure the probability of selection. Standard questions on COVID-19 were prepared for the interview process to ensure standardized measurement and a special-purpose survey. Questions were translated into the two main Kurdish dialects spoken in the KRI, Sorani and Behdinnani, and Arabic, as well as English.

The interview survey was answered by a total of 1165 participants in refugee camps across the three governorates of the KRI: Duhok (or Dohuk), Erbil, and Suleymania (See graph below).

## Number of respondents in each governorate

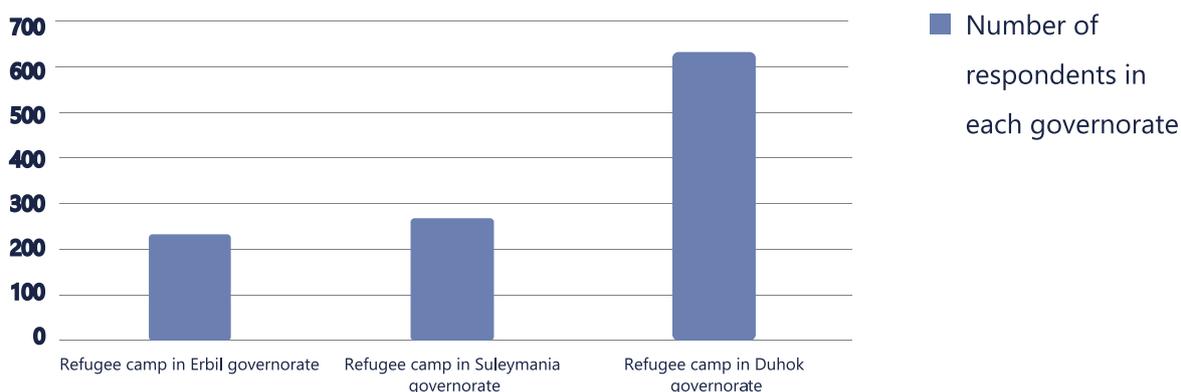


Figure 3: Number of respondents in each governorate

This survey report is a result of data collected from a sample of 273 in Suleymania, 238 in Erbil, and 687 in Duhok refugee camps. The survey considered a larger sample from Duhok because Duhok hosts 66.18% of registered refugees, in Domiz Camps 1 and 2. Smaller samples were collected from Erbil, which hosts 28.92% in Basirme and Darashakran Camps, and Suleymania, with 24.38% in Arbat Camp. Data collectors used smart tablets and software that counted each interview's duration and recognized the location in which it took place. The OTT used these measures both as a preventive and investigative action to ensure the collected data's accuracy. Data collectors were supervised and distributed over the camps' quarters to achieve a balanced, accurate and convincing sample from the refugee camps.

By quantifying their level of satisfaction with their income both now and before the pandemic, the survey results also reveal the socio-economic factors that might have potentially affected the respondents. Someone who belongs to a risk group might differ from a healthier one in terms of optimism and personal experience. Such basic information was crucial because, for instance, questions were asked about respondents' rating of their ability to access the healthcare centers. This included those who had responsibility for taking care of someone in their families. These demographic and socio-economic questions helped the respondents to recall and take into consideration their responsibilities, experiences, and their past and present, which could have potentially helped them to rethink their views before giving answers to the data collectors.

The data collectors were trained to observe and were assigned to write their comments at the end of each working day during the data collection. These observations were later used in the research as qualitative data to further elaborate on the quantitative ones. Some of the data collectors spent more than an hour on some interviews, while the expected time for each interview was 15-20 minutes. This is again related to the fact that our aim was to include qualitative data in the final findings.

**Duhok hosts %66.18 of registered refugees**

The survey crosstab made use of some demographic and socio-economic questions, with questions related to respondents' trust in the state and interstate institutions, their personal challenges at the time of the pandemic, the way they dealt with and interacted with the news regarding COVID-19, the economic impact of the pandemic, the self-reliance of this community, and the level of satisfaction with the quality of services in the camps. This survey attempted to identify the differences in data between Suleymania, which is more under the influence of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and Erbil and Duhok, which are under the influence of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).<sup>10</sup>

This survey attempted to identify the differences in data between Suleymania, which is more under the influence of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and Erbil and Duhok, which are under the influence of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

## DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The questionnaire was available in Kurdish, English, and Arabic and administered by Iraqi Kurdish data collectors of both genders who read the questions to the householder in Kurdish and Arabic and then recorded their answers on a tablet using Kobo Collect software. Data collection took place on 14-25 December 2020.

Survey coordination, planning and implementation was supervised by OTT staff. The collected data was downloaded from the Kobo online platform. Data processing, cleaning and analysis were carried out using Microsoft Excel.

Data collection was conducted taking into consideration hygiene measures to protect the staff and community members from the risk of contracting and spreading COVID-19. Data collectors were informed of these measures and physical distance during the interviews. The data collectors were provided with basic protective equipment (such as gloves and masks) to be used during the data collection process.

---

<sup>10</sup> Between 1991 and 2003, Iraqi Kurdistan was a porous zone of transition, and an arena for various transborder flows and conflicts, rather than a power container, that is, a state-like institutionalized entity with even a limited claim to territorial integrity. The region had a civilian government and a parliament, but these were largely ineffective in the face of the armed forces and politburos of local parties and of the military might and political leverage of neighboring countries. Effectively, the 1994-1998 infighting left the region split in two: both parties now controlled single-party statelets marked by pervasive patronage of the locally dominant party. See more: Leezenberg, Michiel, 2017. "Iraqi Kurdistan: A Porous Political Space".

## LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES

This project was not free of the obstacles and gaps between theory and practice common in political and social research. The data collectors were only allowed to conduct structured interviews in camps from 9:00 to 16:30. A regular person working a full-time job finishes work at 17:00, or perhaps even later if they work in a café or restaurant. So, there was little contact with or coverage in the survey of those who currently had a job or worked outside the camp.

One question relating to political trust was removed by the camp management. This question asked the respondents whether they trusted that the KRI President, KRI Prime Minister, Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Health, and Kurdistan Parliament could effectively combat the spread of the virus and mitigate its impact on them. The camp management believed that the question involved sensitive political issues that it was unnecessary to raise among refugees. In general, and in all three governorates, the process of conducting a survey inside the refugee camps was a serious challenge for the OTT staff, who faced difficulties accessing the camps due to the challenging licensing procedures of the camp managements.

So, there was little contact with or coverage in the survey of those who currently had a job or worked outside the camp.

## DATA ANALYSIS SURVEY KEY RESULTS: SOURCES OF INFORMATION

The rapid spread of COVID-19 is of great concern to the public. Therefore, it was evident that public attention to the media in general would increase alongside the rise of pandemic risks in February 2020. This also applied to the refugees inside the camps in the KRI. Access to information, on one hand, was crucial to learn about the nature of the virus and how to avoid it. On the other hand, these communities needed to realize the circumstances, both health and economic, of their current host community, and perhaps their future destination. The results of the survey show that while 70.6% relied on TV to get information about the virus, 60% used social media platforms as their source of information regarding COVID-19. Data collectors reported that the respondents usually answered this question, which asked how they access updates on COVID-19, and for which they were given multiple options, "Yes, we watch the Rudaw" (indicating TV news) or "We check Facebook" (indicating social media). One finding which was not pre-planned but emerged from our observations was that they had a media star. Some refugees said, "We watch Dilbuxuin's news program." Dilbuxuin's news session is about the Kurdish Administration in Northern Syria. So it emerged that Syrian refugees are an active TV audience, especially of Rudaw TV, as they need to check developments in their homeland. The attention level to the updates, however, differed in the three governorates that host refugees in the KRI. Overall, 36.4% of the interviewees said that they had been following the news about COVID-19 since January 2020 with a lot of attention, while 42.8% said that they follow the news on COVID-19 with some attention. We noticed that the majority of respondents from Duhok (53.17%) chose "some attention", while in Erbil and Suleymania the most frequently chosen answer was "a lot of attention", at 47.48% and 49.08% respectively. This difference can be understood best when we consider that the virus hit Erbil and Suleymania harder than Duhok, especially in the first phase of the KRI lockdown in Spring 2020.

70.6% relied on TV to get information about the virus, 60% used social media platforms as their source of information regarding COVID-19.

## VULNERABILITY OF SYRIAN REFUGEES

A substantial minority of the refugees interviewed inside the camps in the three main cities, about 47%, strongly believe that they are more vulnerable to COVID-19 than the host community. While 17.53% chose the 'strongly disagree' option, nearly 11% chose 'agree' and 'disagree' equally (see Figure 4).

According to observations reported by our data collectors, some respondents argued that they were in danger mainly due to the intensity of the camp's population. The camps looked very overcrowded, and houses were extremely close to one another. They said that their children kept mingling with each other to play. They considered that this was very dangerous for them, because their homes were not spacious, there was little to no space between each house, and children from the entire street would assemble easily to play. However, another large proportion disagreed, saying that people outside the camp are more exposed and people of the camp less so, arguing that they are more careful and avoid traveling around the country or into Syria. Many people from the camp accused other communities in the KRI of being less serious in following social distancing measures, and for being less knowledgeable, and less careful about the consequences of COVID-19 spread in the long-term. The interviewees said that people outside the camp spread the virus because they did not follow the government's restrictions, even during the curfew. According to our data collectors, Syrian refugees feared people outside the camp and suspected them of being infected. So the camp and the people of the camps were seen as being safer. But as some people told our data collectors, people inside the camp could not be safe.

A substantial minority of the refugees interviewed inside the camps in the three main cities, about 47%, strongly believe that they are more vulnerable to COVID-19

A substantial minority of the refugees interviewed inside the camps in the three main cities, about 47%, strongly believe that they are more vulnerable to COVID-19

Many of them argued that in reality they are under a greater threat, which they attributed to the fact that many outsiders (including humanitarian workers, members and employees of organizations and security units) enter their camps. Some argued that the refugee camps are the most dangerous spots in Kurdistan when it comes to COVID-19; people from the KRI and all around the world visit them to provide help. But they now pose more of a threat to them.

Some argued that the refugee camps are the most dangerous spots in Kurdistan when it comes to COVID-19; people from the KRI and all around the world visit them to provide help. But they now pose more of a threat to them.

### Education level of the respondents

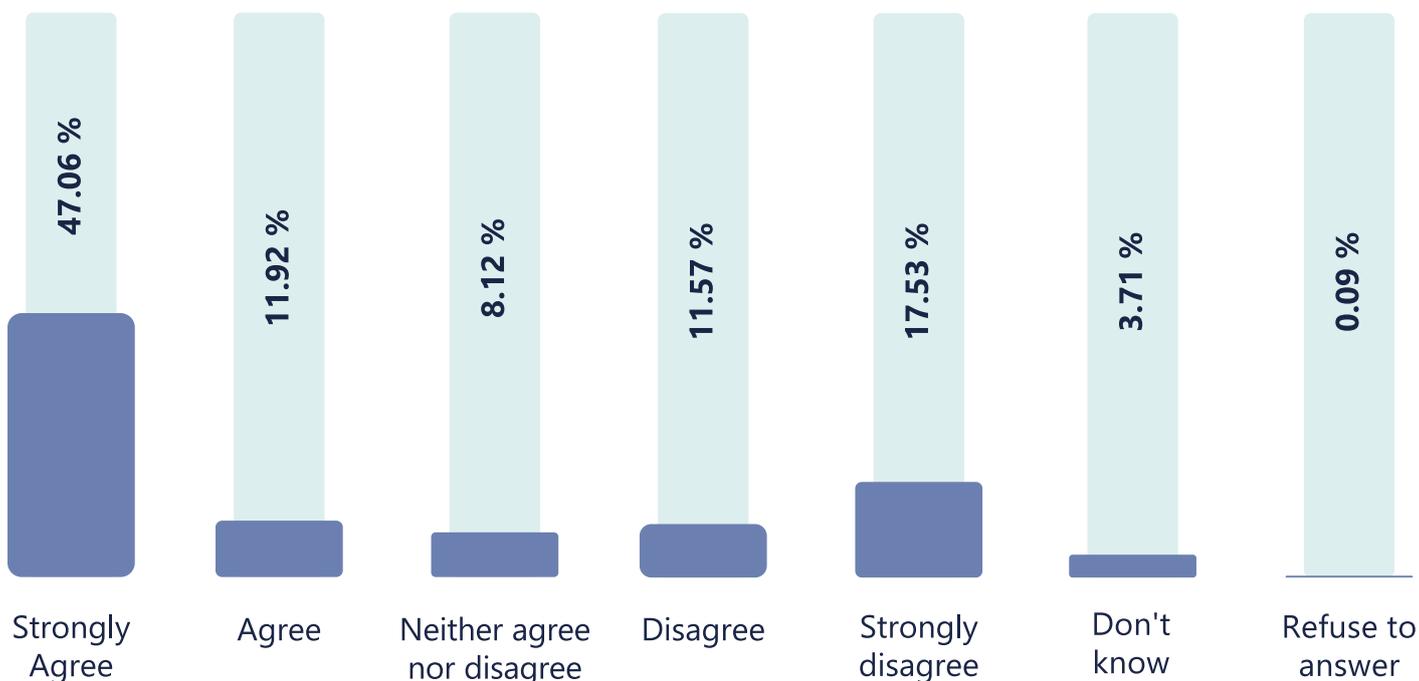


Figure 4: Vulnerability of Syrian refugees compared to the local community in KRI

## POLITICAL TRUST

The correlation between political trust and the COVID-19 pandemic has been very evident in hard-hit countries, including China, the USA, Iran, and Italy, where people lost trust in state institutions. The KRI was no exception, political trust deteriorated, and people had little trust in the healthcare system and its institutions. Some people started to believe that 'COVID-19 was instrumentally made as a biological weapon'. Reaching a state of paranoia, some believed that the 'infected who visit hospitals usually die' (some people believed that the infected were intentionally killed by physicians, therefore they refused to visit hospitals in case of getting the virus) or the 'government wants to spread the virus and make more crises to blend unemployment, salary crises in the KRI'. The same misguided statements were heard in the refugee camps, as reported by our data collectors—two different communities echoing the same sentences, refugees in camps and other KRI communities. The Syrian refugees in the KRI are believed to have been integrated into KRI society to a good extent, the impact of modern communications and social media having made this semi-integration possible. But still, the psychological and socio-economic circumstances of the refugees are different, they are a post-war community, and they are displaced. This research did not seek to examine the attitude of refugees towards the state or decision-makers in general. However, the survey questioned political trust in the context of combating and mitigating the effect of the virus on the lives of refugees. Further, the research sought to determine the extent to which the refugees feel secure and whether they have trust in the KRI institutions as their optimum choice as a safe haven. (Some of the refugees refuse to return to their homeland in Syria, even when the conflict is over)

some believed that the 'infected who visit hospitals usually die'

some people believed that the infected were intentionally killed by physicians, therefore they refused to visit hospitals in case of getting the virus

he research sought to determine the extent to which the refugees feel secure and whether they have trust in the KRI institutions as their optimum choice as a safe haven.

Som of the refugees refuse to return to their homeland in Syria, even when the conflict is over

In an area where the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIL) is still a potential threat, the Syrian civil war is still ongoing, and there is little promise of a resolution to the conflict, Iraq and the KRI are themselves in different crises, and the pandemic threatens lives and jobs; last but not least, will they have easy, affordable and early access to COVID-19 vaccine in a country within the MENA region that is in crisis? Are Iraq and Syria ready for an epidemic or pandemic? All these factors contribute to the level of overall political trust of the Syrian refugees in the KRI.

Data in Figure 5 show that 39% of the Syrian refugees who live inside the camps rely on the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) when it comes to combating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. 29.6% said that they rely on their families, and 7.34% said that they rely on their social circles (friends, colleagues, neighbors). Combining these two responses, we can say that 36.94% of the refugees in the KRI rely on themselves when it comes to mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on their lives, which is very close to the percentage of those who rely on the KRG. This self-reliance itself could also relate to the lack of trust in state institutions (some people stated that if they don't protect themselves and their families, no government or NGO would be able to protect their lives from the impacts of COVID-19). Furthermore, our data collectors reported that many people said that they rely on themselves because no government can do anything. When asked about their trust in the federal government in Baghdad, only 0.52% stated that they trusted the Iraqi government to mitigate the impact of the pandemic.

we can say that 36.94% of the refugees in the KRI rely on themselves when it comes to mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on their lives, which is very close to the percentage of those who rely on the KRG.

This self-reliance itself could also relate to the lack of trust in state institutions

some people stated that if they don't protect themselves and their families, no government or NGO would be able to protect their lives from the impacts of COVID-19

When asked about their trust in the federal government in Baghdad, only 0.52% stated that they trusted the Iraqi government to mitigate the impact of the pandemic.

## On whom do you rely the most to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 on your life?

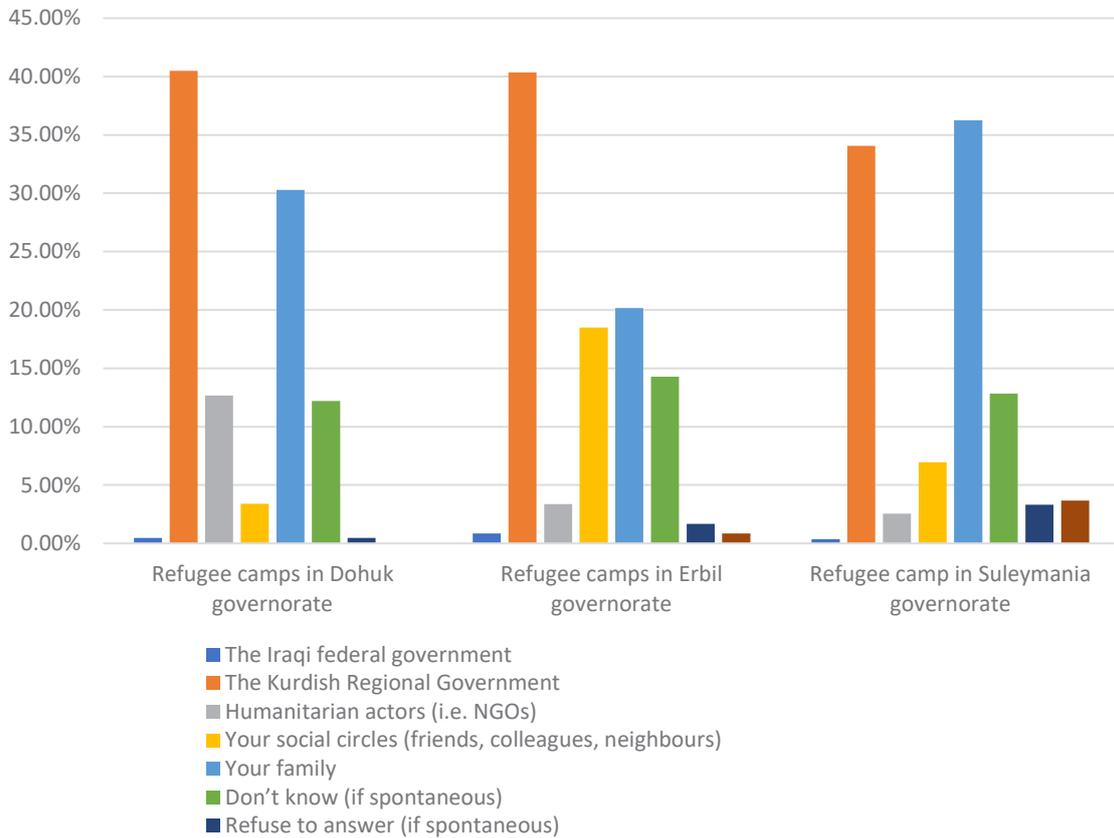


Figure 5: Trust in political institutions

## WHO TO TRUST: MITIGATING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

A question very commonly asked around the world is ‘who should take the lead in combating the virus and the spread of the virus?’ If the answer is ‘states’, then what about stateless people or refugees? In our survey, refugees were asked who should take the lead in mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 situation on the lives and treatment of Syrian refugees; they were given multiple options such as ‘The United Nations,’ ‘The federal or/and the regional government,’ ‘other governments,’ ‘International humanitarian organizations,’ ‘National or local humanitarian organizations,’ ‘Refugees themselves,’ ‘nobody’ and, of course, ‘I don’t know/refuse to answer.’ As shown in Figure 6, public opinion in Syrian refugee camps differs between the Green Zone (areas of PUK influence) and the Yellow Zone (areas of KDP influence). In Duhok, where the KDP had about 70-80% of the votes at the latest elections,<sup>11</sup> a high percentage of people, about 33%, believe that the KRG, which is run by the KDP, should take care of the refugees and take the lead in combating COVID-19, while this percentage fell to about 19% in Erbil and 9% in Suleymania. It became evident during the process of data collection that the further we move away from Duhok, which is the stronghold of the KDP and where other political parties have less influence, the less the presence of the KRG was felt in the refugee camps. In Erbil, which the KDP controls but where it is less overwhelmingly popular than in Duhok, and other parties are somewhat more influential, fewer people chose ‘the federal or/and the regional government.’

public opinion in Syrian refugee camps differs between the Green Zone (areas of PUK influence) and the Yellow Zone (areas of KDP influence).

---

<sup>11</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018. “IPU: Iraq (Council of Representatives of Iraq), Last Elections”.

In Suleymania, controlled by the PUK and the Change movement and where the PKK unofficially, according to KDP media,<sup>12</sup> are a strong influence, very few people chose 'the federal or/and the regional government.' In Duhok 14.99%, in Erbil 21.85%, and in Suleymania 26.01% of refugees in camps had relied mainly on NGOs and international organizations. A number of interviewees believe that the United Nations should take the lead in combating COVID-19 and should also take care of the refugees, 16.85% in Duhok, 18.49% in Erbil, and 26.74% in Suleymania. Another high percentage of respondents from Erbil and Suleymania camps believe that I/NGOs should take the lead in mitigating the impact of COVID-19 and taking care of refugees inside the camps. As with the previous findings on political trust, the element of self-reliance is significant here as well. An average of 17% believe that the refugees themselves can combat the effects of COVID-19 and take care of themselves. In summary, trust in state institutions is stronger in KDP's constituencies.

### Leading role in mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 situation on the lives and treatment of Syrian refugees

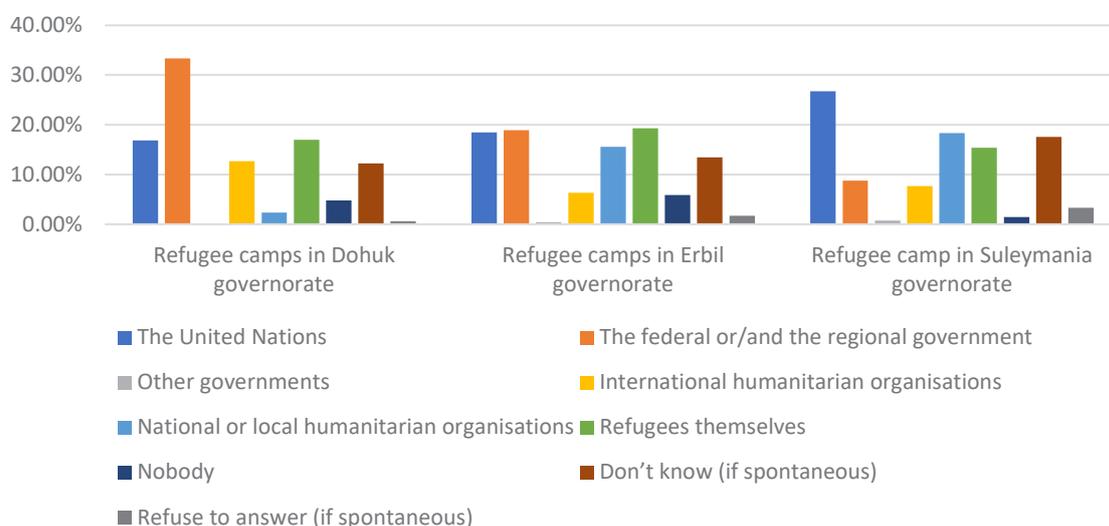


Figure 6: Trust for the leading role

<sup>12</sup> Basnews, 2019. "PKK-Affiliated Party Opens Anonymous Offices in Sulaymaniyah".

## SOCIAL COHESION

Social cohesion between refugees and the host communities, from the perspective of the refugees, is another factor which this research highlights as a vital contributor to political trust among them. This factor can be particularly significant during economic crises, periods of high unemployment, and, most importantly, during a pandemic such as COVID-19. During the survey, a few respondents told our data collectors that they feel that they are a burden on the people of the KRI and the government (KRG). While few in number, these comments may be an indication that this concern might be more widespread despite not being very often expressed to our data collectors. This is because our data collectors were from the KRI, and it's therefore possible that not all refugees would like to mention it, or maybe most simply don't feel that way. As for the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social cohesion in general, and between the Syrian refugees and the KRI communities in particular, we asked our interviewees if they thought the advent of the pandemic has had an impact on social cohesion, especially between the Syrian refugees and Kurdistan. Nearly 3% and 7% respectively said that COVID-19 'strongly fostered social cohesion' and 'it fostered social cohesion a bit'. While a considerable proportion, about 47%, believed that nothing has changed, 28% of the interviewees believed that it has resulted in accrued tensions between Syrians and Kurdistan. Only 6% believed that it had resulted in strong tensions between Syrians and Kurdistan.

It is worth noting that the percentage of those who believed that the 'COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in accrued tensions between Syrians and Kurdistanis' in Duhok was very high compared to other cities. This could result from the fact that COVID-19 restrictions were very strict in Duhok and very lenient in Erbil and Suleymania. It can also be attributed to the fact that Duhok is a very small city, and finding jobs is very hard compared to the other two cities. In the meantime, the fact that the overwhelming majority of the Syrian refugees are placed in Duhok could lead to a higher chance of competences being present among them and of them presenting challenges on the job market. There may be existing or potential communal sensitivity between the people of Duhok and the Syrian refugees because, as mentioned before, some respondents told our data collectors that they feel they are a burden on the KRI. This question, as we mentioned before, needs further in-depth research. There has also been an impact on social cohesion among the Syrian refugees themselves. Our data collectors reported a significant level of complaint between the Syrian refugees in the camps. Complaints were made about some families who had better relations with the administration of the camp and hence received more of the aid that was donated by NGOs. In Dumiz camp 2 in Duhok, where an administrator to the camp was appointed from the refugees themselves, many people complained that this administrator had not distributed the aid fairly, instead favoring their relatives and friends.

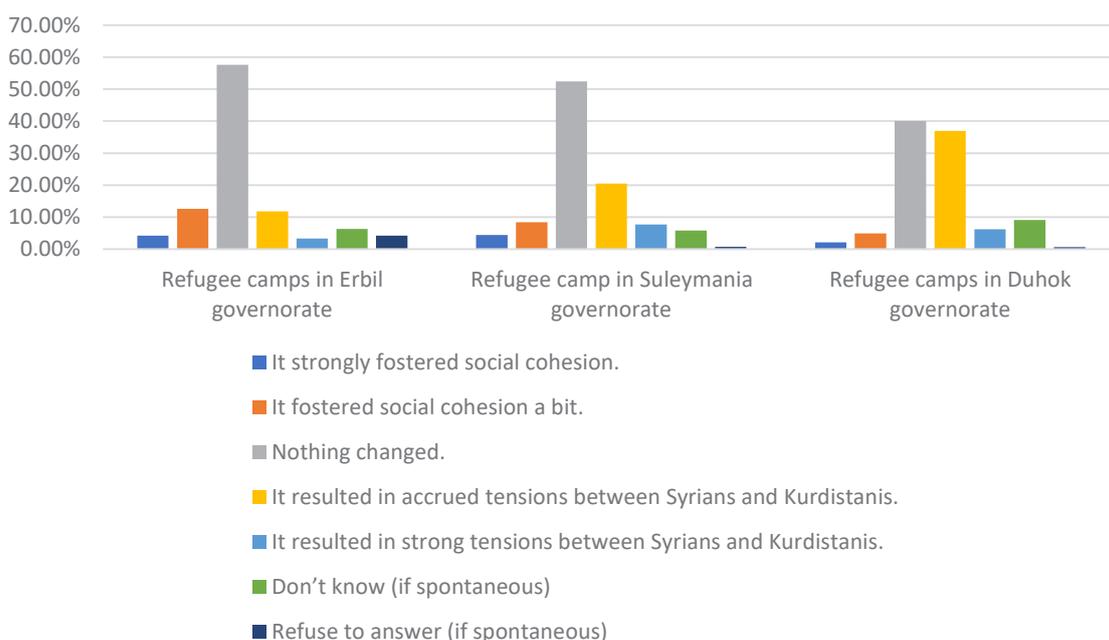


Figure 7: COVID-19 and social cohesion

## CITIES, REFUGEES AND FUTURE DESTINATION

When the war ends in Syria, the question will arise “where will most of the Syrian refugees consider their future homeland to be?” The answer is currently unclear. The war and instability in Syria will eventually come to an end, but when this may happen is so far impossible to predict. Furthermore, an end to the crisis does not seem imminent given recent maneuvers in the MENA region. Of particular concern to the Syrian refugees in the KRI is the fact that the KRG and the Iraqi Government are in the deepest crisis of the post-2003 era. Meanwhile the international community is more than fully occupied in combating COVID-19. Massive numbers of refugees crossed the Turkish borders into Europe in 2020,<sup>13</sup> and the waves of refugees to Europe continue through smuggling routes. Interviewees were asked if they would consider relocating for any reason. Those answering in the affirmative were asked where they thought their future destination should be, and finally, they were asked about the reason behind their decision to relocate. The majority, 60%, said that they would not consider relocating, but about 36% said that they wanted to relocate. Moreover, 15.37%, 8%, and 12% said that they wanted to relocate in three months, six months, and 12 months respectively.

### Considering the impact of the Covid-19 on your life, do you consider relocating?

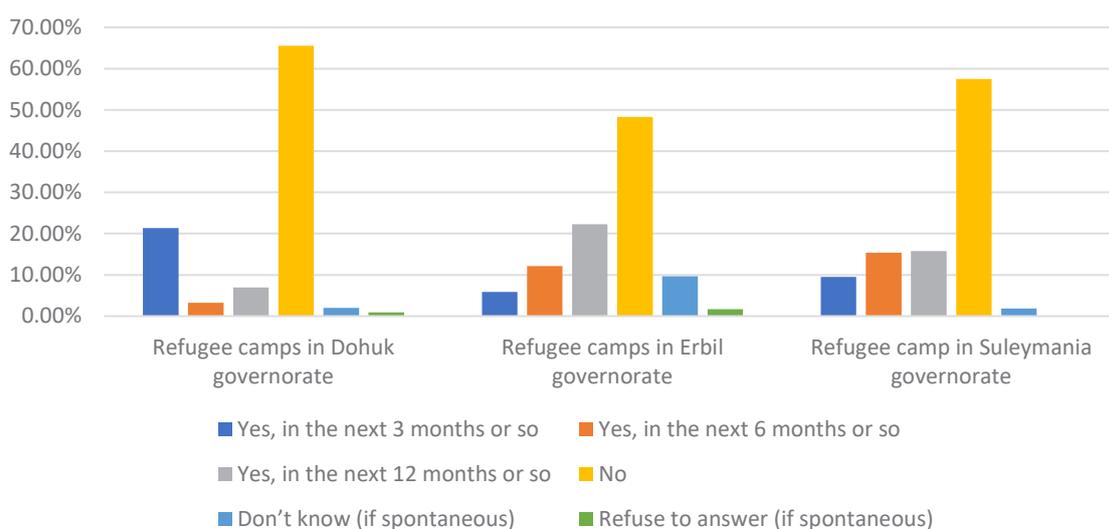


Figure 8: Relocation and Future Destination

<sup>13</sup> Stevis-Gridneff, Matina, and Carlotta Gall, 2020. “Erdogan Says, ‘We Opened the Doors,’ and Clashes Erupt as Migrants Head for Europe”.

These questions also revealed a difference between two refugee camps regarding desire to relocate. Dumiz 1 is older, bigger in area and population, and better established as a complex, than Dumiz 2, which is newer, smaller, and not very developed in terms of services and construction. The percentage of those who said they wanted to relocate from Dumiz camp 2 is higher than those in camp 1. This is understandable. Dumiz camp 1 was built back in 2012, when the KRI was experiencing its best moments, and trade and business in Duhok was at the peak of its development. Thus, Syrian refugees easily found job opportunities and were able to build houses inside the camps instead of tents. Many of them started businesses in Duhok or inside the camp. When Dumiz camp 2 was built in 2014, the KRI was facing both financial crisis and war with ISIL. Essentially, socio-economic conditions are better in Dumiz camp 1, and this is why (as shown in Figure 9) 72% of respondents there said they would not consider relocating, while only 57% said the same in Dumiz camp 2.

### Considering the impact of the Covid-19 on your life, do you consider relocating?

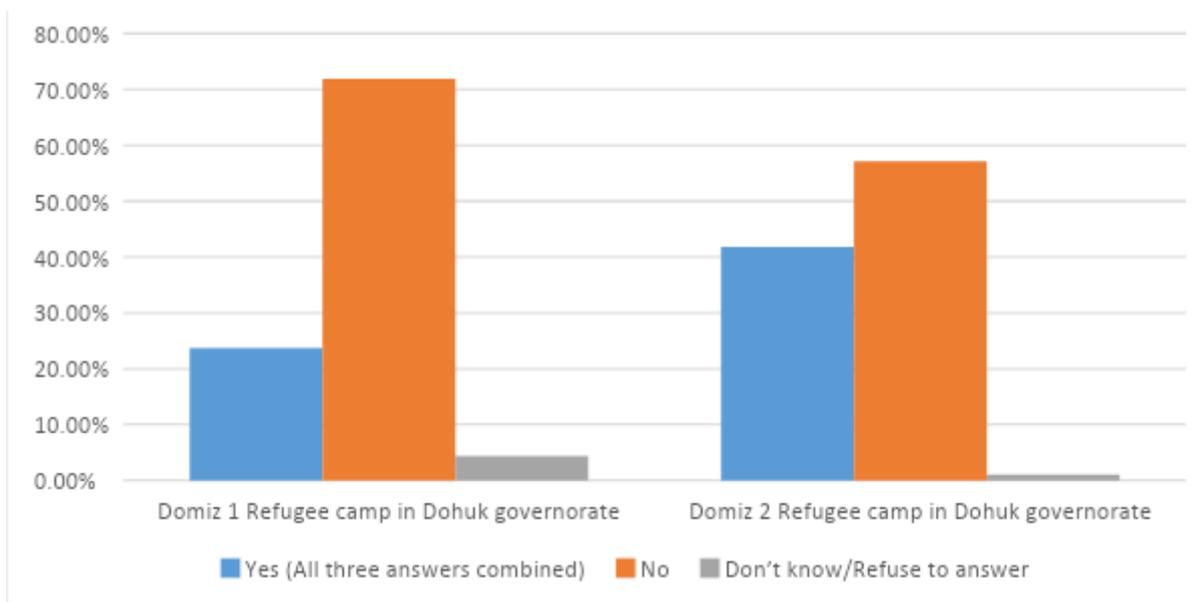


Figure 9: Relocation and comparison between refugee camps

The software was designed to conclude immediately after a respondent indicated that they were not considering relocating. If they said that they were considering relocating, they were asked where to and for what reason. According to our data collectors, Germany was very commonly mentioned by those who said they wanted to relocate. 63.57% said that they wanted to move to Europe (see Figure 10).

Only 12.96% want to go back to Syria. It is worth mentioning that some who said they wanted to go back stated that they have relatives or real estate and land there. Many said that they wanted to go back, but can't, and three common reasons were mentioned. The first was political; because they are wanted by the de facto rulers, the PYD/TEV-DEM, the most commonly cited issue being the SDF/YPG/YPJ military draft program. Second, fear of potential Turkish military intervention in the Kurdish administrated regions of Syria, especially after previous such interventions, Operation Peace Spring in October 2019 and Operation Olive Branch in January 2018. The third reason, which is very interesting and was reported a few times by our data collectors, was the Syrian government's existence inside the city of Qamishli. Some said that they are wanted, and if they go back to Syria either the Syrian authorities will arrest them or the PYD will hand them over to the Syrian authorities. None of the above three reasons may be realistic, but they are why many refugees think they are stuck in the KRI.

According to our data collectors, Germany was very commonly mentioned by those who said they wanted to relocate. 63.57% said that they wanted to move to Europe

---

<sup>14</sup> In the question concerning where they would consider relocating, they were given options, including 'Europe'. Germany was not included as a specific option, but many respondents orally expressed their wish to move to Germany. I returned to the data collectors and asked them about this question. It seems that not many people told them why they chose Germany. However, it was not recruitment. Of the few respondents who gave a specific reason during the interviews, the most common reasons were:

- i. The likelihood of getting accepted as a refugee is higher in Germany. They also believed that their chance of getting a citizenship in Germany is higher.
- ii. There is a substantial number of Kurds living in Germany. They believe that it is now a better place for them. They can meet many Kurds.
- iii. Their relatives are in Germany.
- iv. Germany is a safe place and takes care of refugees.
- v. Their children will have a better future in Germany.

---

## If you consider relocating, where would it be?

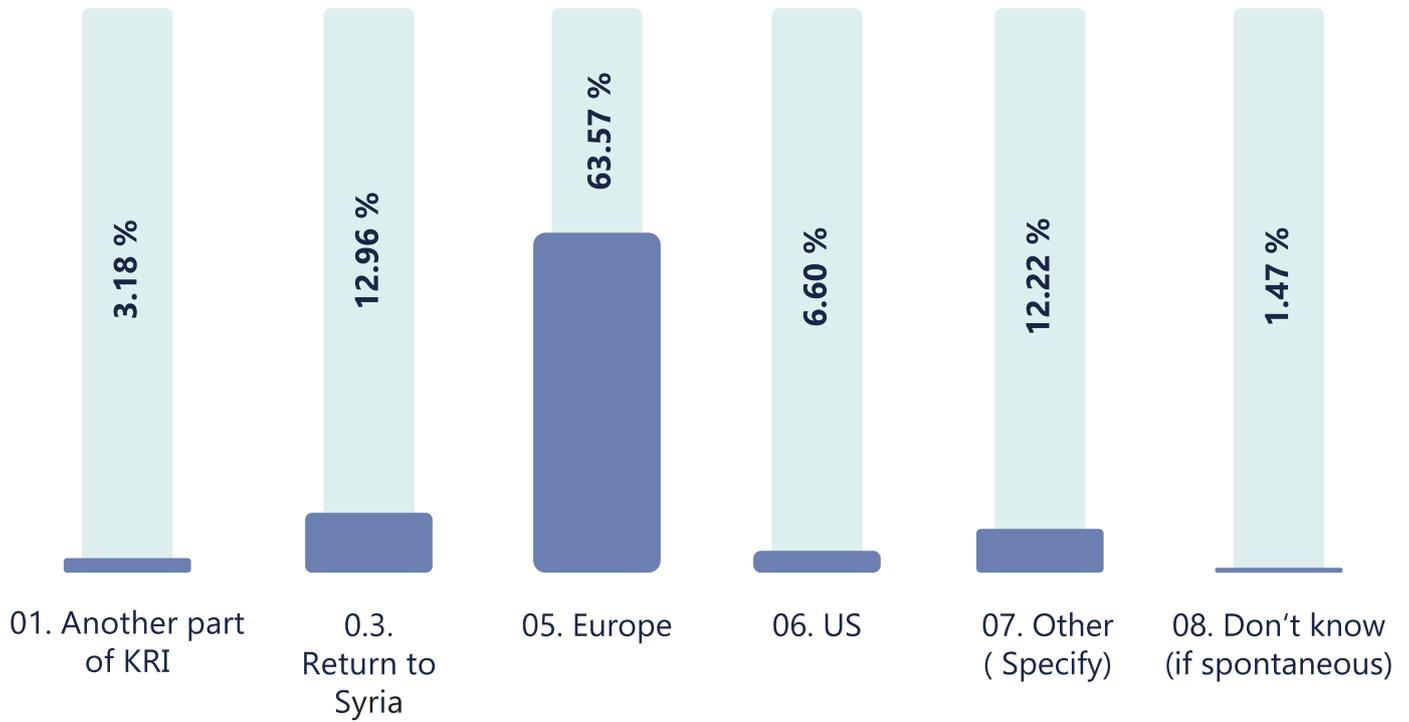


Figure 10: Relocation Destination

Of those who said they want to relocate to another place, only 4% attributed this to the health situation related to COVID-19, thinking that the situation is better elsewhere. 22% attributed it to the general situation (political and economic). 36% and 16% chose 'There is better access to public services there' and 'I have family and/or close friends there' respectively. There were some other very common reasons reported for why they were considering relocating. There was an 'others' option for the same question, and data collectors typed these in. Among 42 reasons, we found two which were particularly common; for medical treatment or surgery, and for the sake of the future of their children and their schooling.

## CONCLUSION

This survey confirms that the pandemic has had serious socio-economic and psychological impacts among the refugees. Obviously, the pandemic impacted on the lives of the majority of the refugees and only 15% of the respondents to our survey stated that their life remains stable and has not been much affected. In addition, about 59% of the respondents believed that they are more vulnerable to COVID-19 in the camp. These indicators reveal that the impact of COVID-19 and related measures has been serious on the majority of the refugees who reside in the camps. Social cohesion has been significantly impacted. Some fear people outside the camp and suspect them of being infected. The refugees accused other communities in the KRI of being less serious in following social distancing measures, and of being less knowledgeable and less careful about the consequences of the long-term spread of COVID-19.

A significant finding of this survey was that many refugees tend to rely on themselves rather than external parties and institutions concerning the mitigation of the impact of the pandemic. Numbers and figures vary between the three governorates and the level of trust was higher in the areas where the KDP (which constitutes the current regional government) has a stronger presence. This self-reliance could itself also be a result of lack of trust in state institutions. However, trust in KRI institutions was much higher than trust in the federal government in Baghdad, which stood at only 0.5%. The most commonly desired next destination for the refugees, where there was one, was Europe. 63.57% stated that they wanted to move to Europe, and Germany was very commonly mentioned by those who said they wanted to relocate.

Access to news and information regarding COVID-19 and related measures through TV and social media has been good, with a high level of attention being paid to it. Respondents' level of access to healthcare centres and satisfaction rates with the healthcare system seem to be very good, although infection rates are very high.

# REFERENCES

---

Basnews, 2019. "PKK-Affiliated Party Opens Anonymous Offices in Sulaymaniyah". which I think <https://www.basnews.com/en/babat/510337> [Accessed 20 January 2021].

Beaujouan et al., 2020. "Political Trust and Social Cohesion at a Time of Crisis: The Impact of COVID-19 on Kurdistan Region-Iraq". Open Think Tank. <http://www.otto.krd/doc/KRI-Covid-Report.pdf> [Accessed 20 January 2021].

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020. "COVID-19 And Your Health". <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-with-medical-conditions.html> [Accessed 29 December 2020].

Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and United Nations Higher Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), 2015. "Syrian Refugee Camp Livelihoods Assessment: Erbil Governate, Kurdistan Region of Iraq".

[https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2a-hUKEwjHirbw3L7uAhUGXRoKHV0HDYc-QFjABegQIAxAC&url=https%3A%2F%2Fdata2.unhcr.org%2Fen%2Fdocuments%2Fdownload%2F43926&usg=AOvVaw25MISEXanc6xzb1rV-tO\\_fR](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2a-hUKEwjHirbw3L7uAhUGXRoKHV0HDYc-QFjABegQIAxAC&url=https%3A%2F%2Fdata2.unhcr.org%2Fen%2Fdocuments%2Fdownload%2F43926&usg=AOvVaw25MISEXanc6xzb1rV-tO_fR) [Accessed 20 January 2021].

Basnews, 2019. "PKK-Affiliated Party Opens Anonymous Offices in Sulaymaniyah". which I think <https://www.basnews.com/en/babat/510337> [Accessed 20 January 2021].

Beaujouan et al., 2020. "Political Trust and Social Cohesion at a Time of Crisis: The Impact of COVID-19 on Kurdistan Region-Iraq". Open Think Tank. <http://www.otto.krd/doc/KRI-Covid-Report.pdf> [Accessed 20 January 2021].

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020. "COVID-19 And Your Health". <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/people-with-medical-conditions.html> [Accessed 29 December 2020].

Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and United Nations Higher Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), 2015. "Syrian Refugee Camp Livelihoods Assessment: Erbil Governate, Kurdistan Region of Iraq".

[https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2a-hUKEwjHirbw3L7uAhUGXRoKHV0HDYc-QFjABegQIAxAC&url=https%3A%2F%2Fdata2.unhcr.org%2Fen%2Fdocuments%2Fdownload%2F43926&usg=AOvVaw25MISEXanc6xzb1rV-tO\\_fR](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&ved=2a-hUKEwjHirbw3L7uAhUGXRoKHV0HDYc-QFjABegQIAxAC&url=https%3A%2F%2Fdata2.unhcr.org%2Fen%2Fdocuments%2Fdownload%2F43926&usg=AOvVaw25MISEXanc6xzb1rV-tO_fR) [Accessed 20 January 2021].

Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018. "Iraq (Council of Representatives of Iraq), Last Elections". PARLINE Database. [http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2151\\_e.htm](http://archive.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2151_e.htm) [Accessed 21 January 2021].

Leezenberg, Michiel, 2017. "Iraqi Kurdistan: A Porous Political Space". *Anatoli*, vol 8, no. 2, pp. 107-131. <https://journals.openedition.org/anatoli/608#toc-to1n2> [Accessed 20 January 2021].

Muhtaseb, Lamis El, 2013. "Jordan's East Banker-Palestinian schism". Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre. <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/162779/746892aacedd3e8fcb1ff7370a77fb67.pdf> [Accessed 20 January 2021].

Stavis-Gridneff, Matina, and Carlotta Gall, 2020. "Erdogan Says, 'We Opened the Doors,' and Clashes Erupt as Migrants Head for Europe". New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/29/world/europe/turkey-migrants-eu.html> [Accessed 21 January 2021].

Taha, M., 2020. "Lutkeyi COVID-19 le Kurdistan [Kurdish text] Peak of COVID-19 in Kurdistan". Rudaw. <https://www.rudaw.net/sorani/opinion/06042020> [Accessed 20 January 2021].

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) and New York University Center on International Cooperation, 2020. "COVID-19, Conflict and Risks in the Arab Region: Ending Hostilities and Investing in Peace". <https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/publications/files/covid-19-conflict-risks-arab-region-english.pdf> [Accessed 20 January 2021].

United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), 2020. "Syria Regional Refugee Response". <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/5> [Accessed 20 January 2021].

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2020. "Impact of COVID-19 on Migrants and Refugees in the Arab Region". <https://reliefweb.int/report/algeria/impact-covid-19-migrants-and-refugees-arab-region> [Accessed 20 January 2021].

World Health Organization. 2021. "Medical Doctors (Per 10 000 Population)". [https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/indicators/indicator-details/GHO/medical-doctors-\(per-10-000-population\)](https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/indicators/indicator-details/GHO/medical-doctors-(per-10-000-population)) [Accessed 20 January 2021].