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Non-return and Re-emigration: The Case of Kurds from the Kurdistan Region-Iraq in Western Europe

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Abstract

This article examines non-return and re-emigration among Kurdish migrants from the Kurdistan Region-Iraq (Southern Kurdistan/SK) residing in Western Europe. Moving beyond conventional return-migration frameworks that prioritize economic incentives or emotional attachment, it asks why many Kurdish migrants do not return and why some who do subsequently re-emigrate. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with Kurdish migrants and returnees, the study advances an integrated analytical framework centered on three interrelated dimensions: malfunctioning political governance, class-based economic insecurity, and socio-cultural conservatism.

The findings show that systemic political dysfunction—marked by corruption, party domination, and weak institutions—underpins economic inequality and socio-cultural exclusion, producing class stratification and insecurity. Prolonged residence in Europe generates intellectual and cultural transformations, complicating reintegration, especially for women individuals with non-traditional lifestyles. Persistent patriarchal norms, gendered exclusion and other social control deter return, often outweighing economic considerations.

The article conceptualizes non-return and re-emigration as structurally produced outcomes rather than individual choices. It challenges return-centered policy assumptions and argues that, under current conditions, large-scale or permanent return to SK is unlikely. Instead, meaningful political, institutional, and gender-sensitive reforms are prerequisites for altering migration trajectories, while diaspora engagement is more likely to remain transnational or temporary rather than permanent.

Introduction

“In the current adverse religious and socio-political situation of the Kurdistan, there are several reasons to leave. As a woman and a human being, the lack of freedom to express my opinions and practice my beliefs drove me away.” (I1, a 46-year-old woman settled in the Netherlands in 2018)

Significant Kurdish migration from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq—hereinafter referred to as Southern Kurdistan (SK)—to Europe began in the early 1960s and intensified from the 1970s onwards. Large-scale migration occurred during the 1980s and 1990s as a result of displacement, the suppression of Kurdish armed insurrections, and intra-Kurdish and state-led violence (Keles et al. 2024; Paasche 2020). In the decades following the fall of the Ba□ath regime, additional waves of migration emerged, driven by political instability, economic crises, governance failures in the Kurdistan Region, and later the rise of ISIS (Baser and Toivanen 2019).

Empirical evidence shows that after 1991, and particularly after 2003, many Kurds returned to Iraq and SK, either voluntarily or involuntarily, but predominantly from neighbouring countries in the region (Creach and Stort 2004; King 2008; Paasche 2020). The relative similarity of socio-economic conditions and cultural norms in these countries often facilitated reintegration. By contrast, the experience of Kurdish migrants who settled in democratic and highly developed Western European countries has been

markedly different. A large proportion of these migrants have not returned permanently, despite the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the formal end of Ba□athist rule.

Over the past decade, a growing body of scholarship has examined return migration to SK, focusing on why migrants return, the conditions under which return occurs, and the policies required to facilitate reintegration and prevent further emigration. Several studies highlight returnees' motivations, including familial ties and emotional attachment to the homeland, alongside the social and institutional challenges they encounter upon return (Keles et al. 2024). Others analyse the return mobilities of highly skilled second-generation Kurds who relocate to Kurdistan as their parental homeland (Keles 2022), or explore the pre- and post-return experiences of diasporic returnees in the post-Saddam era, particularly their engagement in development and state-building processes (Baser and Toivanen 2019; Baser 2019). Additional research has examined the experiences of second-generation returnees whose decisions were shaped primarily by family obligations (Ameen 2018), as well as the diasporic imaginaries of returnees who transferred cultural practices and social norms acquired abroad back to Kurdistan (King 2008).

While this literature has generated important insights, it has largely centred on the processes and motivations of return. Even when political conditions are acknowledged, the focus remains predominantly on why return occurs rather than on why it does not. Consequently, the structural drivers of emigration from Kurdistan and the persistent reluctance of large segments of the Kurdish diaspora to return have received comparatively little analytical attention.

Existing studies tend to approach return migration primarily through economic and, to a lesser extent, cultural lenses, often privileging the perspectives of returnees or of political and economic actors with vested interests in Kurdistan, such as elites who capitalised on dual citizenship, transnational mobility, or access to the rentier state. This mirrors broader trends in return-migration scholarship, which has traditionally emphasised cost–benefit calculations, labour-market outcomes, and the transfer of financial or human capital (Cassarino 2004; Dustmann and Weiss 2007; De Haas, Fokkema and Fihri 2015). Within the Kurdish case, such approaches have tended to foreground successful or strategic returns while marginalising those whose social positioning, political expectations, or lifestyles render reintegration difficult or undesirable.

Beyond forced migrants in neighbouring countries who awaited political change, returnees from Western Europe have disproportionately included individuals from conservative families who struggled to adapt to liberal social norms abroad, or more recent migrants unable to secure stable legal status. This pattern resonates with comparative research showing that return is more likely among migrants with weaker social ties, lower cultural embeddedness, and limited upward mobility in destination societies (Carling 2015; King 2000; Kuschminder 2017). Empirical studies further show that migrants with lower socio-cultural integration—measured through language acquisition, social networks, gender norms, and identification with host-society values—are significantly more likely to return permanently (Bilgili and Siegel 2014; De Bree, Davids and de Haas 2010). Conversely, migrants who develop strong attachments

to democratic institutions, welfare regimes, and individual freedoms are less inclined to view return as viable or desirable, even when emotional ties to the homeland persist.

In the Kurdish case, empirical evidence and prior research point to a recurring cultural justification for return, particularly the desire to raise children within Islamic–traditional Kurdish norms. Carling (2015) notes that return to Kurdistan is "particularly challenging for young women and girls," leading some conservative families to perceive reintegration as easier before their daughters reach puberty. These more traditional and religious returnees often resist social change and seek to preserve established gender norms rather than acting as agents of transformation. By contrast, migrants from less conservative backgrounds—those already familiar with modern social norms or culturally embedded in host societies—are considerably less likely to return. For them, the cultural factors that facilitate return for conservative families function as barriers. Return migration, therefore, cannot be understood solely as an individual or family decision but must be situated within broader social, cultural, and political contexts. While religiosity and conservatism may encourage return, alternative gender norms, political expectations, and notions of citizenship, particularly among the second generation, often discourage it.

At the same time, many Kurdish migrants who have settled permanently in Europe continue to regard Kurdistan as their homeland. They maintain emotional and cultural ties, visit regularly, and express strong affective attachments. Yet emotional belonging does not translate into permanent settlement. Previous studies have largely overlooked migrants whose return is actively discouraged by socio-political and structural conditions in Kurdistan, including the lack of democratic development, parochial political cultures, insecurity, corruption, conservative religious dominance, and the resurgence of tribalism. These conditions function not only as key drivers of emigration but also as major obstacles to return.

Despite their centrality, these factors remain under-theorised. Existing research focuses primarily on economic incentives and cultural attachments that enable return, paying insufficient attention to the socio-political dynamics that prevent it. Only a limited number of studies have engaged critically with these barriers, mainly from the perspectives of returnees rather than migrants who remain in Europe. A notable exception is Paasche (2016), who identifies corruption as a major obstacle to reintegration for Iraqi Kurdish returnees. This underscores the importance of homeland structures in shaping return decisions, yet a research gap persists regarding non-return and re-emigration.

Against this backdrop, this study shifts the analytical lens from return to non-return and re-emigration. *Non-return* refers to migrants' permanent settlement in host countries without returning permanently to their home country. *Re-emigration* refers to the renewed migration of returnees to a host country, often their previous one, and *re-emigrants* are such returnees. The study examines why many Kurdish migrants —both those who left during the Ba□ath regime and those who emigrated after 2003—remain reluctant to return, and why some who do return subsequently re-migrate to Europe. It also addresses why emigration from SK has continued despite the establishment of KRG. Rather than asking why some migrants return, the article asks why many do not.

The study adopts a qualitative approach based on semi-structured, purposive online interviews with first-generation Kurdish migrants residing in Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium. The 30 male and female interviewees, aged between 34 and 70, include individuals who emigrated both before and after 2003. The interviews were conducted in Autumn 2025. Content analysis reveals three interrelated categories shaping non-return and re-emigration: malfunctioning political governance, class-based economic insecurity, and socio-cultural conservatism. Following a brief discussion of migration trajectories, the article elaborates these themes in turn.

From Forced Migration to Voluntary Leaving "Forever"

"I came to stay forever." (I1, a 46 year-old women settled in the Netherlands in 2018)

"The day I decided to leave Kurdistan, it was forever, and upon reaching Germany, I resolved not to return." (I2, A 36 year-old women settled in Germany in 2021)

Migration from SK during the second half of the twentieth century was largely shaped by forced displacement resulting from prolonged socio-political conflict. These included wars between the Iraqi state and Kurdish movements, internal Kurdish conflicts, and Iraq's regional wars from the 1960s until the fall of the Ba□ath regime in 2003 (Keles et al. 2024). During this period, migration was widely experienced as temporary exile, with a strong expectation of eventual return contingent upon political change in Iraq. As one interviewee who left Kurdistan in 1997 explained, "At that time your destination is not clear. But there is always a hope to return" (I3, 52-year-old woman, Netherlands). Even then, however, permanent migration was not uncommon. A 55-year-old man in the Netherlands (I18) stated, "Because of civil war and limited individual freedom, I left Kurdistan forever in 1996."

Historically, Kurdish migration from SK can be understood as unfolding in two broad phases. Prior to 2003, migration was largely forced and politically driven, with return imagined as integral to the migratory trajectory. After the collapse of the Ba□ath regime and the establishment of a federal political order, migration increasingly assumed a different character. While insecurity persisted, many migrants left for reasons extending beyond immediate political persecution, including economic uncertainty, governance failures, and socio-cultural pressures. Crucially, unlike earlier cohorts, many post-2003 migrants departed with the intention of settling permanently. As a 38-year-old man living in Belgium since 2006 (I17), explained, "At that time, many people left Kurdistan at a young age because of instability, injustice, and an uncertain future conditions that, in many ways, continue to this day."

Among post-2003 migrants, two analytically distinct but overlapping groups can be identified. The first comprises individuals largely compatible with prevailing socio-cultural norms in Kurdistan, often more religious, conservative, and embedded in family structures. Their migration was frequently shaped by economic motivations and what Paasche (2020) describes as "emulation," whereby decisions were influenced by others' experiences. A 34-year-old man in Belgium (I5) stated, "In 2015 there was a high imitation, a high flood of people came toward Europe. I was one of them, while my life had no any problem in Kurdistan. It was only imitation." He added, "What is more important for me is my own culture

and religion, I've maintained that more." This group often maintained strong attachments to Kurdish cultural and religious norms, anchoring their sense of belonging to the homeland. Improved conditions in Kurdistan may prompt some to return, particularly those with limited host-society interaction. Referring to this, one interviewee (I17) stated, "I did not come temporarily or to stay forever. We plan to return if the situation improves and Kurdistan becomes socio-economically stable and secure. Who would not want to live among their family and nation?"

The second group consists of migrants whose departure was motivated less by emulation or economic calculation and more by aspirations for personal autonomy, socio-political freedom, and what interviewees described as a "happier life." A 42-year-old woman in the Netherlands (I16) stated, "Leaving [SK] was related to its political situation, specifically, the limited freedom of expression and the lack of personal security, including threats to my life due to my activities for freedom." These individuals frequently experienced socio-cultural pressures in Kurdistan that they found increasingly intolerable. Their migration trajectories were shaped by lifestyle aspirations and value orientations that conflicted with dominant social norms in the homeland. As a 42-year-old man in Belgium (I7) explained, "I had no political problems, just a desire for a happier life. Indeed, I didn't come to stay for ever, but now things are such that I cannot return". For this group, migration was closely tied to the pursuit of individual freedom, gender equality, and future prospects for their children. Another interviewee (I2) stated, "There are many reasons to leave Kurdistan…the lack of individual freedom, the growing Islamic influence on society, and the absence of a clear future for ourselves and our children."

Although some migrants initially imagined their stay in Europe as temporary, return was frequently postponed and gradually became less likely. Decisions about return were often deferred until retirement or until children had completed their education and established independent lives. A 50-year-old woman in the Netherlands (I8) articulated this ambivalence clearly: "I did not come temporarily and do not plan to return. I may consider returning to Kurdistan once my children are married. Even then, it might only be a temporary return." At this stage, children in particular become more integrated and identify with the host country. As one interviewee (I15) who left Kurdistan at age nine noted, "I have been integrated in the Netherlands since childhood; this is now my homeland." Consequently, strong intergenerational ties make parents' return increasingly unlikely. This pattern aligns with broader migration research showing that migrants who remain in destination countries until retirement are more accurately described as permanent rather than temporary migrants, and that definitive return at retirement is far from guaranteed (Dustmann and Weiss 2007; Hunter 2011).

Indeed, temporary migration frequently becomes permanent over time (Jensen and Pedersen 2007). Prolonged residence in host societies leads to deeper economic, social, and cultural integration, which increases the material and emotional costs of return. Postponing return can also generate alienation from the country of origin (Karl and Ramos 2025). As a 37-year-old man (I13) living in Germany for thirteen years reflected, "I came temporarily, but I have stayed until now, and I don't know how long I will be here." Longer duration of stay enhances access to welfare systems, labour markets, and social

networks, making return increasingly difficult and, for many, undesirable (Castles and Miller 2003; Portes, Parker, and Cobas 1980; Waldorf and Esparza 1991).

As a result, migration from SK to Europe has often evolved into a permanent settlement process, even when initially conceived as temporary. Moreover, for some migrants who did return after 2003, reintegration proved difficult, leading to re-emigration to Europe. These trajectories highlight the transformation of Kurdish migration from a politics-driven exile with an imagined return into a long-term and often irreversible relocation shaped by structural inequalities between homeland and host societies.

Limited Space for Returnees: Re-emigration to Europe

Like earlier cohorts of forced migrants who left Kurdistan before 2003 with the expectation of return, some of those who emigrated after 2003—albeit for different reasons—initially perceived their migration as temporary and envisaged eventual return. One interviewee (I5) explained “When I came, I thought I would be here for a few years and then return. But once you come here, everything is different. You can not carry out your plans as you wish. I have a 15-years plan to return.” Family attachment remains a powerful factor shaping such imaginaries. As the same interviewee added: “Whether politics is good or not, I return, because Kurdistan is my land and my parents live there. That is more important to me than political and economic issues.”

Yet, as migration scholarship has consistently shown, temporary migration often becomes permanent, particularly when return is postponed and life-course events—such as marriage, childrearing, and labour-market integration—anchor migrants more firmly in destination societies (Dustmann 1996; Jensen and Pedersen 2007). Long-term return often results in feelings of alienation and the emergence of profound gaps at social, identificational, and everyday-life levels (Brednikova 2017). These challenges complicate reintegration in the homeland and, in many cases, ultimately lead to re-emigration to host countries. In the Kurdish case, return was further complicated by the profound transformations that occurred both in migrants themselves and in Kurdistan during their absence. As King and Kılınç (2025) note, neither the returnee nor the homeland remains unchanged; return thus involves a confrontation between altered subjectivities and transformed socio-political environments.

Among the interviewees, several had returned to Kurdistan after years in Europe, often motivated by optimism following the post-2003 political transition or by a desire to contribute to reconstruction and development. However, for many, return proved to be a temporary phase rather than a final settlement. Structural barriers—economic, political, and cultural—made reintegration difficult, ultimately leading to re-emigration. This process reflects what Dustmann (1996) describes as “return regret,” whereby returnees reassess their decision in light of unmet expectations and adverse reintegration experiences. The case of a 68-year-old man (I4), who left Kurdistan in 1979 due to political persecution, illustrates this dynamic clearly. After settling in Germany, he returned to Kurdistan in 2004 with the intention of participating in rebuilding academic institutions. Yet by 2015, he had re-emigrated to Germany, which he now described

as his “chosen homeland.” Reflecting on his experience, he pointed to entrenched corruption, partisan control of universities, and the lack of meritocratic standards:

There are many universities, but very few real scientists. Many people gained positions through party connections. The society is very messy. Political change has become more externalist, more corrupt, and more cruel…there is no hope for change.

Such accounts reveal that re-emigration is not merely driven by economic disappointment or security concerns, but by a deeper sense of institutional dysfunction and moral disillusionment. Returnees frequently encounter systems governed by informal networks, partisan loyalty, and clientelism rather than transparent rules, conditions that stand in sharp contrast to the rule, bound environments of European host societies. In addition to institutional barriers, returnees described a profound cultural and social disconnect from everyday life in Kurdistan. Practices taken for granted in Europe—such as freedom of movement, public intimacy, or leisure activities—became sources of alienation after return. One male returnee (I25) expressed this gap succinctly:

I miss rules that apply to everyone, not just one or two people. I miss walking freely with my girlfriend, going to a nightclub, and not being judged.

These experiences underscore how return may produce a heightened awareness of difference, rendering the homeland unfamiliar and emotionally distant. As Brednikova (2017) argues, return can paradoxically deepen feelings of non-belonging, as migrants confront the limits of their social acceptance and recognise that they no longer fully fit into the moral and cultural order of the place they once called home. For many returnees, this sense of exclusion translated into the perception that there was “no space” for them in Kurdistan—socially, professionally, and symbolically. Unlike political elites, investors, or those embedded in party networks, ordinary returnees often lacked the social capital necessary to navigate informal power structures. A 44-year-old woman living in the Netherlands (I6), who returned with her family before re-emigrating, described this experience in detail:

We felt there was no space for us anymore. We were not considered part of society—neither socially nor politically. We brought knowledge and wanted to contribute, but nobody accepted it. People told us, ‘You don’t know anything; you haven’t lived here.’ Even though it was our country, we were treated as newcomers.

This exclusion was compounded by practical concerns related to employment, education, and childrearing. Returnees frequently compared the opportunities available to their children in Kurdistan with those in Europe, concluding that the former could not meet their expectations or ensure social mobility. As the same interviewee explained, returning to Europe was ultimately framed as a reluctant but rational choice oriented toward their child’s future.

Once re-emigration occurred, many interviewees described a shift in their sense of identity and belonging. Whereas earlier phases of migration were marked by a strong orientation toward Kurdistan

and an aspiration to return, re-emigration often coincided with a more confident identification with the host society. The previously obligatory and temporary settlement in the host country becomes, through re-emigration in the subsequent period, a voluntary and selective choice. As previously mentioned one re-emigrant (I4) stated bluntly: “I re-emigrated to my voluntarily chosen homeland…I am from Germany.” This transition reflects a broader process of selective belonging, whereby emotional attachment to the homeland persists but political, social, and civic identification increasingly aligns with the destination country.

Conceptually, re-emigration in this context should not be understood as individual failure or lack of commitment to the homeland. Rather, it represents a structurally conditioned outcome of misaligned political systems, incompatible social norms, and unequal life chances between Kurdistan and Western Europe. Return, instead of closing the migration cycle, becomes a moment of rupture that clarifies the limits of reintegration and reinforces the rationality of non-return. In this sense, re-emigration emerges as an integral component of Kurdish migration trajectories, revealing how return can paradoxically consolidate permanent settlement abroad rather than reverse it.

Unwillingness to Return: Socio-political and Economic Factors

Global inequalities continue to structure international migration, with most flows moving from less-developed to more-developed countries (Song 2018). Although economic considerations are frequently foregrounded in analyses of return migration, in the case of SK, economic insecurity cannot be separated from the broader socio-political system. Processes of non-return and the transition from temporary to permanent migration are particularly salient in this context, encompassing diverse migrant categories, including temporary workers, irregular migrants, and refugees (Basok 2000).

The literature identifies a wide range of factors shaping return decisions, including age at entry, length of residence in the destination country, conditions in both origin and host countries—especially welfare regimes—gender, property ownership, educational background, parental concerns regarding children, and family ties (Dustmann 1996, 2003; Jensen and Pedersen 2007; King and Lulle 2022; Davydova-Minguet and Pöllänen 2025). These factors accumulate over time, often transforming initially temporary migration into long-term or permanent settlement. In line with this, the interviews show that even migrants who have settled permanently in Europe remain deeply embedded in Kurdish social networks and community life. Many continue to visit Kurdistan regularly to reconnect emotionally and symbolically with their place of origin, expressing strong affective attachments and a sense of rootedness. Yet these emotional bonds do not always translate into a desire for permanent return.

Return and non-return migrants respond differently to structural factors such as income differentials, unemployment rates, and geographical distance, and they carefully assess the costs and benefits of return (DaVanzo 1976). For Kurdish migrants, the risks associated with reintegration—including joblessness, social maladjustment, boredom, and frustration (Arowolo 2000)—are weighed against the

relative stability and predictability experienced in host societies. These assessments play a significant role in discouraging return.

Beyond economic considerations, the interviews reveal a range of socio-cultural and political-security factors that further shape reluctance to return. In addition to constraints related to employment and children's futures in Europe, broader socio-political conditions in Kurdistan play a decisive role. Both forced and voluntary migrants consistently identified similar structural issues—many of which had initially motivated their departure—as key reasons for their continued unwillingness to return. These include limited individual freedoms, the dominance of conservative religious norms, traditional social control, widespread violence and access to weapons, environmental degradation, and weak public services.

Notably, some returnees who lived in Kurdistan for several years eventually re-emigrated, driven not by the overt political repression that characterised earlier periods of forced migration, but by a broader set of political, economic, and socio-cultural constraints encountered upon return. Together, these findings point to three interrelated categories shaping Kurdish migrants' reluctance to return, which are elaborated in the following sections.

A) Malfunctioning Political Governance

"Parliament embodies a proper system and law; however, SK lacks such a framework. When parties form parliament and the system governs the country, then parties should be limited to acting as political parties, not as capitalists, tribes, or religious sects. But over the past 20 years, we have seen many parties, tribes, and Melas and Tariqat groups emerge, while what is truly needed is a good system." (I6, a 44-year-old female in the Netherlands)

Apart from issues related to dual citizenship, which can affect reintegration both positively and negatively (Carling 2015), a range of political factors in Kurdistan—particularly when compared with European societies—have strongly shaped both decisions to emigrate and continued reluctance to return. Interviews consistently indicate that the lack of political development and the weak functioning of the political system constitute the root causes of many other social problems. Participants repeatedly linked poor economic conditions to flawed political decision-making, systemic corruption, and ineffective governance. While interviewees expressed strong emotional attachment to Kurdistan and symbolic loyalty to the homeland, they identified the political and governmental system as the principal obstacle to return. In direct comparison with their host countries, they overwhelmingly preferred to reside in societies governed by predictable rules, institutional accountability, and the rule of law.

High levels of corruption in SK are rooted in the role of political parties, widespread nepotism, and a weak, politicized bureaucracy (Pring 2015). These structural problems are not merely contemporary but embedded in deeper historical and social patterns. The revival and reinforcement of tribalism and religious sectarianism play a central role in shaping migrants' decisions about return. Tribalism has long

been a prominent form of social organization in Middle Eastern societies, including Kurdish society (Ross and Mohammadpur 2018). Although modernization altered nomadic and tribal lifestyles, “it did not mean the total disappearance of tribal relationships among large segments of Kurdish society” (Koohi-Kamali 2003, 44). Strong tribal identities and loyalties have at times obstructed Kurdish nationalism and a shared national identity (Koohi-Kamali 2003, 67; Ross and Mohammadpur 2018; Bruinessen 2002). Colonial powers and regional states have strategically instrumentalized tribalism and religion to maintain political control over Kurdistan (Mohammadpour and Soleimani 2019; Mofidi 2022).

In Iraq, tribalism retained influence—and even gained renewed prominence—under Abdul Karim Qasim and later under the Ba□ath Party, which deliberately revived tribal structures to weaken Kurdish nationalism (Mohammadpour and Soleimani 2019). The transformation of political parties into quasi-tribal entities can be traced to Saddam Hussein’s regime, when the Ba□ath Party itself was described as “a tribe” (Baram 1997). In the post-2003 period, Iraqi politics witnessed the resurgence of sectarianism and tribal values across Sunni, Shi□i, and Kurdish communities, with tribalism continuing to mediate power relations (Machlis 2025).

Rather than weakening, traditional structures were reinforced through political practice and institutional design. The political space created by Iraqi and Kurdish governing authorities enabled the persistence of these forces, shaping socio-cultural life and prompting unfavourable historical comparisons. One interviewee (I4) remarked, “Education during the dominant dictatorship regime period was very better and more serious than that after 1991, which because of the rule of tribal men and political bullies has decreased.” Similarly, a 40-year-old man in Belgium (I14) stated:

Everyone knows what that country is like: there is no order. It is governed by mafia networks, incompetent figures, and ruling families and tribes. There is no freedom, no proper education or health system, etc. and ruling families are aligned with other countries rather than caring about the Kurds.

Religion and tribal organization have played a central role in the politics of SK (Mohammadpour and Soleimani, 2019). On the one hand, public space is increasingly dominated by various religious groups. On the other hand, the parties are controlled by the members of a specific families and their political agendas further reinforce tribalism both socially and politically. Thus, tribes often function as non-state actors, exercising informal social and judicial authority (Abdullah 2018; Machlis 2025). Kurdish political parties have increasingly taken on “a new form of tribe,” such that “the structure of governing political parties is tribal” (Shekarchi and Omar 2020). Tribal chieftains occupy central positions within party hierarchies, producing hybrid tribal–political structures that undermine institutional governance.

This alliance between political parties and tribal actors has weakened the rule of law and reinforced tribal structures and norms/values at the expense of civic equality (Shekarchi and Omar, 2020; Moulton and Bowen 2018). Contrary to most democratic systems, where political institutions are designed and maintained by non-partisan bodies to safeguard national interests, in SK the partisan interests considerations tend to override public accountability, often prioritizing “securing benefits for a particular tribe or family and in others for a specific political cartel” (Abdullah 2018). As one interviewee (I7)

observed: “There is no real political party in Kurdistan, there is only political shop. Someone creates a party for himself, earns money, and becomes a mercenary for surrounding countries.”

Kurdish leaders, as Yavuz and Gunter (2004) argue, have frequently failed “to rise above the level of tribal warlord to true statesman.” Tribalism has contributed to the emergence and consolidation of ruling families, with political power in SK historically concentrated in the hands of a few dominant parties and families—an arrangement that has undermined democratic development (Hama and Abdullah 2021). The dominance of charismatic leaders has further shaped the nature of power, which is widely perceived as vested in specific individuals, families, or tribes rather than in institutions (Hama and Abdullah 2021). As Mohammed and Alrebh (2020) argue, Kurdish political and economic life has been constructed around partisan loyalties at the expense of collective and national interests, a pattern reinforced by officials who prioritize personal and party interests over broader Kurdish concerns (Gunter 2018). This configuration has contributed to weakened or ineffective political institutions, the erosion of parliamentary authority, widespread corruption, limited transparency, and political party influence over the judiciary, education, security forces, and the military (Hama 2022).

According to interviews, these political developments are widely perceived as negative. One interviewee (I11) stated bluntly: “The political change has become worse and worse,” identifying corruption as the principal factor hindering Kurdish societal progress. Several interviewees emphasized the absence of a clear and coherent political system in Kurdistan. After observing the functioning of rule-based governance in Europe, they argued that neither Iraq nor SK is governed by an effective system grounded in the rule of law. Even basic administrative procedures—such as appointments or access to public services—were described as time-consuming and arbitrary. As one interviewee (I7) noted: “There is no system in Kurdistan. Once you enter Bashur, the system breaks down. You can only get things done through family connections.”

Many interviewees believed that Kurdistan is not governed by a genuine government in the institutional sense. Instead, in their view, the party rule shaped by certain families and tribal logic dominates rather than a legal-rational system of governance. As one (I6) explained: “What exists is the party. The party has become a businessman; it controls the country’s affairs and acts in its own interest.” Another (I16) added: “The political situation has worsened; parliament is inactive; government or institutions do not function, and one or two families dominate. Democracy, liberties, judicial power, and the rule of law are virtually nonexistent.” Some interviewees further argued that meaningful political reform would have transformative effects across society. One interviewee (I6) said: “If the political system changes, the whole country changes. Individuals are treated as equal citizens and have equal rights. A balance is created economically and regarding gender.” In a similar vein, a 37-year-old man in Germany (I13) highlighted freedom, justice, the disarmament of parties, independent courts, and the end of ruling-family dominance as essential conditions for progress.

Taken together, these political dynamics—rooted in the malfunctioning of the political system and perceived as the primary source of broader social problems—play a decisive role in shaping Kurdish

migrants' enduring reluctance to return to Kurdistan. In this regard, one interviewee (I18) noted: "I have adapted to life here. I find it very difficult to work under religious or tribal rationality, a party agent, or a politician's grandchild." On the other hand, improving the political conditions pave the way more to migrant's return, as another interviewee (I16) said: "Since our arrival, I have always dreamed of returning to Kurdistan, and if political conditions change, I would undoubtedly return to the land where I feel my own existence."

B) Class-based Economic Insecurity

"It is difficult to live under poor economic and socio-political conditions." (I1, a 46 year-old women settled in the Netherlands in 2018)

As discussed in the previous section, the malfunctioning of the political system in SK has reinforced structural inequalities within the economy. One of the most visible consequences is the widening class divide, particularly between those employed in the public sector—often through political affiliation—and those working in the private sector, who generally lack job security, social protection, and stable income. This is while, as a consequence of the previously mentioned the domination of political parties, currently prestigious business and advantages in private sector are also given to politically affiliated individuals, leading to the exploitation of employees. This dual labour structure has produced a significant gap between rich and poor and has made everyday life increasingly difficult for middle- and lower-class groups.

Although economic issues such as unemployment or income level were not always the primary drivers of migration—especially among those who left Kurdistan after 2003—class inequality and social insecurity have increasingly become central concerns shaping migrants' unwillingness to return. Under conditions of underdevelopment and uneven economic growth, return is perceived as exposing individuals and families to downward social mobility. The interviews reveal a pervasive fear of economic pressure and uncertainty, particularly regarding the long-term prospects of children. Concerns about class reproduction and intergenerational mobility featured prominently in interviewees' narratives. A 36-year-old woman settled in Germany in 2021 (I2) explained:

Certainly, having children is influential. In Germany, a child has a clear future within a structured educational system. In Kurdistan, except for the children of officials, influential figures, or the very wealthy, life is difficult or uncertain for middle- and lower-class families.

This statement highlights how class inequality is perceived not merely as an income gap but as a system that allocates life chances unevenly, privileging political and economic elites. In this sense, class inequality in Kurdistan is closely tied to the politicization of wealth and opportunity, a pattern consistent with rentier political economies where access to resources is mediated by power rather than productivity. Several interviewees described stark contrasts between wealth and poverty during visits to Kurdistan. One interviewee who left Kurdistan in 2004 (I8) reflected on these disparities as follows:

Yes, there is a big change in Kurdistan. However, alongside this, there are people who are very, very poor and people who are very, very rich. I see this as corruption.

These observations align with broader analyses linking inequality in Kurdistan to systemic corruption within the political system of KRG. A 68-year-old woman residing in the Netherlands (I9) described the situation in similarly stark terms:

All the money of Kurdistan is in the pockets of parties and in the homes of officials. People are becoming poorer and poorer. So much money is left to the grandchildren of officials that they only eat and waste it. […] The officials there advertise some public services on TV, whereas here officials actually provide these services to people and they don't resell them to the public.

Such narratives underscore how class inequality is experienced as a moral injustice as well as an economic burden. The visibility of elite privilege—particularly when linked to political power—intensifies feelings of exclusion and erodes trust in the possibility of fair treatment upon return. For some migrants, the extent of class inequality has become a decisive condition shaping hypothetical return. As one interviewee (I7) stated: "I will return to Kurdistan only if an official's son doesn't go ahead of me or have privilege over me. I've worked hard my whole life, and it's unacceptable that a 15-year-old has a better car and priority in public administration." This statement reflects a demand not for absolute equality, but for procedural fairness and merit-based access—expectations shaped by migrants' experiences in European societies.

Class inequality in Kurdistan has also generated a widespread fear of economic pressure and hardship, which functions as a powerful deterrent to return migration. Many potential returnees anticipate having to work in the private sector, where social security protections are weak or absent. Even migrants holding dual citizenship may be excluded from certain benefits or face informal discrimination. In contrast to European welfare regimes, where access to healthcare, unemployment support, and pensions is institutionalized, social protection in Kurdistan is fragmented and politically mediated.

As a result, interviewees consistently emphasized quality of life as a key reason for remaining in Europe. Once migrants attain a relatively stable standard of living—characterized by predictable income, access to public services, and social security—they become increasingly reluctant to relinquish it. As one interviewee (I14) put it: "Everyone who lives in Europe for a few years can no longer live there [in Kurdistan]." Another interviewee (I11) summarized his reasons for staying in Europe as follows: "Economic stability, security in Europe, health, economic and social services, and compatibility with European life."

These accounts demonstrate that class inequality and fear of economic pressure are not isolated economic concerns but are deeply embedded in the broader malfunctioning of the political system discussed earlier. Economic insecurity, unequal life chances, and weak welfare protections reinforce one another, making return appear risky and irrational for many Kurdish migrants. These socio-economic

considerations interact with, and are further intensified by, socio-cultural concerns about living in a more conservative and restrictive social environment—issues addressed in the following section.

C) Socio-cultural Conservatism

“Public space remains masculine. There is no feminine space where women can simply sit on the street and drink tea like men; must go to newer places such as some cafés. During my recent visit, I went to Shabe Chaykhana, everyone there was a man and my presence drew strange looks. Many spaces, especially the older ones, remain entirely masculine. Public space is still not for women, meaning that women go out only for necessities.” (I6, a 44-year-old female in the Netherlands)

As discussed earlier, intellectual transformation and prolonged exposure to host societies generate a widening cultural gap between migrants and their society of origin, making return increasingly difficult. This gap is not limited to values or lifestyles but extends to everyday practices, social norms, and expectations. One of the first issues raised by interviewees concerns marriage and childrearing. Migrants who have established families in Europe often perceive fundamental differences in educational philosophies and child development. As one interviewee (I4) explained: “Life here is better for raising kids, because the education is more humanistic.” Another interviewee (I6) similarly noted: “In the Netherlands, I have space to raise my child, whereas there it is limited and outside influences are stronger. Children do not fully experience childhood, and parents have less time for them.” In addition, reintegration in Kurdistan is also difficult for children who have integrated well into the host society. One participant (I15) stated: “I have lived here since childhood. If I return to Kurdistan, I will feel like a tourist, and it will take years to integrate. I will always miss the Netherlands and want to return.”

These concerns reflect broader differences between collectivist, socially regulated environments and more individual-oriented systems, where children’s autonomy and emotional development are institutionally protected. For many migrants, returning to Kurdistan would mean re-exposing their children to intense social surveillance, normative pressure, and limited educational freedom—conditions they regard as incompatible with their parenting values.

Secondly, pervasive forms of social control, moral judgment, and intrusion into personal life remain defining features of everyday life in Kurdistan. For individuals who have adapted to European norms of privacy and individual autonomy, these conditions are often experienced as oppressive, leading to incompatibility with conservative social norms in Kurdistan. As one interviewee (I7) stated: “Kurdistan has seen superficial economic progress, but culturally it was better when I left. Today, there is a lot of constant interference in personal life—from comment on clothing and hair to other private matters—which is unbearable.” Such accounts illustrate how return can entail not merely economic adjustment but a profound loss of personal autonomy.

In addition, some migrants have developed close social networks with Europeans and adopted non-traditional lifestyles that are difficult to reconcile with prevailing social norms in Kurdistan. Those

involved in romantic relationships outside traditional frameworks, or those who have embraced more liberal lifestyles, often find return practically impossible. Their emotional attachments, social identities, and everyday practices are now embedded in European contexts, while their lifestyles would be socially sanctioned or stigmatized in Kurdistan. Consequently, non-return becomes a rational response to anticipated social exclusion.

A central dimension of this cultural incompatibility concerns gender relations. Unequal gender power structures continue to marginalize Kurdish women (Begikhani 2022). These inequalities are reproduced both socially and institutionally, reflecting the interaction between patriarchal norms and weak legal enforcement. Despite visible changes in women's public participation, Kurdish society continues to draw sharp distinctions between men and women. Interviewees repeatedly emphasized that society has become more religious and conservative in recent years, with Islamic norms increasingly shaping social expectations. This environment has confined women's roles and reinforced the belief—sometimes internalized by women themselves—that their primary place is within the domestic sphere. Some even see negative developments in this regard. One of the interviewees (I16) said: "SK has withdrawn on gender issues and women's freedom, largely due to the space given to political Islam. Although this does not influence me directly, it influences me indirectly through those around me."

Female interviewees strongly opposed such constraints and emphasized that women lack freedom not only "as women" but "as human beings" to express themselves, move freely, and participate fully in social and professional life. In contrast to conservative families—some of whom return to Kurdistan precisely to preserve religious and traditional values—migrants who have undergone intellectual transformation, whether prior to migration or through exposure to host societies, find such norms intolerable. Although women's visibility in public spaces and certain professions has increased, interviewees stressed that these changes remain largely superficial. Women continue to operate under male dominance, and genuine equality in decision-making, respect, and opportunity remains absent. One re-emigrant interviewees (I6) described these dynamics in a stark term:

Being a woman and an artist was one reason I left. […] I experienced deep social injustice, as opportunities for women in the arts were very limited. I faced many problems. I do not regret leaving, since injustice has only increased. In Kurdish culture, respect depends on family background, wealth, and appearance, and active working women are often labelled, restricted, and undervalued. This makes creativity and productivity difficult, as women's work is not respected.

Such experiences reveal how gender inequality intersects with class, family background, and appearance, producing layered forms of exclusion. For many women, return would entail not only professional marginalization but also constant negotiation of respectability and legitimacy.

As a result, women are often more reluctant than men to return and are more likely to prefer permanent settlement in host countries. One interviewee (I8) stated: "Not only because of my family, but also because I personally like this country, where woman enjoy considerable freedom." For her and others, improvements in women's rights have become a precondition for any consideration of return. As she

further explained: “Many issues must be addressed to encourage return: security, healthcare, and women’s protection. All killings of women must stop.”

Overall, socio-cultural factors—particularly those related to gender inequality and moral regulation—exert such a strong influence that they often outweigh economic considerations in shaping decisions about return. Referring to economic problems as potentially solvable, one interviewee (I2) emphasized that deeper cultural and political reforms are decisive: “If freedom of expression is ensured, the law applies equally to all, and if political parties, clerics, and mosques do not interfere in citizens’ lives, I might one day decide to return.”

These findings complete the analytical triad developed in this article. The malfunctioning political system produces class inequality and economic insecurity, which in turn reinforce conservative social norms and gendered exclusions. Under such conditions, non-return and re-emigration emerge not as temporary strategies but as rational, long-term responses to structural incompatibility between Kurdistan and European host societies.

Conclusion

This article has examined non-return and re-emigration among Kurds from SK residing in Western Europe by shifting the analytical focus from why migrants return to why many do not—and why some who do return subsequently re-emigrate. The findings demonstrate that reluctance to return is not the outcome of isolated personal preferences or purely economic calculations, but rather the result of interrelated and structurally embedded conditions in the homeland. Specifically, the study identifies three mutually reinforcing dimensions: malfunctioning political governance, class-based economic insecurity, and socio-cultural conservatism.

First, the analysis shows that the malfunctioning political governance in SK constitutes the structural foundation of other forms of exclusion. Party-dominated governance, corruption, weak institutions, and the persistence of tribal and familial power structures undermine the rule of law and erode trust in public institutions. For migrants socialized in European political systems characterized by institutional predictability, accountability, and civic rights, this governance model represents a fundamental barrier to return. Importantly, political malfunction is not perceived as a temporary crisis but as a durable condition that shapes everyday life, limits future planning, and reproduces inequality.

Second, this political dysfunction translates directly into class inequality and economic insecurity. The findings demonstrate that fears surrounding return are less about absolute poverty than about exposure to downward social mobility, unequal life chances, and the absence of welfare protection. Economic opportunity in SK is widely perceived as politicized, with access mediated by party affiliation, family background, or wealth. This produces a stark divide between elites and the broader population and generates profound anxiety about the future—especially for migrants’ children. In contrast, European welfare regimes offer institutionalized security, predictability, and merit-based access, making return

economically irrational and encouraging permanent settlement in Europe even among those emotionally attached to Kurdistan.

Third, socio-cultural conservatism leading to gender inequality and pervasive social control further deepen the gap between migrants and the homeland. Prolonged residence in Europe produces intellectual and cultural transformation that renders reintegration difficult, especially for women and for those who have adopted non-traditional lifestyles. The persistence of patriarchal norms, the masculinization of public space, and the growing influence of religious conservatism severely constrain women's autonomy and participation. For many female migrants, return would entail not only professional marginalization but also a fundamental loss of dignity, freedom, and personal agency. These gendered dynamics often outweigh economic considerations and operate as decisive barriers to return.

Taken together, these three dimensions form an integrated analytical framework that explains why non-return and re-emigration should be understood as rational and durable outcomes rather than temporary deviations. Theoretically, the article contributes to return migration and diaspora studies by foregrounding non-return as a structurally conditioned position shaped by governance, class, and culture. It challenges approaches that privilege economic incentives or homeland attachment, and instead highlights how political systems and socio-cultural regimes actively produce migration continuities. By centering the perspectives of non-returnees and re-emigrants, the study extends existing literature that has predominantly focused on returnees themselves.

The findings also have important policy implications. Under current conditions, expecting large-scale or permanent return migration to SK is neither realistic nor reasonable. Policies aimed at encouraging return—particularly those focused on economic incentives or symbolic diaspora engagement—are unlikely to succeed in the absence of profound political, institutional, and socio-cultural reform. Instead, KRG should prioritize improving conditions within Kurdistan itself, particularly by strengthening the rule of law, reducing corruption, addressing class inequality, and ensuring gender equality and social justice. Preventing further emigration is likely to be more feasible and effective than attempting to reverse existing migration trajectories.

At the same time, the Kurdish diaspora retains significant potential to contribute to Kurdistan's development through transnational engagement, knowledge transfer, investment, and temporary or circular mobility. However, such contributions should not be conflated with permanent return. For most migrants in this study, Kurdistan remains an emotional and symbolic homeland rather than a viable site for long-term settlement. Until the structural conditions identified in this article are addressed, non-return and re-emigration will remain defining features of Kurdish migration from SK to Europe.

Declarations

Ethics Statement

This study received ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Social and Behavioral Research at the American University of Kurdistan (AUK) under the Migration Governance Project at the Center for Peace and Human Security. The research protocol was approved on 19 August 2025 under approval number IRB-CPHS1, with oversight from the AUK Provost Office and the Center for Peace and Human Security (CPHS). All procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the American University of Kurdistan and internationally recognized ethical guidelines for research involving human participants, including the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any time. Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic and to ensure participants' anonymity, **oral informed consent** was obtained at the beginning of each interview. Oral consent was **recorded by the researcher through written documentation in field notes prior to the commencement of each interview**, and, where applicable, through audio confirmation at the start of the recording. A copy of the oral consent script used during interviews has been provided as supplementary material.

Author Contribution

The paper represents a collaborative effort, with equal contributions from both Aghapouri and Mofidi.

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Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study consist of qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted with Kurdish migrants from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq residing in Western Europe. Due to the sensitive nature of the research topic, full interview transcripts cannot be made publicly available. However, de-identified and anonymised excerpts of the data can be shared upon reasonable request, subject to ethical approval and data protection requirements.The interview protocol, coding framework, and methodological documentation are available from the corresponding author upon request. Relevant materials can also be made available to editors and reviewers for the purpose of evaluation.

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