

Arab Labourers Flock to Kurdistan

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Plethora of opportunities and safety makes Sulaimaniyah's job market appealing for Arab workers. Thousands of Arab labourers have flocked to Sulaimaniyah to work in the construction and service industries of this safe Kurdish city.

After the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, Sulaimaniyah became a magnet for workers from other parts of the country, especially the western city of Mosul and central and southern Iraq. People fled the poor security situation in these unstable regions to find work in Sulaimaniyah's booming economy.

According to the city's passport and residency department, approximately 6,000 labourers from outside Sulaimaniyah province are working here. But officials believe the number is higher because people often turn up without registering with the authorities. The figure is expected to grow further as violence hinders economic development across much of the rest of the country.

Arab workers are primarily employed as day labourers in construction or in menial jobs in hotels and restaurants. They are paid a maximum of 15 US dollars a day, while many Kurds in Sulaimaniyah - a relatively expensive city by Iraqi standards - demand as much as 40 per cent more for similar jobs.

Business owners say they are profiting from the cheaper labour and their businesses are growing as a result.

Mariwan Abbas, director of the Dyako construction company in Sulaimaniyah, said most of his workers come from other parts of Iraq, and estimates that he saves 1,000 dollars a month using Arab labourers, who are also willing to work longer hours than Kurdish employees.

"They work for less money, and we can work with them during night time," said Abbas. "This helps us save a lot of money. They're a good way to raise profits."

"They're very good for us," agreed Haji Hassan, owner of a small restaurant in downtown Sulaimaniyah that employs and serves the workers. "Since they've come here our business has increased tenfold."

Despite the fact that Arabs are of a different ethnicity and speak a different language, several interviewed by IWPR said they are mostly happy in Sulaimaniyah because it is safer than their home towns and work is more widely available. Some who have decided to stay have learned Kurdish, as few people in Sulaimaniyah are fluent in Arabic.

Their living conditions are basic, however, and many share rooms in cheap hotels or flats. Arab labourers tend to flock to Sulaimaniyah in the spring and summer, when they can sleep in parks or on their building sites rather than pay rent in the city's inflated housing market.

The Arab incomers are in many ways treated as foreigners in Iraqi Kurdistan, a region which was persecuted by Saddam's regime and where suspicions of Arabs remain high. The "Asayeesh", Kurdistan's

security and intelligence force, requires that Arab labourers register with police as a way of guarding against terrorism, according to general Muhsin Osman, head of the passport and residency directorate.

Arab labourers are often the first suspects in the rare cases of violence here. They were rounded up after several car bombs killed 13 people in Sulaimaniyah in October, although the security agencies later determined that it was Kurds who carried out the attacks.

Emran Saad, 34, from the central city of Karbala, has worked in Sulaimaniyah for eight months and says he doesn't mind the security checks, "These procedures are necessary so that Kurdistan won't become like [other parts] of Iraq."

The labourers said they earn between 300 and 500 dollars a month, most of which they send back to their families. Many prefer to stay in Sulaimaniyah three to four months at a time and return home in winter to be with their families.

Labourers said being away from their wives and children is the most difficult part of working in Sulaimaniyah, but many feel they have few other options.

Yasir Ezzadin, 37, from Baqubah in the central Iraqi province of Diyala, has been married for 13 years and has four children. He calls his family every day just to check how they are.

"I'm always thinking about my children. I'm afraid one day when they go to school, a bomb will go off and they'll be killed, because [Baqubah] is not safe," he said.

Saleem al-Khafaji, 28, also from Baqubah, moved to Sulaimaniyah in 2003 to work as a labourer. He returned home a year later to get married, then moved back north with his wife.

"In [Baqubah] it's not only that there are no job opportunities," said al-Khafaji, who works in construction. "Even if they are available, you're scared to work because of poor security."

Some Kurdish workers said they resent the Arab labourers for making it more difficult for them to find work and for bringing wage levels down.

"I hate these workers," said Halgurd Omar, who said that over the last two years he's seen his salary cut by a third, to 400 dollars a month.

While some labourers have learned a little Kurdish, they spend of their time with other Arabs. They have found that Sunnis and Shias can coexist easily here even as the divide between the two communities appear to grow larger in other parts of Iraq.

"We are Shias and Sunnis working together," said Hassan Asi, a 35-year-old Shia from Najaf who is working with Sunni Arab friends to tile a seven-storey building. "Even though we are of different sects, in Sulaimaniyah sectarianism is not a problem for us."

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Location: Iraqi Kurdistan

Iraq

Focus: Iraq

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