

Job Market Flourishes in Kurdish North

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Rising investment and stable security have created a boom in the job market in Sulaimaniyah.

A crowd of Arab labourers gathers in front of the main mosque in the northern Iraqi city of Sulaimaniyah at 630 every morning, hoping to pick up work for the day.

Once an area teetering on the brink of poverty, an influx of foreign companies and increasing regional investment means Iraq's Kurdish region is attracting workers from across the country.

Mosul native Faisal Omar arrived in Sulaimaniyah in mid-November, "I came here to look for work because wages are much better than in Mosul or even Baghdad. Here I can earn around 15,000 Iraqi dinars [10 US dollars] a day.

"I'm paying 2,000 dinars a night for a hotel room, the rest I can save and send to my family. There are 14 of us, so we need the money."

Mustafa Akil finished high school in Baghdad last year, but despite getting good grades he had to drop out to support his family, so he too moved north to find work.

"I've been in Sulaimaniyah for eight months. I've got a staff contract with a company rather than getting paid by the day and I'm earning more than I would have done in Baghdad. I spend around 8,000 dinars daily on food, 3,000 on my hotel room and the rest I send back to my parents."

As well as the chance to earn more money, security is a major factor in drawing workers to Kurdish cities.

"Sulaimaniyah is a safe place compared with the rest of the country," said Faisal Omar. "That's why you can even find Arabs from the capital coming here to look for work."

Nasir Abid Omar, an ethnic Kurd, lived in Baghdad all his life but moved north as soon as the security problems started. "I swear to God, if they paid me a million dinars a month to stay and work in Baghdad, I wouldn't accept it," he said.

Abid Omar has been working as a waiter in Sulaimaniyah's Abu Sanaa hotel for the past four months, earning a monthly salary of 100,000, about 70 dollars. His family lives in Mosul, where he visits them every few weeks.

"It's not perfect. I worked in a shoe factory in Baghdad and earned more than I do now. But at least we're safe here," he said.

The stable security situation has led a number of foreign companies to set up in the region, offering job seekers an alternative to the public sector or unskilled manual labour for the first time in years. While government jobs may have traditionally been people's first choice because of the cachet they carry here, a significant number of graduates are now tempted by the higher wages offered in the private sector.

The combination of strong private and public sectors has led to a manpower shortage in an area which used to suffer from high unemployment.

“Before the fall of Saddam’s regime, there was high unemployment because the government was basically the only employer,” explained Mahdi Shera, media manager for the Investment Support Board. “Now they are actually having to compete with the private sector for employees.”

The increased availability of white-collar jobs has had a knock-on effect on employment opportunities all the way down the chain.

Tawfik Mahmood, who owns the Matbakh restaurant in Sulaimaniyah, says he is now being forced to hire younger and younger employees, “School leavers and new graduates are all going to work for the government or big companies, so there’s a real labour shortage everywhere else. I’m hiring people who haven’t even finished high school and having to pay them 200,000 dinars [135 dollars] a month.”

Taxi driver Yusuf Nureddin says he has found he can support his family by working as his own boss, “I don’t need to work for the government because I’m earning around 20,000 dinars per day, which is enough to look after my family.”

Overall stability and the growing job opportunities are even attracting expat Kurds back to the area.

Saman Haji Nori moved back to Sulaimaniyah last year, after spending 12 years in Germany. Seven months ago, he opened his own business and he now has six employees.

“I like the fact that I am now providing jobs for people here. I want to give as many young people an opportunity as possible, and it doesn't matter to me whether they're Kurd or Arab,” he said.

He says the city’s change of fortune since the time he left is visible, “The place is cleaner and it is much more active, both culturally and commercially.”

But Nori warned that greater steps must be take to create long-term rather than ephemeral employment.

“We have opportunities at the moment because of the boom in trade and construction businesses, but we what we need in Iraq is more factories so that people will be guaranteed jobs in the future.”

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