

## **Young Kurds Escape Economic Gloom**

**Author:** [Frman Abdul-Rahman](#)

Fed up with corruption and poverty, they yearn for a new life in Western Europe.

For Diyar Abdullah, a 28-year-old taxi driver, getting to Europe has become something of an obsession - it's all he ever talks about with his friends.

He came one step closer to realising his dream recently when he sold his new Nissan car for 11,000 US dollars and bought a Swedish visa with the proceeds.

Abdullah is now encouraging his friends to follow him because, he says, they don't have much of a future where they are. "There's no respect for human beings in this country," he said.

Abdullah is among a growing number of people in this region who are paying huge sums of money for visas to western countries. But those who leave Iraqi Kurdistan are not escaping the violence engulfing the country, as their town and cities have been spared the bloodshed. They're emigrating because, they say, they've had enough of corruption and poverty.

Shkar Abdullah, 23, an agriculture graduate, said he's lost hope of ever having a decent life in Kurdistan and is making plans to go abroad. He's struggled to find a job, but he says they don't pay enough anyway. "When you get employed you only earn 157,000 Iraqi dinars monthly (around 105 dollars) to build your life and make a living," he said.

Kurds wanting to leave approach local tourism companies who are able to negotiate visas for western countries, with customers having to shell out anything between 8-12,000 dollars.

Haji Bestoon, the owner of the Lebanon for Tourism Company in Sulaimaniyah, said he's provided 900 visas for Turkey. "Most of our customers are young people," he said.

Young Kurds have been amongst the fiercest critics of the local authorities for not doing enough to clamp down on corruption, raise living standards and improve basic services.

Three months ago, Nariman Muhammed, 35, a technician from Sulaimaniyah, got a visa from Bestoon, and flew to Sweden, leaving behind his wife and five kids. "I'm trying to get the rest of family over here," he said in a 'phone interview. "We will never go back to Kurdistan."

Many people who returned after the fall of the Saddam regime in 2003 say they regret their decision and are planning to head off again. Dler Omer, 30, who emigrated to Britain in 1998,

said he made a big mistake coming back to Kurdistan. "What is important for me is (in Britain) there is no shortage of fuel, electricity and water," he said.

In an effort to counter the emigration of the region's youngsters, the authorities appear to be issuing new passports only to people over 27 - although they don't admit that this is official policy, claiming that

shortages mean that priority cases take precedence.

"Because we have a limited number of passports, we are forced to give them to people who need them urgently,

such as patients and government delegations," said Muhsin Osman, head of Sulaimaniyah Passport and Residence Directorate.

Some of those unable to get new passports turn to forgers - but risk being found out by customs officials. That's the fate that befell one young man IWPR spoke to. But although he was deported back to Iraq, he's not going to give up on his dream of a new life in Western Europe. "Even if I'm deported a hundred more times, I will still keep trying," he said. "I will either reach Europe or die trying."

By Frman Abdul-Rahman is an IWPR contributor in Sulaimaniyah.

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