

# POLICYBRIEF

## Integration of Kurdish Refugees in Europe: A Diasporic Perspective

Fiona B. Adamson and Veysi Dag,  
SOAS University of London<sup>1</sup>

This policy brief provides a diasporic perspective on questions of integration of Kurdish refugees and asylum-seekers in Europe. It highlights the impact of the geopolitical context and the role of Kurdish diaspora organizations, drawing attention to integration as a multi-scalar process.

August 2022

### Introduction

Kurdish refugees and asylum-seekers across Europe are a particularly vulnerable and marginalized group with unique needs relating to their position at the center of multiple conflicts in their homeland(s). Due to the high level of politicization of Kurdish identity across their primary states of origin (i.e. Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran) Kurdish refugees often face a specific set of integration issues based on their ethno-political identity; their relationship to state authorities and citizenship regimes in their countries of origin; the ways in which conflicts in their home countries intersect with the foreign policy interests of European states; and their membership in, or relationship to, broader diaspora networks that stretch across Europe.

In this policy brief, which is based on over 200 interviews with Kurdish refugees and established diaspora members, we outline the unique challenges facing Kurds in Europe, and suggest some possible policy options. The memo brings together findings from field research in 17 locations across 6 states, and uses a “diasporic perspective” to shed light on both the common challenges but also the varying conditions facing Kurdish refugees and asylum-seekers across different contexts.<sup>2</sup> It draws attention to how transnational factors – including trans-state diaspora networks and geopolitical relations between

---

<sup>1</sup> This policy brief has been reviewed by **Name (affiliation)** and **Name (affiliation)** as part of the MAGYC’s internal review process.

<sup>2</sup> Further elaborations of the findings in this policy brief can be found in Dag, Craven and Adamson (2021a, 2021b).

European states and Kurdish refugee “homelands” -- have direct impacts on the integration possibilities and trajectories for newly-arrived Kurdish refugees in Europe.

## Evidence and Analysis

Kurds represents a significant refugee and asylum-seeking population in Europe, especially in the 2010s at the height of the so-called refugee crisis. The Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) in Germany estimated that between 2014 and 2020 more than 30 percent of asylum applicants from Syria and 70 percent from Iraq were people who claimed a Kurdish ethnicity. According to data provided by Eurostat, Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran are ranked amongst the top ten countries in terms of numbers of asylum applicants in European countries (BAMF 2021). Yet, Kurds are often invisible as a distinct refugee population because they are not generally included in official statistics, which usually categorize populations by country of origin or citizenship.

The most recent wave of Kurdish departure to Europe over the past decade and a half has been spurred by a number of factors, most prominently the Syrian civil war, the rise of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the collapse of the peace talks between the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and the Turkish state between 2013 and 2015, as well as ongoing conflict and military operations in northern Syria and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. This most recent wave comes on top of earlier waves of migration: a large proportion of economic migrants from Turkey in the 1960s and 1970s were identifiably Kurdish; the civil war in Turkey between the PKK and the Turkish state spurred another wave of Kurdish refugees and asylum seekers in the 1980s and 1990s, as did the use of chemical weapons in Iraq. In addition, there have also been waves of Kurdish migration from Iran since the 1980s. Asylum-seeking migration from the region to Europe continued into the 2000s due to state repression by the Syrian regime against the Kurdish population in Northern Syria; the on-going conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state; and unstable economic and political conditions in Iraq and Iran.

### *Formation of Diaspora*

The history of Kurdish migration to Europe, combined with ongoing conflicts in the homeland(s), has led to the development of numerous Kurdish-oriented diaspora organizations across Europe, some of which are tied to different actors in the region, and some of which are more focused on integration activities and politics in Europe. The larger and more established Kurdish organizations are present in metropolitan cities across Europe, with a particularly strong presence in Germany, France and Sweden. They are highly networked with strong transnational connections. In regions where there are no established Kurdish organizations, there are often informal and unaffiliated network structures, based on self-help, kinship or other factors, which are established by the refugees themselves. The types of Kurdish organizations can be loosely categorized into *Moderate Broker*, *Politicized Homeland* and *Self-Organized and Unaffiliated* (Figure 1). Thus, when Kurdish refugees and asylum-seekers arrive in Europe, they may also encounter established Kurdish organizations, although the type and extent will vary according to their area of settlement. Moderate Broker Organizations are more present in locations with established Kurdish populations and strong government refugee support policies. Self-organized and Unaffiliated are found in both non-metropolitan areas with strong social services and areas with weak social services. Politicized Homeland Organisations are found largely in metropolitan areas, but their networks also stretch across to other locales.

**Figure 1: Types of Kurdish Diaspora Organizations**

<b>Moderate Broker</b>	Work closely with local governments and officials Receive funds for integration programs Focused on Kurdish culture w/in country of residence Example: KOMKAR, YEKMAL
<b>Politicized Homeland</b>	Highly politicized Linked to broader transnational governance structures Internal “diaspora governance” Associated with the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK)
<b>Self-Organized and Unaffiliated</b>	Local and spontaneously organized Provide self-help, welfare, community, some governance Emerge in absence of established diaspora organizations Examples: Bari, Bornholm, Landshut, Malmö

*Homeland Politics and Geopolitical Factors*

The combination of ongoing and active conflicts in the region, European geopolitical interests, and the prominence of homeland politics in many of the Kurdish diaspora organizations affects newly-arriving Kurdish asylum-seekers and refugees to Europe in numerous ways. Of course, the impacts of these factors vary according to the circumstances of individual refugees and asylum-seekers, including their relationship to conflict dynamics in their country of origin, education level, and access to material resources and networks. Nevertheless, our interviews highlighted significant commonalities across the diaspora, moderated by variations in the relevant national and local integration and welfare regimes, as well as the nature and type of local Kurdish organizations.

First and foremost, the geopolitical context strongly affects the ability of individual asylum-seekers to secure a legal status in Europe – a factor which affects all other aspects of integration. Our interviews provided evidence of the influence of geopolitical factors on asylum-granting decisions in a number of respects. First, regional conflicts involving Kurdish populations stretch across borders and are deeply entangled with each other, and are part of a regional conflict complex that stretches across Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq. Kurdish populations live in the border regions of all four states and their social and political networks are often cross-border. Similarly, military operations in the region by both state and a variety of non-state actors are frequently cross-border. However, in Europe, asylum decisions are made according to state of origin, meaning that, despite experiencing similar levels of danger and persecution relating to the conflicts’ cross-border dynamics; individual chances of having one’s asylum application approved vary strongly according to one’s state of origin. This means that in the 2010s, asylum seekers from Turkey and Iraq often received negative decisions in their asylum processes, whereas Kurdish asylum seekers from Syria had a good prospect of having their asylum claims recognized.

Second, geopolitical considerations may directly affect the chances of individual asylum applications being approved. For example, Turkey has been able to leverage its position as an EU candidate and NATO member, as well as a refugee-hosting and transit state, to demand concessions that impact on Kurdish populations in Europe. Interviews indicated that individual asylum cases were also subject to geopolitical maneuvering – for example, asylum claims from Turkey were more likely to be granted when governments were locked into a confrontation with

Turkey; they were less likely to be granted when there were good relations or claims became entangled and linked with other foreign policy concerns. A dramatic example of this -- which occurred after our field research, but which illustrates the dynamics -- was the Turkish state's 2022 leveraging of its ability to block NATO membership applications of Sweden and Finland, which was resolved via a memorandum that included agreements to stricter vetting of Kurdish asylum-seekers and further provisions for extradition (Duxbury 2022).

Finally, the very process of asylum claim recognition in Europe is heavily subject to political dynamics in the countries of origin, as it relies on valid and legal identity documents and papers that are often unavailable to marginalized populations due to non-issuance; revocation or confiscation (see also Ferreri 2022). This means that asylum applicants are never free from political dynamics in their state of origin. Similarly, states of origin can seek to block asylum applications or request extraditions based on documentation that seeks to link applicants to illegal activities. A common method is to link membership in legal pro-Kurdish political parties to membership in banned Kurdish military organizations. Moreover, state security actors from countries of origin operate transnationally in Europe and can continue to be a presence in the lives of asylum seekers and refugees even following their departure from the region. This has been an ongoing problem for Kurdish refugees from both Syria and Turkey (see, e.g. Moss 2016; Schenkan 2018).

### *Impacts of Diaspora Organizations*

Within this context, the various roles played by Kurdish diaspora organizations in Europe is significant in multiple respects. On the one hand, they are vital to understanding pathways to integration of Kurdish asylum-seekers and refugees, although the way in which they promote (or, at times, impede) integration varies according to local context and individual circumstances. Kurdish populations in Europe exist on a continuum from situations of extreme precarity, such as those with irregular status who are disconnected from any support networks whatsoever, to well-established elite networks, who are at the forefront of Kurdish politics and cultural production.

On one end of the spectrum are irregular and recently arrived populations located in areas that lack either state service provision or well-established formal Kurdish community organizations. Such populations are living under the radar and can be considered survival migrants that are eking out a living, often via undocumented and irregular activities. They frequently rely on self-help forms of organization that provide a modicum of solidarity, internal governance and welfare. Such populations can also become the targets of unscrupulous actors in the community and/or exploited by homeland-oriented actors due to their high level of vulnerability.

On the other end of the spectrum are well-integrated Kurdish populations and elite or well-networked Kurdish asylum seekers and refugees who have strong pre-existing connections with established organizations in Europe. Such populations can be engaged in both integration- and homeland-oriented organizations, and both types of organizations may have interactions with newly-arrived Kurdish refugees, with the former focusing primarily on the provision of cultural activities and acting as a broker for government-funded services; and the latter focusing more on political mobilization around, and direct support for, homeland politics. The division between these two types of organizations is not complete, but their basis of legitimacy and transnational networks and connections are fundamentally different (although at times may overlap in particular contexts).

In the middle of the spectrum are the many ordinary asylum-seekers who are simultaneously navigating the legal and bureaucratic landscape of Europe, the political landscape of Kurdish diaspora organizations in Europe, as well as the transnational reach of the bureaucracies,

diaspora engagement policies and, at times, security regimes of their states of origin. Such populations may have access to some level of support structures and services, but are often living in situations of limbo, unable to travel, work, or move forward on the path to integration, and they may be highly dependent on community and informal networks for their survival.

Diaspora organizations are therefore frequently key actors in refugee integration processes, providing much-needed material, psychological and social support in situations of extreme precarity. They can also act as brokers that assist new arrivals in accessing existing state services and opportunities; provide them with access to essential information; and help them to navigate the legal and bureaucratic obstacles that newcomers inevitably encounter upon arrival to states in Europe. Our interviews found that diaspora organizations play important roles in processes of arrival, reception and settlement, as well as in the key milestones of refugee integration, including securing legal status; acquiring access to employment, healthcare, education, housing and other basic necessities, including language training; and assistance in integrating socially and culturally into the new context.

On the other hand, diaspora organizations, in combination with existing geopolitical dynamics and homeland conflicts, can also create challenges for new arrivals and at times impede integration. For example, precarious new arrivals without legal status and with little access to other forms of support are vulnerable to becoming dependent on, or even at times exploited by, some forms of diaspora networks and organizations. Similarly, the restrictive migration policies, overall structure, and legal-bureaucratic requirements of European asylum regimes may push some individuals into the hands of diaspora actors who seek to mobilize them for their own homeland-oriented political purposes, or for their own economic or personal motivations. Situations of precarity, legal limbo and dependency can provide underlying conditions for intra-diasporic forms of exploitation, and these can in turn become tied to broader transnational conflict networks and multi-scalar geopolitical dynamics that the majority of asylum-seekers are seeking to escape.

## **Policy Implications and Recommendations**

The findings of our research suggest several policy implications and recommendations, which we summarize in this section.

### *Mediating the Role of Geopolitics*

The most significant obstacle to integration encountered by our interview subjects was their legal status. While this is a common problem for all asylum-seekers in Europe, Kurdish asylum seekers faced some unique challenges relating to the broader geopolitical and foreign policy context of their homeland(s). This was particularly the case for Kurdish asylum-seekers originating from Turkey and/or Kurds displaced by operations in the Syrian-Turkish border region, who often get caught up in the foreign policy dynamics and bargaining process stemming from Turkey's role as a European Union candidate state, NATO member, and, increasingly, a state that has become key to the EU's overall external migration prevention and control strategy (Adamson and Tsourapas 2019). The contrast between the situation of Kurdish asylum seekers and refugees from Ukraine can be seen clearly in the varying European-level policies to the two groups. For obvious reasons, geopolitical dynamics cannot be completely eliminated from the formulation of refugee and asylum policy, and the two cases are not directly comparable. The Ukraine example nonetheless demonstrates that a willingness to have an expansive and open policy of refugee reception makes it more difficult for refugee and asylum "crises" to be subject to geopolitical instrumentalization: open door policies can go a long way

to safeguarding refugees from becoming weaponized by state and non-state actors in their regions of origin, thus easing their pathway to integration (Greenhill 2022).

### *Diaspora Organizations as Facilitators of Integration*

Our research shows that diaspora organizations often play important roles as “brokers” and facilitators of processes of integration. They can connect newly-arrived refugees and asylum-seekers with existing resources, services and support. However, this only works when there are indeed state services and support available to new arrivals, and where there are established, service-providing diaspora organizations. In cases where state support for new arrivals is lacking, or there is a lack of established diaspora organizations that have a history of partnering with local policy actors, new arrivals can be in danger of falling into a situation of extreme precarity and/or being exploited by informal actors or diaspora organizations that take advantage of newcomers’ extreme vulnerability. There are two ways to positively intervene in such dynamics: for states and local communities to provide new arrivals with greater and more open access to legal channels for reception and integration, so that services and assistance can be accessed directly and without fear; and for policy-makers to partner with and support diaspora organizations that have the capacity, expertise, experience and orientation to serve as reliable brokers for new arrivals in the process of integration.

### *A Multi-scalar Perspective on Integration*

Finally, our research suggests that processes of integration should be thought of as taking place within a multi-scalar context. The complexity of geopolitical relations, and the density of personal, social, political and media networks between states of reception and states of origin, means that individual refugees and asylum-seekers do not simply leave one context and start a new life in another context. Rather, they will continue to be influenced by developments in their homelands; remain embedded in broader geopolitical dynamics that affect their everyday lives; and be subject to the influence of a range of transnational actors, ties, and forms of diaspora politics. New arrivals can be expected to remain politically engaged with and interested in their countries of origin without this being a sign of lack of integration in their country of reception. Access to legal status and forms of support can ensure, however, that vulnerable newcomers can make their own choices about levels and types of political engagement, rather than being forced by necessity into situations of intra-diasporic forms of dependency in which they may be at risk of being exploited by predatory actors in the diaspora. Overall, this suggests that formal integration processes need to be designed in ways that are multi-scalar. In other words, successful integration processes should provide individuals with the resources and support to successfully function and flourish in their country of reception, as well as to engage productively with broader transnational, geopolitical and diasporic contexts.

## **Research Parameters**

Our research aimed to capture a “bottom-up” understanding of the challenges facing Kurdish refugees across Europe. Our design was multi-sited and multi-method, using a variety of methods including interviews, focus groups, ethnography and participant observation. Sites of field research were chosen in order to facilitate both cross-country and within-country comparisons. The overall research design aimed to capture variations across the different reception and integration experiences of Kurdish refugees in both urban areas (i.e. metropolitan cities), but also less populated regions (i.e. border towns). Our findings are based on over 230 interviews conducted between March and August 2019, as well as participant observation across 17 sites in 6 countries: Berlin, Munich, and Landshut (Germany);

Stockholm, Malmö, and Lund (Sweden); Bornholm (Denmark); Salzburg, Vienna (Austria); Paris, Nice, Antibes, and Cannes (France); Ventimiglia, Rome, Grosseto, and Bari (Italy).

Field research was overseen by Adamson and conducted by Dag, an experienced researcher with a Kurdish background, who was able to draw on his personal knowledge of the Kurdish refugee context. Interviews were conducted in Kurdish (Kurmanji and Sorani), Turkish, German, and English. Interview subjects included both established members of the Kurdish diaspora community in Europe and recently-arrived Kurdish asylum-seekers and refugees. Initial contacts were identified via different diaspora community organizations, online forums and social network sites. Subsequently, snowball sampling was utilized as the basis for arranging in-depth interviews and participant observation. In addition, the study also used a trial-and-error method to reach out to Kurdish refugees in isolated locations and populations who were not connected to other Kurdish networks, communities, or institutions (Beauchemin and González-Ferrer 2011).

Approximately 15-30 in-depth individual interviews and/or focus groups were conducted in each research site. Interviews were conducted with four different categories of individuals: established diaspora community leaders; refugees and asylum seekers in urban areas; refugees and asylum seekers in small towns and rural areas; and some focus groups that included both refugees/asylum seekers and established diaspora community leaders. For the selection of interviewees, we ensured a mix of characteristics of Kurdish refugees in relation to their legal status, age, gender identity, occupation, employment status and type, level of language skills, education level, housing situation, time of immigration, country of origin, their position within particular diaspora organizations, and their relationships with pre-established Kurdish communities in terms of political affiliation and/or kinship and transnational links with relatives or friends beyond their settlement location. We followed appropriate ethical guidelines in our study, including explaining the nature of our research to all participants, gaining their consent, and anonymizing all responses. In addition, Dag used ethnographic methods to engage in various forms of participant observation, including attending social gatherings, participating in collective conversations, and spending time in different social settings, including refugee camps, outside gatherings and in private homes.

Many individuals encountered in this research were in very precarious personal situations, as measured by their legal status, their lack of an economic support system, and their self-identification with a marginalized group. Moreover, some were engaged in political activities or organizations that may have put them at odds with majority refugee or migrant populations from their countries of origin. Given that governments in Europe keep no official statistics on specifically Kurdish populations in Europe, one of the key challenges was in delineating what was meant by “Kurdish” in our study. We largely used self-identification as a tool, which raises issues of selection bias. Nevertheless, we were careful to ensure that our sample size included a wide range of self-identified Kurdish asylum-seekers and refugees, including many who did not identify with any particular political orientation or group.

## References

Adamson, Fiona B. and Gerasimos Tsourapas. 2019. Migration Diplomacy in World Politics. *International Studies Perspectives* 20 (2): 113-128.

Bundesamt für Bildung und Forschung. 2021. "Das Bundesamt in Zahlen": <https://www.bamf.de/DE/Themen/Statistik/Asylzahlen/BundesamtInZahlen/bundesamtinzahlen-node.html>, (accessed 22.8.2022).

Beauchemin, Cris, and Amparo González-Ferrer. 2011. "Sampling International Migrants with Origin-Based Snowballing Method: New Evidence on Biases and Limitations." *Demographic Research* 25: 103–34.

Dag, Veysi, Catherine Craven and Fiona B. Adamson. 2021a. *Diaspora Organizations and Multi-Scalar Governance: A Kurdish Case Study* Case Study Report Deliverable 6.2, EU H2020 Grant 822806.

Dag, Veysi, Catherine Craven and Fiona B. Adamson. 2021b. *Mapping the Kurdish Refugee Community and Diaspora in Europe* Case Study Report Deliverable 5.2, EU H2020 Grant 822806.

Duxbury, Charlie. 2022. Swedish and Finnish NATO Deal with Turkey Triggers Fears Over Kurdish Deportations. *Politico* July 29, 2022: <https://www.politico.eu/article/sweden-finland-nato-deal-turkey-trigger-fears-kurdish-deportations/> (accessed 22.8.2022).

Ferreri, Victoria. 2022. The Invisible Hard Work of Retrieving Papers: Syrians and the Paradoxes of Integration in Germany. *Citizenship Studies* (online first: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13621025.2022.2103973> - accessed 22.08.2022).

Greenhill, Kelly M. 2022. When Migrants Become Weapons: The Long History and Worrying Future of a Coercive Tactic. *Foreign Affairs* 101 (2): 155-164.

Moss, Dana M. 2016. Transnational Repression, Diaspora Mobilization and the Case of the Arab Spring. *Social Problems* 63 (4): 480-498.

Schenkkan, Nate. 2018. The Remarkable Scale of Turkey's 'Global Purge': How It Became a Threat to Rule of Law Everywhere. *Foreign Affairs* :<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2018-01-29/remarkable-scale-turkeys-global-purge> (accessed 22.08.2022).



## Project Identity

<b>PROJECT NAME</b>	MAGYC - Migration Governance and AsYlum Crises
<b>COORDINATOR</b>	The Hugo Observatory (Université de Liège), Liège, Belgium. hugo.observatory@uliege.be
<b>CONSORTIUM</b>	Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique - Institut français du Proche-Orient (Beirut, Lebanon) GIGA Institute of Global and Area Studies (Hamburg, Germany) IDMC (Geneva, Switzerland) Lebanese American University (Beirut, Lebanon) Lund University (Lund, Sweden) Sabanci University (Istanbul, Turkey) Sciences Po (Paris, France) SOAS University of London (London, UK) University of Economics in Bratislava (Bratislava, Slovakia) University of Macedonia (Thessaloniki, Greece) University of Milan (Milan, Italy)
<b>FUNDING SCHEME</b>	This project has received funding from the European Commission's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme (2014-2020), Societal Challenge 6 – Europe in a changing world: inclusive, innovative and reflective societies", call MIGRATION-02-2018 — Towards forward-looking migration governance: addressing the challenges, assessing capacities and designing future strategies.
<b>DURATION</b>	November 2018 – April 2023
<b>BUDGET</b>	EU contribution: 3,175,263.70€.
<b>WEBSITE</b>	<a href="https://www.magyc.uliege.be/">https://www.magyc.uliege.be/</a>
<b>FOR MORE INFORMATION</b>	<b>Contact:</b> Basak Yavcan: byavcan@uliege.be
<b>FURTHER READING</b>	Adamson, Fiona B. 2022. Migration Governance in Civil War: The Case of the Kurdish Conflict. Working Paper. Deliverable 8.6 EU H2020 Grant 822806, April 2022.  Ambrosini, Maurizio. 2021. The Battleground of Asylum and Immigration Policies: A Conceptual Inquiry. <i>Ethnic and Racial Studies</i> 44 (3): 374-395.  Dag, Veysi. 2022. The Politics of Cultural Production: Exile, Integration and Homeland in Europe's Kurdish Diaspora. <i>Diaspora Studies</i> (online first).

Dag, Veysi. 2022. Governing From Below: Kurdish Refugees on the Margins of European Societies. Working Paper. Deliverable 6.4 EU H2020 Grant 822806, April 2022.

Fry, Claudia and Mine Islar. 2021. Horizontal Local Governance and Social Inclusion: The Case of Municipality-Civil Society Engagement During Refugee Reception in Malmö, Sweden. *Frontiers in Political Science* Vol 3.

**Disclaimer:** *The information and views set out in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the European Union. Neither the European Union institutions and bodies nor any person acting on their behalf may be held responsible for the use which may be made of the information contained therein.*