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The role of corruption in reintegration: experiences of Iraqi Kurds upon return from Europe

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ABSTRACT
This article examines how corruption affects reintegration. The literature on return and reintegration shows that return migrants often struggle to adjust and adapt to life in their place of origin because that environment can be very different from what they grew accustomed to abroad. One stark difference is the prevalence and meaning of corruption. In many sending countries that migrants come from and then return to, corruption is endemic. By contrast, in many receiving countries that migrants go to and return from, it is incidental. Yet, we know little about how the discrepancy affects reintegration. This study examines how corruption affects the psychosocial and economic reintegration of Iraqi Kurds returning to Iraqi Kurdistan from Norway and the United Kingdom. Interviews with returnees reveal that they consider corruption a major challenge for their own reintegration. Psychosocially, it alienates them from the ideology of the Kurdish nation-building project, challenges their identities, undermines a sense of belonging and creates insecurity. Economically, it shapes economic behaviour and outcomes by obstructing entrepreneurship, producing relative deprivation and conditioning their employability.

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Introduction

Coming ‘home’ from abroad can be challenging. When migrants return to their place of origin after being away for an extended period of time, a difficult process of adjustment and adaptation often follows. This reintegration process can be at least as taxing as the process of immigrant integration abroad, partly because the migrant has changed since departure and partly because everyday life ‘here’ and ‘there’ often differ greatly (Hammond 1999; King 2000).

Contrasts between sending and receiving countries are typically viewed in terms of economy, development and security. Such differences often pattern return and reintegration. Scholars examining return and reintegration through an economic lens have looked into cross-country differences between origin and destination in terms of employment and entrepreneurship opportunities, earning differentials, economic risk, availability of occupational choices and divergencies in the premium on skills (Borjas and Bratsberg...
Scholars who emphasise the development discrepancies between origins and destinations have asked how standard of living issues and developmental policies affect returnees (Crosby 2001; Dei 1991; Harvey 2006; Jayagupta 2009). Finally, because both economic growth and development are conditioned on security, scholars tend to view security as something of a sine qua non for migrants’ willingness to return, shaping return rates and experiences of post-conflict return and reintegration (Black et al. 2004; Stefansson 2006).

All three concepts—economy, development and security—come with metatheoretical baggage and emphasise some aspects of migration experiences over others. This article argues that corruption is an understudied factor cutting across all three, and that it can be central in shaping post-return lives. Theoretically, the states often labelled as conflict affected and low income that many migrants leave from and eventually return to could also be considered institutionally weak and high corruption. UNDP (2009) estimates that more than three quarters of international migrants go to a country with a higher level of human development than their country of origin. Given that more corrupt countries tend to have lower levels of human development (Akcay 2006, 46), many of these migrants will return to countries of origin with higher levels of corruption than the host countries they return from.

The linkages between return and corruption are one aspect of what Carling, Paasche, and Siegel (2015) hold to be a little explored migration–corruption nexus. In this two-way relationship, they argue that migration affects both the practice and perceptions of corruption, while corruption can simultaneously shape migration processes and modify its effects on society. An embryonic literature has started to examine this nexus, viewing corruption as a differentiating factor between origin and destination locations. The research has so far focused mainly on immigrant integration, remittances and emigration decisions (Ariu and Squicciarini 2013; Barr and Serra 2010; Cooray and Schneider 2014; Dimant, Krieger, and Meierrieks 2013; Fisman and Miguel 2007; Ivlevs and King 2014). By comparison, relatively little attention has been devoted to links between corruption and post-return reintegration.

One need not travel to or live in a liberal democracy to become sensitive to corruption or recognise that systematic differences in governance exist across and within different parts of the world. However, differences in levels and meanings of corruption across sending and receiving contexts are usefully incorporated into the study of return and reintegration for at least three reasons.

Firstly, returnees’ perspectives on corruption ‘at home’ can change as a consequence of sociocultural integration in a social model abroad. Migrants tend to adjust and adapt values, attitudes and practices of legality at destination locations over time (Kubal 2014), as has been found with respect to corruption (Barr and Serra 2010). Normative understandings of corruption and its acceptability varies across what Collier (2013) conceives as ‘social models’, which differ in their norms, institutions, organisations and values. Anthropological research confirms that corruption has different meanings in different social models (Blundo and deSardan 2006; Haller and Shore 2005; Smith 2007).

Secondly, returnees may not only view corruption differently from local non-migrants, but also experience it differently through complex mechanisms that can be expected to vary across contexts and individuals. Returnees may more frequently be asked for a bribe, for instance, because they have, actually or seemingly, accumulated wealth...
abroad. This is not necessarily an unambiguous act of victimisation. Bribing may enable access to resources that would otherwise be inaccessible. Moreover, wealth can beget a type of social capital that makes one less dependent on illegal, corrupt practices. On the other hand, returnees may lack access to patronage or know-how, for instance, if they have been abroad and unconnected for an extended period, if political transitions in their absence have reconfigured power, or if lack of patronage motivated their departure.

Thirdly, a returnee who struggles to reintegrate may wish to maintain a positive sense of self by attributing problems externally to a corrupt system. Returnees’ perceptions of corruption, leaving aside the issue of verification, are interesting in their own right because they are richly imbued with social meaning. In a similar vein to researchers being criticised for exploiting the corruption discourse as a paternalistic tool to moralise over ‘less developed’ Others (Blundo and deSarkan 2006; Lindberg and Orjuela 2014), returnees may engage in the same discourse to position themselves as morally impeccable and ideologically superior ‘torchbearers of progress’ whose return brought them from modernity to backwardness (Parry 2003, 244). Corruption perceptions are also interesting in how they link self-representations with representations of governance and statehood, reflecting how returnees imagine their state (Gupta 2005).

Corruption is weighted with normative loadings and routinely subjected to definitional and disciplinary discussions (Jancsics 2014; Lindberg and Orjuela 2014). Here I adopt De Sarkan’s (1999, 29) definition of a ‘corruption complex’, viewing corruption as culturally embedded in moral economy and including not only bribery, but also ‘nepotism, abuse of power, embezzlement and various forms of misappropriation, influence-peddling, prevarication, insider trading and abuse of the public purse’. Such a broad definition seems particularly applicable in contexts where boundaries between public and private spheres blur, as legal-rational institutions weave seamlessly into nepatrimonial informality.

In this article, I ask what role corruption plays in post-return reintegration. My analysis is empirically based on interviews with migrants coming back from Norway and the United Kingdom to the semi-autonomous region of Iraqi Kurdistan. In the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) produced by the international anti-corruption NGO Transparency International, Norway and the UK rank among the world’s 20 least corrupt countries throughout the 2000s. Such rankings are contested and have methodological issues and limitations, but I cite the CPI to give an approximation of how these countries may compare with Iraqi Kurdistan. Although levels of corruption in Iraqi Kurdistan are probably lower than in the rest of Iraq—consistently ranked by the CPI among the world’s 20 most corrupt countries throughout the 2000s—they are ‘relatively high compared to other countries in the [Middle East] region’ (Pring 2015, 1).

For some background, I now turn to a literature review of corruption in the study of return and reintegration. That is followed by notes on methodology and some information on Iraqi Kurdistan. Next comes the main empirical discussion of how corruption was found to affect reintegration psychosocially and economically. Finally, a conclusion identifies broader theoretical implications.

**Corruption in the study of return and reintegration**

A review of past research substantiates the claim that my analytical approach here is innovative. As a body of literature, the study of return and reintegration is no longer ‘the great
unwritten chapter in the history of migration’ (King 2000, 7). That chapter’s section on corruption, however, remains unwritten.

The most frequently cited edited volumes on return and reintegration do not consider the role of corruption (e.g. Ghosh 2000; Koser and Black 1999; Long and Oxfeld 2004; Markowitz and Stefansson 2004). For this article, I reviewed 819 broad-spanning academic studies on return and reintegration, identified from a systematic bibliography on return (Carling, Mortensen, and Wu 2011). None made corruption its main object of analysis but several hinted at its relevance. In some cases, corruption is discussed in a section on country background or as a reason for emigration, but not integrated into the analysis of return (Asis 1992; King and Vullnetari 2009).

A few studies of labour migrants mention corruption more or less in passing. For example, one study details how some Chinese migrants see life in the United States explicitly as a way of avoiding corruption in China (Alberts and Hazen 2005). Another study describes how Japanese–Brazilian migrants in Japan could not be incentivised to return by governmental reforms in Brazil during the late 1990s because of an almost fatalistic belief that corruption would persist in spite of reforms (Tsuda 1999).

Refugees often flee states with weak rule of law. Although corruption rarely features centrally in studies of refugee return, it is occasionally mentioned. One study of elite Afghan returnee visitors back from the United States remarkably found that ‘corruption was one of the most commonly given reasons as to why they had not stayed longer [in Afghanistan], even more so than insecurity’ (Oeppen 2009, 156, my emphasis). Corruption in Afghanistan constituted a bureaucratic obstacle for returnees who intended to set up humanitarian projects, establish a business, sell land or work with the government. Likewise, refugees in the UK have cited the corruption they encounter during return visits as a reason not to return permanently (Muggeridge and Doná 2006). In other contexts, refugee returnees have been found to lobby successfully against corruption, for example by making the government clamp down on corrupt airport officials in Vietnam (Moore 2003).

A ‘home country’ can acquire new meanings when migrants return. For labour migrants and refugees alike, encounters with corruption ‘at home’ are conductive to idealisations of the previous country of residence. As Pedersen (2003, 37) describes in the context of return to Lebanon, places are always defined and sometimes idealised in relation to each other. ‘[The] Northern European state came to symbolize a political system devoid of the corruption and clientelism that is so widespread in Lebanon.’ Returnees may find that other returnees share their critical views upon return (Müller 2010), but they can also attribute corruption to a flaw in ethnonational character shared equally among migrants and non-migrants (Kibria 2008; Moore 2003). Corruption can, moreover, be lucrative for returnees. Although most scholars present returnees as indignant bystanders, Dei (1991) notes a corruption scandal that implicated the leadership of a Ghanaian association of returnees from Nigeria and led to the group’s dissolution.

The literature is divided on how informed the diaspora is about corruption in the country of origin. On the one hand, researchers implicitly consider the diaspora to be knowledgeable when members’ reluctance to invest in and return to the country of origin is attributed to corruption there (Raunet 2005). On the other hand, returnees are often portrayed in the literature as deeply surprised by the prevalence and meaning of corruption in their country of origin. Christou and King (Christou 2006; Christou and King 2006) have described how Greek returnees back from the US responded to corruption with
disappointment and alienation, resignation and acceptance, and, most of all, surprise. Similar sentiments were echoed by a returnee to South Africa: ‘I hadn’t realised how much damage had been done on the ground in all sorts of things ... I’m astounded by the degree of corruption in the country’ (Steyn and Grant 2007, 374).

The literature I reviewed contains scattered references to corruption, though does not deal with it in depth, even when empirical observations are remarkable. Virtually no references are made to the field of corruption studies, further indicating the presence of theoretical blinders. Both lacunae point to the potential not just to fill a gap, but to rethink the experience of return migration.

Method

The relevance of corruption became clear during data-gathering. As my primary data source, I conducted interviews with returnees, concentrating on urban areas in all three regions of Iraqi Kurdistan—Erbil, Dohuk and Sulaymaniyah—during 4 months of fieldwork in 2012 and 2013. Of the 72 returnees interviewed, 56 initially left for Norway and the UK as asylum seekers, 6 came through family reunification, 5 as quota refugees and 5 to pursue education.

This case study is part of a larger cross-country research project on return migration. Norway and the UK were selected as host states, being two of the five top destination countries of Iraqis in Europe at the time of fieldwork. Data were pooled because similarities in narratives and differences in interviewee attributes across the host states prevented cross-country comparison.

In total, 35 returnees came back from Norway and 37 from the UK. A 1-year minimum residence in Norway or the UK was a sampling criteria, but most had lived there for much longer. Ten years of absence was the average duration of time from departure until return, time in transit included. The range, mode and median number of years from departure until return were, respectively, 45 (46–1), 7 and 9. There was some variation in year of departure from Iraqi Kurdistan (11 during 1975–1991, 25 during 1992–1998 and 36 during 1999–2012), but less variation for year of return. Sixty-eight of the 72 returned after the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, a time of generalised optimism and economic opportunity. There seems to have been little long-term return to the region prior to the mid-2000s.

Local interpreters were used in Iraqi Kurdistan for most interviews and helped with recruitment. Interviews were loosely semi-structured around key themes such as migration context, destination country socioeconomics, decision-making processes regarding initial emigration and return migration, and post-return opportunities and challenges. Recruitment took place through a combination of snowball sampling (referrals limited to five) and personal and organisational networks, aiming to ensure diversity in age, socioeconomic status and gender. Recruiting female interviewees was a challenge, with almost 90% of interviewees being male. Diversity among returnees was notable, however, in the legal-bureaucratic category of return: whether individuals were considered deported or ‘removed’ (13), so-called ‘voluntary’ returnees (14) or autonomous returnees (45). The first two categories were rejected asylum seekers and irregular migrants who were, respectively, returned forcibly and through assisted return programmes offering some kind of incentive. Autonomous returnees were migrants with residence permits in Norway and the UK, returning on their own.
Additional data from the country of origin derive from focus group discussions and key informant interviews in Iraqi Kurdistan. Three focus group discussions were held: one with four migrants, one with five migrants and one with four non-migrants. The last offered some useful complementing perspectives. Ten key informant interviews were conducted, including with high-level officials in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and organisations working with migrants. Six return visitors normally resident in Norway or the UK were interviewed. All this supplemental data collection offered contextual insight that aided the analysis. Another source of supplemental data not directly drawn upon is 34 interviews with legally resident adult emigrants—most of whom were asylum seekers—in Norway and the UK. Differences in perspective between emigrants and returnees are beyond the scope of this article, but will be explored in future research. The same goes for any differences between return migrants’ and non-migrants’ perspectives, as I currently have no substantial data on non-migrants.

Recorded interviews were transcribed. Transcriptions and interview notes were coded and analysed using NVivo software.

Given the political sensitivity of grand corruption in Iraqi Kurdistan, the frequency with which returnees unpromptedly brought up corruption as a problem was astonishing. Government critics decrying high-level corruption in the KRG have been harassed, detained without charge or trial and occasionally killed.4

Corruption in Iraqi Kurdistan

The new millennium has witnessed rapid economic growth in Iraqi Kurdistan and opportunities for corrupt self-enrichment at an unprecedented scale. After a history of violent conflict and poverty both before and after semi-autonomy was established in 1991, economic and political developments during the late 1990s were catalysed by the American-led 2003 invasion of Iraq. The invasion toppled the previous regime in Baghdad and consolidated the KRG’s international and domestic position. Economic growth during this period was staggering and primarily driven by oil production. According to official statistics, the nominal GDP grew from 4.4 billion Iraqi Dinars in 2004 to 28.3 billions in 2011 (KRG 2011; World Bank 2015). Before a financial, security and humanitarian crisis caused setbacks and new flows of asylum seekers to Europe in 2014, the region enjoyed a GDP growth of 8% (World Bank 2015). The great majority of return migrants from Europe came back during this third period to a place of massive yet inequitably distributed economic opportunity, with strong economic incentives for corruption and a young state with weak institutions.

Grand corruption, typically involving high-level decision-makers and large sums of money, is widely considered a serious problem in the KRG. A Gallup public opinion poll from 2013 found that 81% of respondents in Iraqi Kurdistan agree with the statement that corruption is widespread throughout the KRG. It also found that attitudes towards public services continued to decline alongside calls for less corruption in government (Loschky 2012). Such popular discontent has given rise to an oppositional political party, Goran, which means ‘change’ in Sorani Kurdish. Linked to the Kurdish diaspora in Europe, Goran received nearly a quarter of the votes in the July 2009 Kurdish parliament elections. This came after it challenged the monopoly and personalisation of politics by the two main parties—the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union
of Kurdistan (PUK)—and campaigned to uproot corruption in the government. The KRG is routinely accused of corruption by observers, both international (e.g. Leezenberg 2005) and national (e.g. Hassan 2015), and, mostly without specifics, in Kurdish media. The problem of public corruption has been acknowledged by President Massoud Barzani, Prime Minister Nechirwan Barzani and former prime minister Barham Saleh. In its strategic vision for 2020, the KRG (2013, 39) states: ‘We must improve our honesty, transparency, and efficiency. By 2020, our government will be free of corruption and will fulfill all of its responsibilities fairly and efficiently.’

The KRG displays structural features that are theoretically associated with endemic corruption. Firstly, the KRG has an oversized public sector where the main parties distribute jobs as patronage (Jabary and Hira 2013). Official statistics indicate that 80% of all employed women and 45% of all employed men work in the public sector (KRG 2013), a large bureaucracy that creates supply and demand for corruption. Secondly, the KRG’s economy is based on natural resources. The federal budget depends on national oil revenues for 80% of its total revenues (World Bank 2015). Before the oil, during most of the 1990s, international aid was a source of rent and worked to reinforce neopatrimonial rule (Natali 2007). Decades of repression, conflict and immiseration, combined with entrenched tribal social structures and client–patron relationships (Van Bruinessen 1992), have institutionalised informal governance and ‘may have durably undermined the very idea of state legitimacy as founded on a social contract of sorts’ (Leezenberg 2005). At the same time, events, such as the 2011 Sulaymaniyah protests against corruption, and social injustice demonstrate that legitimacy remains a political rallying platform.

Corruption and returnee reintegration

Interview data suggest that return migration from Europe to Iraqi Kurdistan started becoming significant during the mid-2000s. KRG keeps no statistics, but by 2013, European Union member states had ordered over 95,000 Iraqis to return to Iraq (including Iraqi nationals other than Kurds), and roughly a third had complied or had been deported (Fandrich 2013, 16). In an interview with an official from the organisation, IOM confirmed that most of those who return through its assisted return programmes are Iraqi Kurds and that 21,507 individuals returned ‘voluntarily’ from Europe to Iraq during the period 2003–2012.

Reintegration is complex and multidimensional, but central in the literature are its psychosocial and economic dimensions (Hammond 1999; King 2000; Ruben, van Houte, and Davids 2009). Each of these will be dealt with separately in the following analysis.

Psychosocial reintegration

Returnees are often portrayed as struggling to reconcile and negotiate a multiplicity of identities (Long and Oxfeld 2004). Their life stories, behaviours and frameworks of reference deviate from those of non-migrants, which potentially leads to alienation from the ‘homeland’ and its people (Ruben, van Houte, and Davids 2009). My interviews suggest that in Iraqi Kurdistan, this psychosocial struggle is closely tied with the weak rule of law. The perception of a corrupt political leadership impacts returnees’ psychosocial
well-being by alienating them ideologically, fostering insecurity and inhibiting their freedom of expression.

The illicit self-enrichment of governing elites was often seen as at odds with the spirit of nationalist struggle and the collective aspiration of state-building. Several interviewees talked of a moral duty to return in order to help build their country after decades of conflict and underdevelopment, and referred to corruption as an obstruction to doing so. Narratives were regularly held in balance, however, as returnees sometimes took pride in what the KRG had accomplished since the turn of the millennium and at other times complained of the social injustice manifest in the behaviour of political elites.

Physically, Iraqi Kurdistan transformed from a rural and relatively isolated region during the 1980s to a site of rapid urban development in the 2000s. Still, several returnees described the rise of individualism and materialism with mixed feelings and referred to a past of egalitarian values and solidarity. One contrasted past nationalism with today’s ‘moneyism’, intimating that the collective struggle for liberation was replaced by an individual struggle to amass wealth through illicit connections to political parties. One highly educated professional reported returning with the intention to help build the country with his skills and experience acquired abroad, but then suffered disillusionment with the political system.

Personally, many years after I came back, I regret that I did. I found a country which is fully corrupted. I found a country where there are no independent people [...]. Those who are running this country, on both sides, are fully corrupted and undemocratic as well. (Male, age 40+, 10+ years abroad) 

Mental stress and discomfort are particularly evident when a returnee’s behaviour conflicts with beliefs integral to his or her identity. The same returnee expressed a need to rebuild his identity because years of working with high-ranking party officials had confronted him with moral dilemmas. ‘It has compromised me a lot—my values, my principles,’ he said, contemplating re-migration to Europe to rebuild a coherent sense of self. Merely observing injustice can be stressful if it violates internalised norms, whether or not they were internalised in Europe. As one interviewee said: ‘I think I found it easy to integrate into Western culture—much easier than to reintegrate into my own culture—simply because in this country [Iraqi Kurdistan], the rule of law and justice is hard to find’ (M40+, 10+).

Grand corruption, as described by interviewees, erodes the ideological foundation of patriotism. It leads not only to doubt in those who govern, but also to loss of confidence in the state-building project that has contributed to uniting Iraqi Kurds for decades. Refugee returnees may be especially prone to such feelings if they fled because of the struggle against Baghdad’s oppressive regime. Having taken risks and suffered losses in that struggle, one returnee asked rhetorically during the interview if the current status quo was ‘what we fought for’. Others referred to the short history of limited self-rule, since 1991, to explain the persistence of political problems. In any case, symbols of development—Erbil International Airport, towering luxury hotels, new roads and houses—were frequently contrasted with a stated lack of political progress.

Returnees regularly compared what they saw abroad with what they see upon return. The experience of residing in Europe and exposure to Norway’s and the UK’s social models affected returnees’ normative ideas of the state–citizen relationship back in Iraqi
Kurdistan. That said, the continual dialectic between ‘here’ and ‘there’ was experienced differently by different returnees. One said he did not care much for British people but would be willing to die for the British government. Another summed up his view of the people–state relationship ‘here’ and ‘there’ in no ambiguous terms: ‘In a Muslim country, the people are good but the government is rubbish. In the UK, the government is good but the people are rubbish’ (M20+, 5+). A third interviewee stressed that it was easier to maintain a sense of patriotism while abroad, before returning to a place with conspicuous consumption and frenzied competition for wealth through wasta. This term frequently came up during interviews.

An Arabic word, wasta denotes a kind of social capital that creates privileges and resources (e.g. jobs, business contracts, speedy bureaucratic processing) based on preferential treatment by people in positions of power, waseets, rather than merit, capability or formal rights. Wasta can be an effective social insurance for individuals, does not require direct reciprocity and may confer prestige on both the waseet and the beneficiary (Barnett, Yandle, and Naufal 2013). However, it can also undermine transparency and the principle of equal treatment. One returnee contrasted what he saw as equality before the law in Europe, and inequality before the law in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Law and justice [in the UK] are strong. Each one has his rights. The prime minister there cannot do anything illegal or steal anything. But here it’s different […] I miss the law, the organised life, the system. (M40+, 5+)

The perception of governing elites as being above the law creates a constant sense of legal insecurity for several returnees, non-conducive to a feeling of safety ‘at home’. Asked what was worst about being back, one returnee pointed precisely at the legal system.

The legal system is very backward, and it’s not respected much so there are a lot of injustices. Injustices in the workplaces, injustice in politics, and injustice in the distribution of wealth. It all comes down to a very weak and politicised legal system. (M20+, 20+)

A weak judiciary is not an abstraction of concern merely to returnees who are highly educated and articulate. It cuts across educational and social divides, although differently positioned returnees verbalise similar themes differently. The following is how a returnee with very little education describes the same ‘politicised legal system’.

Life here is very different … My life is not in my hands. There’s no rule of law here. If you face any problems with someone—even if he was the one who started the problem—if he has connections with someone like an official or politician here, you yourself get the blame. In Norway the law doesn’t differ for the son of the prime minister and for yourself. (M20+, 10+)

Returnees accustomed to discussing politics freely in Europe felt the need to self-censor on return. As one put it: ‘It’s difficult, to be honest. You need to live with it. I mean, I have to keep my mouth shut until the right time’ (M20+, 5+). Self-censorship was seen by another interviewee as making public sector corruption less tolerable, stating: ‘Anyone working with the government and their family becomes a millionaire … No one is held accountable. No one is kind of telling them this is not right’ (M20+, 10+). Being critical of governing elites is seen as both risky and futile. For some, ‘positive thinking’ is a preferred alternative. For instance, a returnee first complained that ‘corruption here kills the beauty, the trust’, then emphasised the need to avoid such thoughts.
Always people tell me I’m so positive. The half-empty glass is always full. I get angry about politics, but try to stay calm and happy. If you stay here and look for bad things, it poisons you. (M40+, 20+)

My positionality as a citizen of Norway and someone who has lived in the UK may have been useful for teasing out the aforementioned narratives. Several interviewees stated it was a positive experience to openly discuss these matters with ‘someone who understands’, that is, someone with a seemingly shared frame of reference who is familiar with the social model they refer to. However, interviewees may also have felt compelled to subscribe to a negative view of corruption and stress its negative impact on their psychosocial well-being. One participant in a focus group concluded after a lengthy discussion that it was time to stop being ‘good Kurds’ and start addressing the issue of corruption. Representations of corruption are also self-representations.

Approximately half the interviewees reported some kind of psychosocial impact of corruption, mostly unprompted. Based on analysis of all interviewees’ narratives and individual attributes, group-level differences were not easily observable across legal category of return, level of education, age, emigration cohort (1975–1991, 1992–1998, 1999–2012), immigrant generation or current activity (work, education, inactivity). The number of female interviewees was too low to meaningfully address gender. Interviewees who considered re-return to Europe or had lived in Europe for more than 20 years were somewhat more inclined to elaborate on the psychosocial impact of corruption than others.

**Economic reintegration**

Other types of reintegration are conditioned on economic reintegration, and the most urgent economic challenge for returnees is to find a sustainable livelihood. To do so, returnees to various countries have often engaged in entrepreneurship (Black and Castaldo 2009; King 2000; Murphy 1999). Be they employed or self-employed, key for returnees is a resilient livelihood along with the ability to maintain and enhance economic capabilities and assets over time (Ruben, van Houte, and Davids 2009).

Corruption can impede economic reintegration directly, for instance, by obstructing entrepreneurship, or indirectly, by affecting the broader economic environment. Much of my interview data points to both. Less in line with the (Western) view of corruption as a pathology, a few narratives suggest that corruption can facilitate economic reintegration. A couple of interviewees described membership in a politically connected family as a reason to return. Several stated that having a good connection with a high-level official was the decisive factor prompting their return, although at least one was disappointed with the type of support he actually received upon return. One contently returned to a powerful position in a well-paid public sector job, which he got from a friend and for which his qualifications seemed questionable.

In some cases, *wasta* was depicted as useful to expediting bureaucratic processes. One interviewee needing foreign-earned educational qualifications nationally recognised asked her father to ask his contacts in the bureaucracy for help. Seeing this as ‘white’ rather than ‘black’ corruption, and partly justified by what she saw as a lethargic bureaucracy, she acknowledged that her use of *wasta* slowed down the processing of other people’s requests but also added ‘I just love it sometimes’ (F20+, 10+). In another example, she had
competed for work with a foreigner and made use of a relative’s contacts on the inside to get the job, seeing it as ‘natural’ that she should get it as a national.

So you have to make friends with those in power and make sure you play the game very well. [...] So, in a way, we’re forced to be corrupt as well. Back in the system, back to the corruption.

One emigrant interviewee living in Europe for several decades described generally high expectations for immediate rewards and governmental assistance among those planning to return from the diaspora.

Some of them think that they will go back and immediately there’s a pot of gold sitting in Kurdistan for them [...] And if they want to start a business, every single Kurdish person, the first thing they ask is whether the government is going to give them money to start a business. (P40+)

Such inflated expectations of post-return economic success can cause disappointment. They may be attributable, at least in part, to the doom-to-boom macroeconomic growth in Kurdistan from 2003 until 2014 and a sudden increase in the visibly rich. They can also arise, however, from the perception that public funds are easily converted into private riches. One interviewee discussed unrealistic expectations among returnees.

Some people think they will become rich overnight. Yes, there’s corruption here. If you have a good connection with officials, maybe you can get a very well-paid job or start a company, business, et cetera. This is for a few people. (M20+, 5+)

There was a general consensus among interviewees that personal networks were needed to find a job and that qualifications meant less than they did in Europe. Many said they relied on close relatives in this regard. Some said they had social connections they could profit from informally, but for moral reasons did not want to do so.

Returnees often prefer self-employment, partly to signal upwards social mobility (King 2000). International migrants are frequently conceived of as risk-takers and agents of development who have accumulated capital and skills abroad and can put their acquisitions to innovative, productive use once they are back (Ammassari 2004; Black and Castaldo 2009). Corruption nuances this celebratory account. Firstly, corruption can quash the feasibility and rewards of entrepreneurship. Secondly, in a highly corrupt environment, entrepreneurship can take the shape of unproductive rent-seeking (Baumol 1990), here understood simply as ‘any redistributive activity that takes up resources’ (Murphy, Shleifer, and Vishny 1993, 409). Rent-seeking is not necessarily illegal, but endemic corruption breeds strong incentives for government bureaucrats to abuse their entrusted discretionary power to extract rent from the private sector. Monopolies and demands for bribes are especially hurtful to entrepreneurs in the process of establishing businesses (Murphy, Shleifer, and Vishny 1993).

Public officials in Iraqi Kurdistan are said to request bribes in exchange for licences and contracts. As one interviewee put it: ‘Party officials definitely control businesses. It’s affecting everybody’s lives. Even small companies, they control every small company’ (M20+, 10+). Another returnee stated that party officials also control employment in international oil companies operating in Iraqi Kurdistan. ‘One advice people gave me was that if you want to get a job as an interpreter, for example, with the oil companies, you should have a connection to someone in [the party]’ (M20+, 5+). He added that party officials
had stolen parts of the monthly salary a private company had agreed to pay him and other employees.

Returnee entrepreneurs therefore often need to cultivate personal ties with party officials. One highly educated migrant tried to re-establish himself economically after a few years in Europe, but failed. Interviewed in Europe, his account of the blurred lines between politics and business is summarised below.

I came back and applied for jobs in Iraqi Kurdistan, but didn’t get any because I wasn’t a member in one of political parties. Then I tried to set up a business, but you need contacts with the parties for that, too, or money, so you can buy contacts with someone central in the party. We had a business idea, but they wanted 75 per cent of the profit to themselves. So I didn’t bother. Then I got a good idea for an import business in Kurdistan, but a potential business partner told me ‘Someone from the Barzani family runs this business there, don’t even think about it. […] Others have tried before you.’ I had gone through all the hassle, planning my business, but when I heard this, I dropped it. All the big business there is run by the Talabani and Barzani families. (M20+)

The narrative contains various observations. Employability is described as contingent on party membership. Entrepreneurship appears to be contingent on *wasta* or the ability to bribe agents in the upper echelons of politics. Finally, opaque monopolistic structures block the entry of competitors. For the returnee, costs are incurred from loss of potential income as well as the time and efforts wasted because of hidden market imperfections.

The same interviewee cited previously who claimed party officials control every small company was asked for bribes when he tried to acquire governmental approval for a business idea.

The truth is actually that corruption is in every inch of Iraq, including Kurdistan. I want to start a small business, but state agencies control the market. Where they know there’s an interest or possibility for a business, they come and take the idea from you … They have people everywhere … It’s crazy. [Or] they’re asking for a high percentage [of the profit] with no contribution. (M20+, 10+)

Bribes are required for big business, he stressed, even if one has *wasta*. Rejecting bribery, the interviewee described how he challenged the party officials who had asked for it. First, he invoked nationalist sentiments by stressing the value of his entrepreneurial idea for the Kurdish people, a rhetorical strategy that invoked nationalist values and ‘made it difficult for them to say, “No”’. Then he threatened to sue the corrupt official. Finally, he suggested, his local business partner knew another public official within the same state agency who supported and protected their business venture. ‘But it’s not because he knew him. It’s because he does his job. Frankly, he’s one in a hundred,’ explained the interviewee. Even so, returnee entrepreneurship remains contingent on knowing the right people or having business partners who do.

Public sector employment offers opportunities for cultivating client–patron relationships. With great macroeconomic development happening in the KRG ever since 1998, catalysed by the 2003 invasion of Iraq, everyone seemed to have heard of someone who got rich fast, often thanks to powerful patrons in the parties. One interviewee, struggling economically, said he could arrange to become a millionaire by picking up the phone and asking a politically powerful benefactor for misappropriated real estate. ‘Being given land can give you millions in no time at all. I know many who became millionaires that way’
Instead, through the assistance of a close relative, he secured what is called a ghost job, an employed position in which he did very little actual work.

Seeing others succeed in rent-seeking can diminish one’s own sense of accomplishment, producing a sense of relative deprivation. One returnee touched upon this.

There’s a lot of corruption, and especially for the poor, when they see all this corruption … Every day you hear that somebody makes millions of dollars and builds a hotel—five stars—and before that, they were nothing. They didn’t have any money. So where did they get all this? (M20+, 10+)

Privilege for some creates frustration and risk for others. One returnee said he had lost money invested in his private business because of a corruption scandal that was negatively affecting markets. Risk is also associated with the fact that many among the political elites have foreign passports and are believed to have secret bank accounts abroad. In several narratives, their commitment to the collective future of Iraqi Kurdistan is questioned. One returnee likened a high-level minister to the pilot of a plane who could simply ‘parachute away if something happens’ (M20+, 5+). A returnee who held a foreign passport and had party ties echoed the concern: ‘The PUK or KDP, whatever happens, most of their people in power have foreign passports in their pockets. Only the poor people will be affected’ (F40+, 10+). In a historically unstable region, such an expectation may deter investment.

Finally, corruption may affect economic reintegration indirectly through the quality of public services. One interviewee posited that if Iraqi Kurdistan’s resources had served the public good and not been misappropriated, the country could have been rebuilt in a decade following 1991. The precise extent to which interviewees held corrupt leaders accountable for problems of public service delivery is unclear from the data, but that corruption is a contributing factor was frequently implied. This may manifest itself differently across public sectors. Poor banking services hamper business. Unregulated health sectors with blurred lines between public and private sectors make room for exorbitant fees in private clinics. Private schools targeting the children of internationals are expensive, but public schools are considered underdeveloped. All of these factors divert returnees’ resources away from economic investments.

Approximately one third of interviewees reported, mostly unprompted, that corruption affected their economic reintegration. Generally, those who elaborated on the economic impact of corruption on their post-return lives had often engaged in some entrepreneurial activity or searched for work. Those most likely to report this, based on analysis of their narratives and individual attributes, were under age 40, with high education (upper secondary or above), and had left during the 1990s, possibly because they had accumulated start-up capital or acquired marketable skills. Few deportees reported an economic impact. Those residing for over 15 years in Europe were somewhat likelier to report such an impact than those with shorter residence.

**Conclusion**

This article examined how corruption affects reintegration in terms of psychosocial and economic well-being, while also shedding light on an understudied phenomenon within return migration. Iraqi Kurdistan was booming during my fieldwork, with return migrants
lured back by the region’s economic growth, rapid urban development and relative security. Still, the returnees I interviewed lamented the inequitable and unchecked distribution of wealth and power, the lack of merit-based opportunities following development and the undermining of national and individual security by politicians perceived as being above the law.

In a Venn diagram of economy, development and security, endemic corruption would show up in the middle. Indeed, corruption cuts across that conceptual trinity so often invoked in the study of return and reintegration, and nuances the actual meaning of economic growth, development and security to ordinary people. Part of the reason for its cross-cutting effects and profound impact on the post-return lives of returnees of differing socio-economic status and migration trajectories, may be that corruption shapes their relationship with the Kurdish quasi-state. When endemic, corruption is integral to the broader political economy into which returnees reintegrate. It determines which of the state’s resources are available to them and under what conditions.

Endemic corruption is difficult to avoid. I would have been remiss to analyse my interviewees’ narratives on the challenges and opportunities of being back without considering the structuring impact of corruption on their reintegration. The practical implications of returning to a country where corruption is rampant are many. To set up a business, returnees may need to pay bribes. To acquire work, returnees may need to rely on relatives to pull strings, reversing the notion of non-migrants’ dependence on migrants. Such tendencies may not be readily observable to Western researchers whose everyday life is not governed by corruption and whose fieldworks rarely include attempts to set up a business or find a job. Another reason corruption is understudied in the context of return could be the relative paucity of background data on corruption. Finally, the concept of corruption comes with controversial normative connotations.

As demonstrated, attentiveness to the ways through which corruption affects reintegration can help one rethink the experience of return as well as the success criteria for return. In my analysis, economic reintegration does not necessarily come with human and financial capital if the requisite social capital is not in place. Inversely, there is potential for upwards social mobility for those who, as one interviewee put it, ‘play the game very well’. This leads to a second analytical point. It is the very rule of that game that prevent some from wanting to play it, showing the relevance of returnees’ imaginations of the state and hence their political identities.

Returnees rarely referred to corruption as a purely practical issue. For those who expressed frustration it appears to spring from an imagination of what the state ought to be like. Many studies of returnees cast the reintegration process as one of negotiating ambiguous and contested identities and relationships. Others emphasise the economic requirements and outcomes of return. This article has done both while also casting the returnee as a political being, whose experience of corruption upon return seems linked, to a point, to previous experience of a different social model abroad.

Notes
1. Thanks to the peer reviewer who raised this issue.
2. Thanks to the anonymous peer reviewers for comments on this point, adopted almost verbatim here.
5. From hereon, interviewees are given a descriptor in the format: [gender (M/F)] [age in 20-year intervals (20–39, 40–60)] [residence abroad in 5-year intervals (5–9, 10–14, … )].

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