

Iraqi Armenians after the toppling of Saddam Hussein: Emigration or Repatriation?

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This is the title of the MA dissertation presented by Anush Bezhanyan to the Graduate School of Political Science and International Affairs of the American University of Armenia (AUA). It is based on sources, observations and interviews with 30 Iraqi Armenian households settled in Armenia.

The study is aimed at aiding Armenian Government, Nongovernmental Organizations as well as private people and donors in directing their resources to fulfill the gaps existing in the policy towards Iraqi Armenians in their homeland. The faculty advisor is the political scientist Dr. Armen Ayyazyan.

The study finds that fear of war, lack of security and the current political situation of Iraq are the overriding reasons for Iraqi Armenians to leave Iraq and settle permanently in Armenia. It also finds that some Iraqi Armenians leave Armenia to another country for several motives: in the West they are provided with housing, monthly grant and pension for elderly and they benefit from free medical treatment. The reason that Armenia is their homeland dominates the motives of Iraqi Armenians to come to Armenia. Iraqi Armenians are restricted in moving to other countries than Syria, Jordan, Egypt and Armenia.

The study also states the influx of Iraqi Armenians to Armenia started in 2003, but took larger dimension in 2006 and 2007. According to the Migration Agency of the Ministry of Territorial Administration of Armenia 804 Iraqi Armenians were registered as temporary asylum seekers. Others (357 people) did not apply for temporary asylum seeker status and have gained special residency card between 2003 and 2007. A significant part of Iraqi Armenians want to gain dual citizenship. Almost all Iraqi Armenians reported that they were safe and secure in Armenia from the perspective of physical protection.

Regarding problems facing Iraqi Armenians in Armenia the study finds out that Iraqi Armenians reported problems at secondary schools and higher education establishments. Lack of jobs as well as normal working conditions and decent employment opportunities are the main source of disillusionment and frustration.

77 percent of the respondents claimed that Armenia has not any particular policy or comprehensive government program towards Iraqi Armenians, and does not take measures to satisfy their basic needs. As for the repatriation of Iraqi Armenians to Armenia 70 percent of the respondents expressed a thought that Armenian Government should make of it a priority issue to be solved. It was found that 97 percent of the respondents thought that the Armenian Government should encourage the full integration of Iraqi Armenians into Armenian society. The study offers several solutions that would contribute to ameliorate Iraqi Armenians life in Armenia. The respondents ordered these solutions as follows: Pension to elderly and handicapped, tax cut for small and medium businesses, Armenian language courses, trainings and degree programs, free land near Yerevan, houses for needy people, fine businesses for discrimination, free housing in other cities and towns of Armenia, free land for housing and agriculture in rural areas and free livelihood opportunities in Artsakh.

In short-run, the study recommends to provide Iraqi Armenians with the refugee status that would enable them to benefit from houses and pensions. It also recommends to raise the self-organization of Iraqi Armenians through creating effective advocacy body in the form of an NGO which would present their interests locally and internationally.

In long-run, the study recommends to promote the repatriation of Iraqi Armenians in collaboration with Armenian Central National Authority in Iraq and Diaspora, provide mechanisms easing to gain double

citizenship, design and carry out satisfactory housing and employment policies. It also recommends to grant Iraqi Armenian students the same educational rights granted to local Armenians, organize Armenian language free courses, as well as extracurricular classes easing education and integration. Also, it recommends to provide counseling on legal, business and healthcare issues, raise public awareness in Armenia about Iraqi Armenians within the context of Iraq's political developments, and create a positive understanding of repatriation through mass media.

The academic staff and the audience appreciated the study regarding it as the first of its kind conducted in Armenia.

Ara S. Ashjian

An Iraqi Armenian settled in

Yerevan, Armenia

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