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Keles, Janroj Yilmaz ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3525-9760> (2019) Return mobilities of highly skilled young people to a post-conflict region: the case of Kurdish-British to Kurdistan – Iraq. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* . pp. 1-21. ISSN 1369-183X [Article] (Published online first) (doi:10.1080/1369183X.2019.1600401)

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Return Mobilities of Highly Skilled Young People to a Post-Conflict Region

Abstract

Building upon insights from recent studies on the “return mobilities” of children of migrants to their parents’ country of origin, this paper focuses on the motives of highly skilled young people from the UK who migrate to their parental post-conflict region (Kurdistan-Iraq), an area that has experienced long-term conflict and profound economic and political instability. The existing studies on children of migrants’ return mobilities place more emphasis on cultural and economic considerations while paying little attention to the associated ideological and political elements. Based on interviews concerning 32 highly skilled young British-Kurdish people’s migration to Kurdistan-Iraq, this paper argues that the transnational mobilities of the 1.5 generation and second generation of refugee-diasporas are more driven by the collective trauma of their parents’ displacement, their feeling of expulsion and intergenerational articulation with an imagined homeland, than they are by economic considerations and/or nostalgia. The Kurdish political aspiration to develop Kurdish institutions and a national economy for a potential statehood in Northern Iraq has also created hope among young Kurdish people and influenced their motivations to “return”. In this context, this paper focuses on the political, ideological and emotional dimensions of return mobilities and draws attention to return mobilities among a new generation of refugees to their parental post-conflict homeland.

Keywords

Transnationalism, Return mobilities, Diaspora, 1.5 generation, Second generation, Root migration, Post-conflict homeland

Introduction

Recent years have seen an increase in transnational mobility and return migration (King and Christou 2010). While earlier studies on return migration primarily focused on economic aspects and viewed return migration as the result of migrants’ economic “failure” or “success” in the countries of settlement (Cassarino 2004), recent studies have started to challenge a solely economic reading of return migration, expanding the field to acknowledge the importance of multiple transnational engagements, cultural and emotional attachment to homeland, as well as lifestyle choices, as pull factors involved in return mobilities (Bolognani 2014; Benson and O’Reilly 2016; McMichael et al. 2017). Moreover, the phenomenon of return mobilities in the 1.5 generation (those who migrated abroad as a child), and the second generation (children of immigrant parents born in the country of settlement) has become a new research focus (Wessendorf 2007; Reynolds 2010; King and Christou 2010; Jain 2013; Bolognani 2014; Nunn et al. 2016; McMichael et al. 2017). These return mobilities are “largely as a result of their parents’ continued sense of belonging” (King et al. 2011, 484), which, when combined with childhood holidays in the homeland, instill a curiosity and longing for their roots which lead to a search for identity (Wessendorf 2007; King and Christou 2011). Therefore, this form of return

mobility between the countries of “root” and “routes”(Ley and Kobayashi 2005) has been viewed as “roots migration” (Wessendorf 2010,1084) or “ancestral return”(King and Christou 2011).

To date, however, research on the 1.5 and second generation has mainly covered return mobilities between politically and economically stable countries. The literature on labour migrants' return mobilities identifies three main pull factors. The first is an emotional attachment to the parental homeland, reproduced by the transnational upbringing and transmission of parents' myth of return (Wessendorf 2010; King et al.2011). Secondly, the memories of homeland created during regular visits to their parents' country of origin play an important role, as Wessendorf shows for Swiss-Italians (2010), Christou and King's (2010) argue for German-Greeks, and Reynolds' demonstrates for British-Caribbeans (2010), childhood holidays create a longing for a familiar home and idealized social relations. This “roots migration”(Wessendorf 2007,1084) differs from first-generation return migration because the children's transnational orientations are to a place they have never lived. Thirdly, this highly skilled second generation might use their human capital (coveted skills and qualifications from western countries) and social capital (transnational personal or professional ties) as an investment to enter the labour market in the parental homeland from a privileged position or discover new lifestyle opportunities (Reynolds 2010; Jain 2013; Ley and Kobayashi 2005; Bolognani 2014; Benson and O'Reilly 2016).

In contrast, there has been little research about the motivations of highly skilled 1.5 and second generations of conflict-generated refugee diasporas to relocate from Europe to their parents' economically and politically unstable homeland (Collyer et al. 2009). While Al-Ali et al. (2001) found that refugees from Bosnia and Eritrea returned to their homelands to participate in post-conflict reconstruction, they did not examine the involvement of children from refugee communities. A limited number of studies on the return mobilities of young people from refugee communities emphasises that this form of return mobilities are as a result of ongoing social relations of young people with their parental homeland (Haikkola 2011), an attempt to achieve “ethnic authenticity” (Barber, 2017) and negotiate their identity and belonging (Ruting 2012). Drawing on research on the transnational mobilities of young British-Kurdish people, my central question in this study was: what factors influence young people to migrate to their conflicted parental homeland? To answer this question, I examined the motives of 1.5 and

second-generation British-Kurdish professionals migrating from the UK to Kurdistan-Iraq since 2005.

Scholars have pointed out that children of migrants tend to engage less frequently and intensely than their parents with their ancestral homes and may not be influenced by their parental homeland values, culture and social practices (Kasinitz et al.2008). However, research on British-Kurdish young people appears to show that children from refugee-diasporas tend to be more interested in their ancestral homeland and engage in various transnational practices, having been raised in a homeland-oriented political environment (van Bruinessen 2000; Levitt 2009). I argue that these return mobilities are less driven by economic considerations or nostalgia than by the emotional, ideological and political elements associated with the collective trauma of their parents' displacement and their strong attachment to their imagined homeland. In addition, they are motivated by their aspirations to contribute to developing the institutions and economy needed for a potential statehood in their parental homeland. This paper focuses on the sociological and political dimensions of return mobilities among children of refugee-diasporas, exploring the interlocking processes between diasporic identity, political transnationalism and nation. By focusing on return mobilities to post-conflict regions, I am responding to the call from Bolognani (2014,36) to develop a theoretical concept "around other motivations behind return possibilities". This paper draws attention to emerging changes in identity politics and return mobilities among a new generation of refugee-diaspora. It, therefore, offers a conceptual framework and fresh insights into the political motives behind 'return' migration to a post-conflict region while also addressing the complexity and peculiarity of the Kurdistan-Iraqi case.

This paper focuses only on a minority; highly skilled people who have decided to migrate to their and/or their parents' homeland to be part of the ongoing national building project of the de facto Kurdish state in Northern Iraq. This relatively understudied form of return mobilities may constitute only a small proportion of 1.5 and second-generation displaced diasporic communities, but it helps to explain the linkages of transnationalism, nationalism, conflicted region and newly emerging migration trajectories. In this way, we are more able to understand the increase in return mobilities of young people to post-conflict countries (see Collyer et al.2009).

Methods

This paper draws on in-depth interviews with 32 British-Kurdish 1.5 and second-generation young people of diverse age 18-35 years, gender, income, political affiliation, education and occupation background in 2015-2016. Ten in-depth interviews (6 males, 4 female, 3 of them second generation) were conducted face-to-face in London and via Skype with young people in Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester and Portsmouth in the UK before their departure to Kurdistan, followed by another 22 interviews with young people (14 males, 8 females, 8 of them second generation) in Erbil and Suleymania in Kurdistan-Iraq (12 face-to-face and 10 via Skype). The participants in the UK were chosen because they had moved or were about to move to their parental homeland. Questions were asked about their plans to migrate to Kurdistan, their sense of ethnicity, homeland, transnational engagement, and the answers were compared with the motivations of those already in Kurdistan. The participants in Kurdistan were selected to examine not only the same political and emotional motivations of “returnees”, but also give some insight into the experiences and challenges faced in Kurdistan. Access to participants was gained through gatekeepers, community organisations, the academic community in Kurdistan, and “returnee” online and offline networks. Occupational background was as follows: two English language teachers, four university lecturers, four oil and civil engineers, a natural science researcher, three IT workers including a web-designer, two medical doctors, two UN senior protection officers, two government officers, two media workers, two young entrepreneurs, five students and three key informants with 1.5 generation background working for the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and Kurdish parties in the UK. Apart from the five university students, the remaining 27 participants were university-educated and had been well integrated into the UK labour market before their departure. While all of their parents had escaped the war and then experienced various immigration-related and other restrictions in the labour market in the UK, the 1.5 and second generation sample I interviewed, had benefited from their access to education and social mobility in their professional life in the UK, with some working in prestigious occupations.

The semi-structured life-story interviews focused on identity, ethnicity, home, homeland, politics of belonging, the impact of retold stories and memories of their parents, their childhood travels to Kurdistan, experience in the UK, diasporic-transnational engagement, ties and networks, motives and root of return mobilities and the post-return experience in their parental homeland. Research participants were fully informed about the purpose, methods and intended uses of the research for academic publication and procedures concerning confidentiality, the

use of pseudonyms and data anonymisation. The interviews lasted between one and three hours. They were audio-recorded, fully transcribed, anonymised and analysed using qualitative software (Nvivo). Analysis entailed dividing the raw data into three major themes identified from the research questions and the original literature review, each of which was further subdivided to allow for more nuanced analysis (see Figure 1).

From displacement to return mobilities: The Kurdish context

Forced migration from the disputed territory of Kurdistan (in the states of Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria) has caused a permanent crisis and instability (Author 2015) among marginalised Kurds and other ethno-religious groups in the region. Not only was their existence, identity and language denied, they also experienced multiple atrocities, discrimination and displacement, leading to a significant conflict-generated Kurdish diaspora in Europe (Author 2015). This means the majority of Kurds in Europe are refugees, contrasting with the motivations of labour migrants (Holgate et al.2012). This study focuses only on Kurds from Kurdistan-Iraq. The first wave of significant Kurdish migration from Iraq to the UK began in the early 1960s and increased after the 1970s. Further major flows of migration from Iraqi-Kurdistan to Europe increased in the 1980s and 1990s as a result of displacement caused by the suppression of Kurdish armed insurrections and mass killing.

Scholars of diaspora emphasise that although conflict-generated diasporas are scattered across the globe, they claim a legitimate political stake in the homeland through their transnationalized political practices (Author 2015) because they “feel a connection with a prior homeland” (Clifford 1997, 255) for historical, political and psychological reasons. Their ethnic collectivity is based on shared experiences of trauma and displacement from their ancestral homeland and the diasporic struggle to return to the homeland remains a profound political conviction that strengthens ethnic solidarity and collective identity (Author 2015). In this process, developments in the country of “root” play a central role in “both the construction and maintenance of diasporic national identity” (Burrell 2003,323). Diasporic identity, political positions and spatial relationships with the homeland are constantly being reconstructed (Cohen, 2008). Diasporic identity may become a “hybrid” identity (Anthias 1998). However, conflict-generated refugee-diasporas such as the Kurds preserve a distinctive diasporic identity over generations (Brubaker 2005). Therefore, diasporas mobilize for a homeland in various ways including contributing to the conflict/peace process (Black and Gent 2006), creating transnational networks and sending financial and political remittances (Rian˜o-Alcala´ and

Goldring 2014). This creates an intergenerational diasporic consciousness (Clifford 1994; Brubaker 2005) because “[e]ven if they [the children of migrants] rarely visit their ancestral homes or are not fluent in its language, they are often raised in settings that reference the homeland ideologically, materially and affectively each day” (Levitt 2009, 1231).

The Kurdish diaspora, like other conflict-generated diasporas (Kleist 2008), have become non-state political actors. As Van Bruinessen (2000, 1-2) states, “[t]he awareness of Kurdistan as a homeland, and of the Kurds as a distinct people, has often been strongest in those Kurds who lived elsewhere ... It was exile that transformed Kurdistan from a vaguely defined geographical entity into a political ideal”. Kurdish exile organisations such as student societies, local Kurdish associations, political parties and the KRG and most recently the Kurdish media, have all played a crucial role in this process. With the creation of the de facto Kurdish state in Kurdistan-Iraq in 1991 well-educated Kurdish activists and politicians started to return to the Kurdish region of Iraq. The collapse of Saddam Hussein’s regime, followed by the Iraqi constitutional recognition of the autonomous Kurdistan Region in 2005, also instigated a significant return mobility among the 1.5 and second generation young Kurds living in western countries. Yet this return mobility of British-Kurdish young people took place against the backdrop of serious political and economic instability in the region, such as the ongoing war with ISIS and political disputes between the KRG and the Iraqi Central Government over power-sharing, resources and territory. More recently the KRG also hosts 1,500,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees from Syria with very limited resources. Yet the number of 1.5 and second-generation return migrants has become significant enough to warrant this study. A key informant of the KRG in Erbil estimates the number of Kurdish “returnees” from Europe (including the first generation) at 30,000. Before their migration to Kurdistan, they obtain Iraqi citizenship. While British citizenship enable their transnational mobility, Iraqi citizenship allow them to settle in Kurdistan (cf. Nunn et al. 2016)

Conflict-Generated Refugee-Diasporas’ Specific Motivations for Return Mobilities

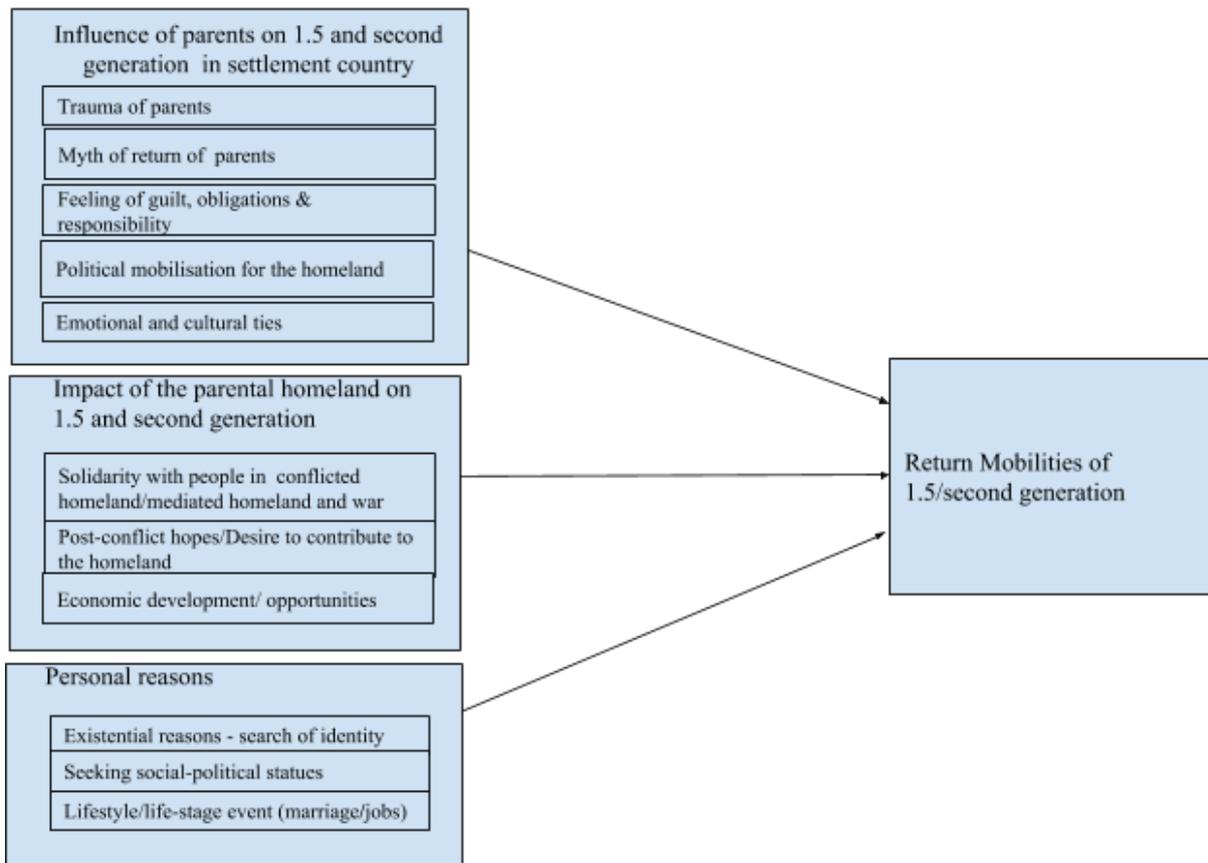
In this section, I identify three main interlocking factors that make up the main motivations for return mobilities of 1.5 and second generation UK Kurdish diaspora (see Figure 1).

First, the influence of their parents' personal experience including the impact of trauma, the myth of return and a sense of responsibility toward those who remained in the homeland.

Second, the impact of ongoing war and conflict, post-conflict hope, and a desire to contribute to economic development/opportunities.

Third, personal or existential reasons such as the search for ethnic and personal identity(ies), lifestyle/life-stage events (marriage, jobs) and the search for an alternative lifestyle.

Figure 1: Motivation for return mobilities to post-conflict regions



1. Influence of Parents on 1.5 and second generation in settlement countries

a. Addressing parental trauma

Studies on war, genocide and displacement indicate that traumatic experiences have long-term consequences including on “family members, who were not directly exposed to that event” (Lev-Wiesel 2007,76). While most studies explore the negative consequences of traumatic events on survivors and their offspring (George 2010; Daud et al.2005), other studies examine how collective trauma provides a foundation to create a sense of belonging to a community of scattered refugee families (Farwell 2001; Rousseau et al.2001; Eyerman 2004; Guribye 2011; Baldassar et al.2017). Through this collective trauma “people not only remember political and historical narratives but they also bring the past to bear on present agendas”(Author 2011,70) connecting people across generations and political movements (Rousseau et al.2011; Farwell 2001) because “this suffering is nurtured, borne, internalized and may even turn into a new form of resistance”(Rousseau et al.2001,160). Therefore, trauma plays a central role in shaping

identities, memories and transmitting resilience across generations (Farwell 2001; Rousseau et al.2001; Guribye 2011).

The young people I interviewed indicated that they became aware of their parents' trauma in their childhood. The brutality of events leading to their parents' departure left "indelible marks on their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways"(Alexander 2004,1). Soran, a 33-year-old software developer, escaped with his family to Iran as a three-year-old when Saddam Hussein's regime used chemical gas against the Kurds in 1988. He recalls:

"The gas attacks, killing of relatives and the children lost during the flight to Iran have always been dominating themes in our home... We came to the UK as a refugee family, but my parents suffered emotionally and mentally from being away from their home and family. My younger brother and I witnessed their pain, tears, helplessness, melancholia. We felt their suffering, and I would even say that we shared their suffering without experiencing what they experienced in Kurdistan. I assume because they are my parents and I shared the same home with them in London. We grew up with their memories of war, struggle, longing for relatives and for Kurdistan. We grew up with Kurdish lullabies which reflected their suffering...I don't know...I become very emotional when I talk about the injustices that they endured. Sometimes I still sing their sad lullabies unintentionally...However, I mixed Kurdish lullabies with hip-hop (laughing). (Soran,33, software developer, Kurdistan-Iraq)

These shared histories are transmitted to the second generation through stories, music, community activities and diasporic involvement in homeland politics, building a strong empathy and solidarity (Ramanathapillai 2006). As collective memories, they unify "the group through time and over space by providing a narrative frame, a collective story, which locates the individual and his and her biography within it"(Eyerman 2004,161–162). This is transmitted to the second generation because "even children who never return to their parents' ancestral homes are brought up in households where people, values, goods and claims from somewhere else are present on a daily basis"(Levitt and Glick-Schiller 2004,1017). For participants in this study, their parents' trauma, exile and values have been transmitted to them, in the form of Kurdish transnational political activism in support of their homeland (cf.Guribye 2011; Rousseau et al.2001; Farwell 2001).

Respondents stated how they developed a sense of ethnic belonging and attachment to their parent's homeland through their parents' trauma, exile, political engagements and diasporic Kurdish networks. Sanar,²⁴ developed strong emotional links to Kurdistan through his parents' engagement with Kurdish politics:

“My family came to the UK as refugees in 1991. I remember that we were always on the way to different Kurdish political and cultural events in London. Sometimes my father turned our home into a Kurdish community centre. People discussed endlessly the political situation in Kurdistan. I also became part of the conversation around Kurdistan over time. As a child, I was aware of my parents' struggle against Saddam's Baathist regime...but also of the beautiful nature and people of Kurdistan. (Sanar, male,²⁴, working for KRG in Erbil).

As Sanar and Soran's stories show, intergenerational conversations on loss, displacement, longing and the ongoing diasporic-political engagements of their parents become part of their own experience, contributing to their belief that their “homeland” needs their assistance and support (cf. Rousseau et al.2001; Farwell 2001). My findings concur with other studies on children of refugee-diasporas, who wish to be agents of change in a post-conflict context (Collyer et al.2009; Rian˜o-Alcala´ and Goldring 2014). All the young people interviewed for this study were involved in some degree in Kurdish diasporic associations and activities in the UK. The oppressive policies of Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq on the Kurds and the political changes in the region continue to influence the orientation of the Kurds including the second generation toward Kurdistan. Kurdistan has become a point of reference for many second generations Kurds in Europe and North America, expressed in forming many Kurdish student societies at the universities, organizing demonstrations, seminars, campaigns and cultural events, talking to media and their MPs on the human rights violations in Turkey, Syria and Iran and writing on the political situation in their homeland in various online and print media. In this sense, the notion of Kurdistan derives their identities of those who have never been in their parental homeland.

In such cases, Levitt (2009,1226) argues that “the lines between the home and the host country and between the first and the second generation blur, making them one interconnected social

experience.” Whether or not they had spent any of their childhood in Kurdistan, a shared intergenerational trauma motivated them to be part of the post-conflict construction of Kurdistan. Aras’s family escaped to Iran when the Iraqi forces attacked the Kurds in the Halabja region with chemical gas. He came to the UK as a nine-year-old:

I was always very active in Kurdish society in the UK when I was living there. I was involved in organising the Kurdish film festival, and other academic, political and cultural activities including campaigning to urge the British Government to recognise the Halabja massacre as genocide. I have always been so close to the Kurdish society in the UK. However, I really wanted to come back here to contribute to Kurdistan and to teach at a Kurdish university. That plan did not work, but nevertheless, I did manage to come back here...and to assist our authorities in the oil industry(Aras, male,30, scientist, works for a foreign oil company, Kurdistan).

The return mobilities to the ‘root’ that these young people have undergone is not so much based on an attachment to the locality and positive memories of a homeland, but rather a strong sense of extreme family trauma. This is one important way in which return mobilities of children of conflict-generated refugee-diasporas such as the Kurds differ from return mobilities among children of labour migrants.

b. Intergenerational ‘myth of return’

Studies of displaced diasporas highlight how refugee-diasporas live with the “myth of return”(Safran 1991; Zetter 1999), viewing the homeland as a “mythic place of desire”(Brah 1996,192). The “myth of return” refers to a limbo situation where the longing for homeland, memories and nostalgia drive to a romanticized and imaginary desire of returning home, however, the ongoing political and economic instability in the homeland and economic opportunities and better living condition in the country of settlement prevent to realize the dream of returning home (Zetter, 1999; Ruting 2012). Scholars point out that “most refugees continue to see their presence outside their country of origin as a temporary phase even after many years spent in exile”(Al-Rasheed 1994, 204). Zetter (1999,3) states that the notion of returning home has been “a dominant theme” for many refugees and diasporic communities, providing a useful connection for refugees’ conceptions of past, present and future.

The myth of return has been an important political discourse for Kurdish political movements and mobilisations in Europe, and it is deeply rooted in the political discourse of Kurdish political movements and the minds of those who were part of the political struggle in Kurdistan. In this sense, the ‘myth of return’ derives its references from the experiences of people prior to flight. It is based upon their memories and nostalgia for the past but also speaks of the present and holds aspirations for the future. In this context, this ‘myth of return’ retains a sense of desire for a homeland which was fled from in a time of war and political violence. However, it is also closely dependent on the involvement of refugees in their homeland struggle prior to their flight, the intensity of their ties to this homeland and political developments in the homeland (whether it be war or peace and economic and political stability). This means the oppressive policies of Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq towards the Kurds and the political change in the region continues to influence the orientation of Kurds including the second generation, towards Kurdistan.

Many people in the Kurdish diaspora will never return to Kurdistan, but the idea of return is a symbol of hope that ‘one day’ war and instability will come to an end in their homeland. The myth of return also helps to “sustain both their social cohesion and distinctiveness during exile” (Zetter 1999,5). In this context, the “myth of return” may become “an eschatological concept used to make life easier by means of a belief in an eventual resolution – a virtual utopia. The return is hoped for ‘at the end of days’ and ... ongoing support of the homeland and, a collective identity ... relationship”(Shuval 2000,8). However as Ruting (2012, 22) states, in this process, the parents’ idealized diasporic discourses of homeland instill in their children “a sense of exile and eventual return”. The settled Estonian-Australians diaspora case shows how second and third generation migrants are influenced by their parents’ continued longing for and seeking meaning and belonging in an ancestral homeland. The interviews with young Kurdish people showed that their search for rootedness is deeply derived from the notion of their parents’ ‘myth of return’ to the place which was a dominant theme throughout their childhood and youthhood. As Sanar states:

..., at that time, we were not able to go to Kurdistan, but I grew up with the idea that we have a homeland far away from London. We grew up in the hope that we will go back to Kurdistan one day.[...]I associated Kurdistan with[...]a holy place where there was a mixture of life, resistance, passion, paradise but also pain, fear and hell. The sad moments when my helpless parents sang in Kurdish, but at the same time their

happiness when dancing the incredibly complicated and enjoyable Kurdish dance to lively Kurdish music had a profound impact on my sister, my brother and me. So we grew up in such a way and waited for a “one day”. “One day” they returned to Kurdistan and asked me to join them. Their dream came true (Sanar, male,24, working for KRG in Erbil).

As mentioned above, the “dream of return” was a long project for many young people involved in the Kurdish transnational political movement in the diaspora. By being able to return to Kurdistan, they felt able to realise their dream. The ‘myth of return’ may also contribute to the establishment of transnational networks which provide potential resources, e.g. cultural and linguistic elements of ethnic identity (Portes 1998; Nunn et al.2016).

You don't choose your homeland. Although our brain and thinking are always here, our hearts are always in Kurdistan. There is not one Kurd who did not feel passionate or angered by ISIS when they attacked Sinjar [Yezide town] or when they attacked Kurdistan as a whole (Siran,23, male, student, UK).

I always consider Kurdistan as my home, and I always wanted to come back to my home where my parents grew up and were forced out from their home. I grew up with their painful longing for Kurdistan...Yes, of course, their painful longing has shaped our identity and our path to Kurdistan (Sara,28, female, business owner, Kurdistan-Iraq).

These testimonies, from a British-born Kurdish student and a business owner in Kurdistan respectively, give some idea of the intense emotional and political attachment to their parents’ homeland. Like Sara, many of participants in this study were deeply influenced by their families’ and communities’ narratives about the homeland. As Lorin points out, the narratives she heard from her family shaped her decision to move to Kurdistan, to continue to “participate in political development” that she and her family have already contributed to, from abroad.

I come from a background where my father has been very engaged in the political movement and the liberation movement in Kurdistan. He has been a Peshmerga [Kurdish fighter]. He has been one of the key figures in establishing a political party there. He has been writing history and political things about the situation there. When I grew up, we had those stories in the home here. So for me, it's very important to be

part of that. I have been engaged in Europe where I have been based, but I decided to go back to Kurdistan (Lorin, female,29,worked for a media company in Kurdistan, interviewed in London).

As Sanar and Lorin's stories show, Kurdish refugee-diasporas have established a "diaspora space"(Brah 1996) in their host countries where they are able to reproduce their ethnic identity, political consciousness and transnational practices, mobilising their resources for homeland politics (Gerharz 2010). A key characteristic of conflict-generated diasporas is their marked politicisation, mobilisation for their homeland and a strong desire to return. Al-Ali et al. (2001,617) found different typologies of transnationalism among refugees, where some play a crucial role in post-conflict reconstruction and "consolidate the process to which they have contributed from abroad". My study shows that the 1.5 and second generation of conflict-generated refugee diasporas have become a part of return mobilities through their involvement in the active reconstruction of their parental post-conflict homeland (cf Collyer et al.2009).

c. Responsibility towards those living in the homeland

Refugee-diasporas have a distinct feeling of responsibility towards those who stayed in the homeland (Eyerman 2004), sometimes tinged with feelings of guilt over having left their family and their homeland behind in a conflict (Van de Laar and de Neubourg 2006; Koinova 2011). . In this context, diasporic communities arise out of a sense of moral obligation and political aspiration affording them strong bonding and bridging ties of reciprocity as well as obligations, and expectations among themselves across the generations and spaces

For example, Lorin states that her family "has always encouraged" her to study because "Kurdistan needs educated people". The narrative around the notion of homeland creates the basis for generational consciousness, intra-communal solidarity, politicised-altruistic behaviours and diasporic philanthropy (Nielsen and Riddle 2010) that go on to influence the 1.5 and second generation' decision to 'return' and be part of the societal and political reconstruction of their or their parental homeland. The ongoing political development in the homeland has notably revived a sense of ethnic identity in many second-generation Kurdish young people, leading to a strong articulation, political identification and moral commitment across spaces. In this sense, the collective and generational consciousness as well as family expectation shape the transnational mobility of young people. Hawre, a 28 years old public servant in Kurdistan states that he did have "no intention to move to Kurdistan", but his family

expected that he should "come back" to continue the legacy of his father who was a high-rank politician and was killed in the 90s.

Parez, a second-generation lecturer at a Kurdish university points out that many highly skilled young people "come back" with a deep-seated compassion, patriotic spirit and altruistic desire at the beginning. Dara,³⁴ was one of them:

Various people have different motivations. In my case, I have a strong feeling of patriotism for Kurdistan. I felt it was my opportunity to return to Kurdistan to help my country...I left my well-paid job in the UK. Later, my wife, a medical doctor, joined me. We felt that we were obliged to fulfil our responsibility towards our people who had suffered so much during Saddam's regime (Dara, male,³⁴, Lecturer at a British University, re-returned to the UK).

Dara later re-migrated with his partner back to the UK stating it was because he felt that their skills were not appreciated by the Kurdish authorities and institutions.

Similarly, British-born Siran told how he felt responsible because "we have left Kurdish people alone under oppressive policies of the respective countries in Kurdistan". While he is involved in homeland politics in the diaspora, he wishes to "return to Kurdistan to participate in the political process" because:

Our fathers as Peshmerga gave everything for Kurdistan. I study at the University of Cambridge for a reason. My view is, it is a shame for me not to go out to Kurdistan and serve in a particular role. (Siran,²³,male,student,UK).

2. Impact of parental homeland on 1.5 and second generation

a. The desire to contribute to the homeland

Political developments in the homeland influence the identity formation of first and second generations in the diaspora (Van Bruinessen 2000). The UK diaspora organisations have strong transnational ties with political parties and networks in the homeland (Author 2015). Their ethnonational discourse serves as a political and cultural bonding mechanism, sustaining second-generation refugees' political, cultural and economic ties with their homeland (Author

2016). Most of these diaspora organisations are managed by generations born or educated in the UK, because of their English language skills, and their cultural and human capital.

In some cases, as Van Bruinessen (2000,3) points out, “[t]he so-called second generation, consisting of immigrant workers’ children who have grown up in Europe, tend to be much more interested in Kurdish identity and Kurdish politics than their parents were, many parents returned to their Kurdish roots under the influence of their children”. They also reproduce Kurdishness and Kurdish cultural and political aspects in their mainstream society through cultural activities. For example, Mehmet Aksoy, a second-generation Kurdish filmmaker and journalist, went to work for the press office of the Kurdish People's Protection Units in Rojava/Syria, where he was killed by ISIS. Like Mehmet, other second-generation Kurds from Europe joined various Kurdish political forces in the Middle East.

The post-conflict situation in Kurdistan-Iraq has influenced the return mobilities of the 1.5 and second generation. For example, the relative political stability from 2003 to 2014 in Kurdistan-Iraq created hope among the Kurdish diaspora. As Amedy,³¹ confirms, many European citizens with a Kurdish background moved to Kurdistan-Iraq:

Some people come here simply because they are tired of Europe... However, there are also people who are very academic, writers, teachers and engineers... They are also back here. And of course, young people who were born or are educated in Europe, they have joined the chain to come to Kurdistan in recent years (Amedy, male, 31, works for a bank in Kurdistan).

The “hope for an independent Kurdistan is so high” that they intend to be part of this “historical development” and the chance to contribute to the livelihood of “the people living in Kurdistan”. A deep-seated feeling of patriotism flows from these highly skilled young people.

I think, at least if I speak for myself, I've been interested in the development there and the events taking place. The Kurdish question so to speak and what we are all trying to strive for, which is an independent democratic Kurdistan free from oppression (Lorin, female, 29, works for a media company in Kurdistan).

I returned because I thought my skills will be useful for my country and people (Baran, male, 27, works for an oil company in Kurdistan).

While Portes (2001,187) argues that “immigrant transnationalism is not driven by ideological reasons but by the very logic of global capitalism” my research shows the return mobilities of children from refugee-diasporas may also be driven by diasporic political projects, alongside job opportunities. Many countries have established specific ministries or departments and developed different nationalistic and cultural programmes to communicate with and attract their diasporas and their descendants to ‘return’ to their ethnic homeland for both economic and ethnonational reasons (Tsuda 2010;Cohen 2009). Highly skilled and educated emigrants with high levels of human capital are particularly welcomed to contribute to the “national economy”(Cohen 2009,20) and fulfil any skills gap in the fields of science and technology. The KRG has neither inaugurated a Ministry of Diaspora Affairs nor developed a relevant state-sponsored repatriation program. Despite this, highly skilled British-Kurdish young people continue to leave the UK, a place of socio-economic wealth, security and job opportunities, to return to Kurdistan motivated by diasporic consciousness and political aspirations.

b. The economic rationale for return mobilities

In her research on return mobilities of second-generation Indian-Americans to India, Jain (2013) states that they migrate for economic/career reasons. While participants in this study also wanted to develop their career and improve their economic situation through their human and cultural capital, they also wanted to contribute to Kurdistan. In this sense, economic and cultural motivations are not independent from each other but closely intertwined. Thus, “returnees” view the fact that they are gaining qualifications not just in terms of individual economic or status opportunities, but as an opportunity to contribute to the reconstruction of their conflict-ridden homeland and therefore compensate for their parental generation’s trauma, and associated feelings of guilt and responsibility. For example, after his MA in international relations, Hawre migrated to Kurdistan to “be able to shape and influence policies and to be able to lead one day”. His family has used their networks to find a job in the public sector for him and encouraged him to migrate to Kurdistan. Unlike their parents who escaped war and poverty in the 1980s and 1990s, the second generation of young Kurdish people are generally well educated in the UK, but they still look for employment opportunities in a highly competitive and less remunerative job market in Kurdistan. While the employment opportunities and the economic rationale for return mobilities may not be very attractive, these

jobs make it possible for them to “come back to home”, as a key informant told me in Erbil, the capital city of the de facto Kurdish state.

Moreover, research has found that political instability and conflict hamper economic growth and cause an uncertain economic environment, leading to reduced employment opportunities and decreased social networks (Kondylis 2010). In June 2014, ISIS seized Mosul, Iraq’s third largest city. The fight against ISIS and the influx of refugees into Kurdistan-Iraq worsened the existing budget crisis and made it even more urgent for the KRG to secure reliable routes for oil exports and payments. Oil companies withdrew most expatriate staff. Kurdistan-Iraq experienced a severe economic crisis, and public sector workers were paid only partial salaries. However, these unfavourable economic and political conditions have not caused a massive re-migration of networked “returnees”. International companies have left the region but the majority of networked highly skilled young people have remained; according to Sangar, 32, it is because they consider Kurdistan-Iraq as their country which needs their “help and expertise during the difficult time”(Sangar,32, a UK-educated petroleum engineer, Dukan).

Similarly, Bahram, a 34-year-old British-educated medical doctor in Sulaymaniyah, Kurdistan, avows:

"Where should we go? This is our country, and we grew up with the idea to return to Kurdistan one day. We did, and it is our national responsibility and duty to stay here. The conflict will come to an end soon, and we should continue with our work".

3. Personal reasons

These categories include; existential reasons, seeking social and political status and life-stage events.

a. Existential Reasons: migration to “roots” in search of ethnic and personal identity

Many young people that were interviewed related they experienced their sense of ethnicity far away from their “roots”. They then travelled to Kurdistan to engage with stories of their parents’ history, meet relatives and develop connections. They returned to Kurdistan so they can experience the “real Kurdistan”, “feel at home” and build as well strength a sense of ethnic and transnational belonging. Kurdishness, therefore, is understood to only be available in their parental homeland. The search of ethnic identity is sometimes mixed with the search for a true self.. Scholars have described the journey of second generations as “roots tourism”(Basu 2004). However, as part of the “politics of belonging”(Yuval-Davis 2011), the return mobilities

for 1.5 and second generation could also be seen as “an emotional or ontological search for ‘home’ and identity”(Christou and King 2010,645). The multiple and overlapping personal reasons of return mobilities among the young people I interviewed fits what has been described elsewhere as an “existential return to the ancestral homeland” (Christou and King 2010,639). Lolan, an artist, working in Erbil explains the phenomena of existential return.

I personally know that a lot of Kurds who feel like they have an identity crisis in the UK. They feel at home in Kurdistan. I guess because, at the end of the day, you are always a foreigner in the UK but in Kurdistan, we are not foreigners but an integral part of the society.

The combination of exclusion in the UK and the desire to experience their ethnic identity in Kurdistan also contribute to their decisions to migrate to their parental homeland.

b. Seeking recognition and social status

The children who had family members that were involved with political parties or affiliated to political parties or politicians usually returned with the hope of getting a job in the public sector. The political activities of their parents already had a huge impact on their choice of study, occupation and networks. They then use their social capital (related to the struggle of their parents in the 1980s and 1990s) and their cultural capital (being educated in the UK) to build a future for themselves in Kurdistan. In this way, they are able to seek recognition and social status within Kurdish society. For example, a key informant in Erbil states that:

They have good connections with the political parties, and the parties want people who can be trusted by the parties to come back and get a position within the KRG. Of course, young people who have connections with the political parties, they have a good chance to get a job in Kurdistan (Hemresh, male, works for the KRG, Erbil).

Within this category, there are also young people acting as cultural importers who aim to make ‘a difference’ to Kurdistan through their creative and cultural engagement. Shwan is a technology engineer from London who migrated to Kurdistan to launch the first English language radio station in Kurdistan-Iraq. The target audience was returnees, young people and international workers. The content broadly supports a liberal, pluralist political agenda and provides a platform for discussion of gender issues including the situation of the LGBT people in Kurdistan. Christou and King (2010,639) would describe these kinds of return mobilities as “as a project of existential return”.

c. Life-stage events

Enacting key life-stage events such as marriage and setting up new businesses in Kurdistan are key mechanisms available to young Kurdish people who are “tired of superficial relations”, and the “workload” in the UK. The possibility of escape from the “hyper-capitalist” system and “the capitalist-driven lifestyles of the UK” (Saey and Skey 2016,66) seems to play a crucial role in return mobilities of the second generation. For example, a medical doctor stated that it was the heavy workload at UK hospitals that led him to migrate to Kurdistan where he can provide “good health care for the local people”, enjoy his life in “warm weather” in a “less stressful working life in Kurdistan” and where he can build “warm” social relations and enjoy “the Kurdish hospitality” and Kurdish way of life. These kinds of return mobilities have been described as a form of life-cycle migration and “lifestyle migration” (Bolognani 2014; Benson and O'Reilly 2016). Lifestyle migration is not always driven by economic or political factors, it is also influenced by the desire of the individuals to have an alternative lifestyle. For example, Sarbest, who has left his job at a UK bank and moved to Kurdistan, points out that his family “returned back to Kurdistan” and his parent would rather have him near them. In addition to this, he believes that “life is much harder in the UK than living here, but it is much more systematic, there are more opportunities if you work but if you would like to have a family and have a more relaxed life. I think Kurdistan can also be an ideal place”.

Return mobilities, generation, gender, age and belonging

Young European Kurds are not homogenous in their sense of belonging, occupation, education, socio-economic background, political affiliation and length of time spent in settlement countries. Moreover, factors such as class, gender, age, family, kinship, resources, networks, competencies, political connections etc., shape their return mobilities. Furthermore, it is important to note that some highly skilled Kurdish young people in the UK state they have no intention to “even visit” Kurdistan because of security reasons and “growing up with disturbing memories” of their parents. While return mobilities are influenced by parental generation trauma and the myth of return, these processes are always subject to negotiation of local realities in Kurdistan which contradict the diasporic imagination of homeland. These indicators then go on to inform their decision whether or not to migrate to Kurdistan.

Most of the 1.5 generation left Kurdistan during their preschool years, though four of them were between six to nine years old when they arrived in the UK. Their own, rather than parent related memories of birthplace, relatives and childhood shaped their imagination, identities and future. The process of integrating into the local community and accessing work was easier for them compared with second-generation migrants, as they were more familiar with the language, culture and customs. A majority of the 1.5-generation interviewees considered themselves “Kurdish” while the majority of second-generation respondents considered themselves “British-Kurdish”. However, overall their perception of relocation was still presented as a “return” to the homeland, although home and homeland for some second-generation interviewees was a distant homeland that they have identified within diaspora. This was clear from Roni’s statement that:

Kurdistan is not the place that my parents described. However, it is also not the place that you would run away from. I was not waiting for a fantasy land with so many conflicts here taking place...Personally, there are many difficulties that young people like me face here. However, before making my decision to move to Kurdistan, I thought of the fragile security situation, inefficient public infrastructures and health sector or uncertainties in the labour market and economic situation as well as cultural differences. As a western- born young person, I have a different lifestyle and living standard. I was aware of the problems that I may face here. So I made my choice consciously. However, I do not know how long I will stay here (Roni,21,male, works for a telecommunications company in Kurdistan).

The research of Ruting (2012) confirms that the ability to speak a parents’ language leads to stronger feelings of attachment to a parental homeland. Where this is not the case, a feeling of exclusion from national belonging may result. An overwhelming majority of female and 1.5 generation participants were able to speak Kurdish fluently. Some male second generation, particularly between 18-21, admitted to having some difficulties in speaking and writing Kurdish. These ‘returnees’ are often seen as outsiders(Ruting 2012), and their ethnic “authenticity” is questioned. Some second-generation and even 1.5-generation respondents stated that local people considered them to be “Europi” (Europeans) or “Xarici” (outsiders) and they were not accepted as “native” or “pure” Kurds because of their accent or unfamiliarity with the spoken language and local lifestyle. Roza, 24, a young second-generation woman, interviewed in Erbil, stated:

In England, I was constantly asked: "Where are you from? No, but, where are you really from?" I would then always say I am from Kurdistan even though that did not mean much to many of those asking and I'd have to explain where Kurdistan is. And here I am, finally in Kurdistan. The land I used to call my home and where now they constantly say: "You are not from here, are you?" (Roza, female, 24, works in the education sector in Kurdistan)

This notion of (un)belonging and disillusionment, despite identifying with and investing in a new place, leads to a double diasporic identification, with the UK as another homeland to which a significant number of British-Kurdish young people have re-returned and others may also re-return in the future (cf. McMichael et al. 2017). Studies indicate that return mobilities are a constant movement between the countries of routes and roots, and an integral part of transnational human mobility (Ley and Kobayashi 2005; Muggeridge and Doná 2006). Kurdish "returnees" also sustain their transnational networks and connections with UK-based friends and colleagues. The four young people interviewed (two male and two female) re-migrated to the UK because of the challenges and disappointments that they faced in Kurdistan. In this sense, "return migration" to Kurdistan is not the end of the migration process but a transnational and circular process based on transnational practices and consciousness (such as marriage, education, purchase of property, issues related to citizenship and business) between Kurdistan, the UK and elsewhere. The ties to their country of origin and country of residence have shaped their transnationalized lives while being a British citizen and having a British passport has empowered their return mobilities. Researching on refugee-background young people in Australia, Nunn et al. (2017, 390) points out that having citizenship of the country of residence contributes to the transnational mobility of young people with refugee background because it provides a sense of "security", "protection" and "the right to return" to the country of residence during their transnational mobility and return mobilities. This it is also clear from my study that a significant number of returnees have now decided to stay in Kurdistan to wait and see what will happen. In this process, the development of effective integration and inclusion policies could play a crucial role in their decision to stay.

Conclusion

The motives and roots of return mobilities of migrant children have become a salient subject of study in recent years. While previous research has mainly focused on the return mobilities

of children of labour migrants relocating from one safe and relatively stable country to another for nostalgic and career reasons, this paper has focused on the motivation of 1.5 and second generations from conflict-generated refugee-diasporas who move from relatively safe and socio-economically stable western countries to far less stable parental post-conflict homelands. This kind of contemporary and transnational phenomenon of return mobilities of 1.5 and second generations from conflict-generated refugee-diasporas has been largely ignored within migration studies.

By drawing together research insights and data on the transnational mobility of highly skilled British-Kurdish 1.5 and second-generation males and females from the UK to Kurdistan-Iraq, this paper has identified and categorized three main interlocking factors that motivate highly skilled/educated young people to migrate to their parental homeland, despite ongoing turbulent political situations (see Figure 1). The paper argues that the motivation of 1.5 and second generations from conflict-generated diasporas may be different from economically driven or “nostalgia” motivated return mobilities. A possible explanation for this might be motives formed by an intense ethnic and political-diasporic group consciousness based on their parents’ memories of trauma and loss, the myth of return, shared political and nationalistic aspirations for a homeland, affirmation of diasporic ethnic identity and a sense of belonging to their ancestral homeland (Rousseau et al.2001;Muggeridge and Doná 2006;McMichael et al.2017). Analysing the interviews, it is clear that these young people intend to be significant agents of change in a post-conflict context and contribute to the economic development of their parental post-conflict homeland.

By focusing on the return mobilities of second generation migrants from conflict-generated refugee-diasporas, this paper emphasises how collective diaspora identities, formed through parental trauma and myth of return are re-produced and transmitted across the generations, leading to transnational practices that articulate and mobilise the second generation towards the notion of homeland. In this context, the findings of this study make clear that the concept of diaspora and transnationalism not only overlap with each other but are intertwined with diasporic engagement and the to-and-fro of transnationalism of the second generation between the country of “root” and country of “routes”(Ley and Kobayashi 2005; Levitt 2009). In so doing the paper challenges the clear-cut distinctions between the concept of diaspora and transnationalism and shows how the diasporic articulation can be converted into a form of transnational capital, even in conflicted regions.

In the context of increasing and ongoing conflicts and uncertainties in many regions around the world, it is important that we understand the reasons that underlie transnational return mobilities of 1.5 and second-generation conflict-generated diasporas. This paper draws attention to emerging changes in identity politics and return mobilities among a new generation of refugee-diasporas to their, or their parental, post-conflict homeland. In this way, governments and agencies from the country of residence and country of origin can start to understand that there are a variety of factors that influence return mobilities that go beyond economic considerations, and that the politically influenced return mobilities of a group of highly skilled young people to a post-conflict region can play a crucial role in the transfer of vital skills and knowledge that can contribute to the peace-building process.

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