



Iraq-Syria Border Opens



IOM responds to the largest wave of refugees since the beginning of the conflict



Since 15 August 2013:

- Over 42,000 refugees have crossed Peshkhabour and Sehela borders into Iraqi Kurdistan
- IOM has transported approximately 38,000 of these refugees to camps and safe locations across Iraqi Kurdistan
- IOM has provided over 1,400 trips to safe locations across Iraqi Kurdistan
- IOM has also provided 200 tents for newly arriving refugees
- IOM provides non-food items (NFIs) such as fans and cooling systems to refugees in the camps
- At the border, IOM staff hands out cold water and food to the waiting refugees
- IOM staff continues to carry out needs assessments in and outside of the camps in order to help refugees to settle into their host communities
- 18 IOM encoders assist at the borders with registration as refugees continue to cross
- **The situation is ongoing, and figures change daily.**



“When you open a bottle of water, 10 hands reach for it and say ‘I want it’- I’ve never seen anything like it. I just thank God every minute that I have a home to go back to. They don’t know when they will have one.”

Rozhan Ahmed, IOM Iraq field staff, reflects on her past week at the Syrian border

When the Peshkhabour border opened at 2pm on Thursday, 15 August, the original intention was to host 2,000 Syrian refugees in Iraqi Kurdistan. Yet in just ten days, over 42,000 refugees have crossed the border. As the number continues to swell, this influx represents the single largest wave of refugees into Iraq since the Syrian conflict began.

IOM Iraq, in close coordination with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), UNHCR, and other international organisations, responded rapidly to receive the flood of refugees, working round the clock to alleviate immediate needs and facilitate safe movement into Iraqi Kurdistan.

Since May 2013, Syrian refugees have been waiting – hoping the border with Iraq would open. For the last three months, the border was closed to all except the most serious medical cases; only 400 people crossed into Iraqi Kurdistan during this period, and all were transported immediately to the nearest hospitals.

Yet the closed crossings did not deter others – scared with nowhere else to go – from fleeing to the Syrian side of the border in anticipation of its opening. Most travelled from their homes by bus to the town of Hasaka and then carried on by foot to the border. As the middle of August approached, the number of Syrians waiting at the border crossings swelled to approximately 7,000 people. Sick and hungry, some had spent three or four nights camped out at the border in hopes of crossing.

On the first day of the opening, nearly 5,000 Syrians poured into Iraqi Kurdistan through the Peshkhabour crossing. As word of the open border spread, those who had camped in nearby Hasaka, sleeping in the streets and taking shelter in local mosques, began the 5 km trek to the border.

Over the weekend and into the following week, the numbers continued to increase and Peshkhabour and Sehela crossings alternately remained open – with IOM Iraq staff stationed along every step of the process to ensure that the refugees arrived to locations in Iraqi Kurdistan safely and securely.





A crowd of Syrian Kurdish refugees waits at the Sehela Border Crossing on 19 August 2013.

A Border Honeymoon

Hozhan & Khunaf's story



Looking across the sea of refugees, IOM staff, and bags, “romantic” is not the first word that comes to mind to describe the border crossing. Yet newlyweds Hozhan and Khunaf, both 26 years old from Hasaka, prove that even in the midst of a refugee crisis, life and love still go on.

Hozhan: “You know, I just married my wife Khunaf three days ago when we heard the borders were opening here. We were happy in Syria before this war began; I was an English teacher and I had her - we’ve loved each other for a year and a half. But how could we get married in Syria? The security situation, the economic situation, everything is terrible. Robbers broke into our home; we could hardly afford the high prices of food and water; everything is going bad back there. We heard the border was opening and saw our chance at a good life. So, we finally got married and left for the crossing together. It hasn’t been easy, but we did this for us – I love her, make sure you write that down.”

Khunaf: “After waiting three days at the border, we’re happy to cross into Iraq and start our new life together. We waited and waited to get married, hoping the border would open. The situation is so bad in Hasaka; I was in my last year of law school in Syria but I had to stop. Even when we were travelling this morning to the border, there were bombings on the way, one at a hospital and one at a bus stop. Bombings! We left everything behind in Syria – his job, my school, our families – but at least we have hope here.”

Hozhan: “Safety, safety, safety. That’s all we want. There’s not even water in Syria – even just a bottle of water is 100,000 liras. The electricity is gone, and everyone around us has left. Our friends and neighbors dropped everything, newly built homes, cars, everything. They just took their kids and they left. Now we have done the same thing.”

A Warm Reception for the Weary

As Syrian refugees flee from their war-torn homeland to Iraqi Kurdistan, making it across the border is just the first step. Once on the Iraqi side, tired and hungry refugees must continue forward to find safe shelter for themselves and their families. All week IOM staff has welcomed these refugees on the Iraqi side of the border, at both the Sehela and Peshkhabour crossings, and continues to provide them transportation to safe locations.



The lines streaming across the border are long, with masses of people waiting in sweltering temperatures to cross to safety on the other side. At each of the crossings, IOM Iraq is supplying food, juice, and cold water for the refugees as they wait to load one of the hundreds of coach buses and mini buses provided by IOM each day.

On the first day of the border opening, with Domiz camp full and no new camps ready, IOM Iraq arranged for the refugees to be transported to schools and mosques in host communities. Through that first day, IOM Iraq transported 4,421 newly-arrived Syrian refugees to Gawer Gosik, Erbil and Aarbad District of Sulaymaniyah, where they waited in temporary shelters as new camps were erected in Erbil.

“There were so many people flooding across the border that our whole team was working non-stop. Even our drivers jumped to help, grabbing water and food to hand out to the refugees; they just picked up the rhythm and threw themselves into it. It’s amazing when the team works like this -- it’s like a beehive, everyone knows what to do and we work together to get it done.”

-Ibrahim Al Shammaa, IOM Dahuk field staff



A young refugee waits as his bus is being registered by IOM staff in Dahuk, 19 August 2013.

“To Protect My Future Child”

Wesal’s Story



It has been a long day for 20-year-old Wesal, who left her home in Qamishlu before 4:30am to travel to the Sehela border crossing with her husband, her brother-in-law, and his family. The journey is not easy on anyone, but Wesal is also pregnant with her first child. On the Iraqi side of the border, she rests and waits quietly for her family to finish registering. It has been a long day, and it is not over yet.

“This day feels like it has lasted forever. We walked for hours just to get here, and now we wait to move forward again. I’m tired, but what else could we have done? In Syria, we were afraid and we were hungry – there was no food, no electricity, no basic necessities. We had to leave to protect ourselves, and my future child. Now that we are here, I hope everything will be better.

I didn’t know there would be free buses at the border. I knew we’d need transportation from the border to Erbil, and I had been afraid we would have to pay ourselves, because we don’t have any money left. It’s been an exhausting journey just to get here, and I’m so happy to have IOM transportation the rest of the way. This day is almost over. I’m not sure what tomorrow holds for us, but I am just thankful to be here.”

Convoys to Kalak

From the border, IOM transports the Syrian refugees in buses organized as convoys - numbering as many as 30 at a time - to an IOM-staffed checkpoint in Kalak, 20 km outside of Erbil. In coordination with the KRG, IOM Iraq’s Rapid Assessment and Response Team (RART) has been working nearly 24 hour days to facilitate



this process: managing the constant stream of buses and counting the weary passengers, double checking the registration numbers from the border crossing.

“We have been working long into the night, all of us. From Thursday, I’ve maybe slept 10 hours,” Erbil RART team member Auday Alwee said while checking buses at 10pm on Monday, 19 August.

Since the borders opened on Thursday, IOM has facilitated 1,400 trips from the border to the Kalak checkpoint. At the checkpoint, refugees are given water and a break from travel after the nearly four-hour journey from the border. The buses, filled to capacity with refugees, continue from Kalak to Sulaymaniya or Erbil, where mosques and schools act as emergency shelters while camps are being set up.





IOM standardised tents being prepared in Baharka camp in Erbil governorate, 24 August 2013.

“There Was No Food for Us”

Mohammed’s Story



At Kalak checkpoint, 46-year old Mohammed stretches his legs after the four-hour bus ride from the border. Surrounded by his wife and five young children, Mohammed tells his story with a weary but persistent smile.

“My family and I arrived at the border last night from our home in Qamishlu. It was closed when we arrived, so we slept there and waited until it opened this morning, when we crossed over into Iraq. I’m so happy we made it here. Everything’s changed since the war; there hasn’t been work near our home in Syria since the beginning of the year. We are a family of seven - I can’t support us without work. Lately, most of the time we’ve been hungry.

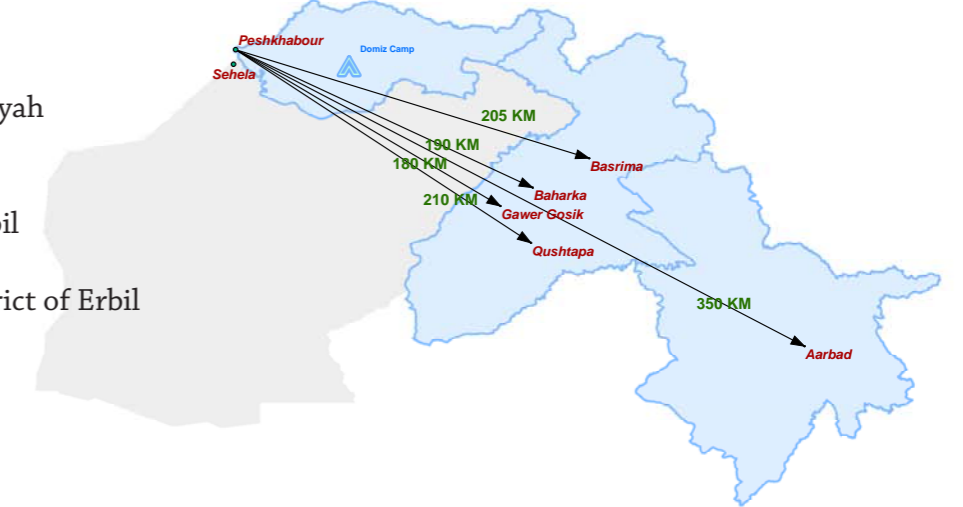
We walked for hours to get to the border, and it was so hot. You can’t imagine how difficult it was to get to the Syrian side - but once we crossed to the Iraqi side everything was good, from the food to the transportation to everyone organizing our arrival and providing assistance. The services from IOM were great too, and I thank God for that because we needed the help.

My hope is that Iraqi Kurdistan is a good place to raise my family, that there are good people here. So far, at least that seems true.”

The Final Stop

From the Kalak checkpoint, IOM RART members send the buses of refugees to one of six locations in Sulaymaniyah and Erbil based on communication with the KRG and UNHCR. Three temporary camps have been set up and emergency shelters have been made in mosques and schools to accommodate the staggering number of refugees. In each place, IOM staff is present. IOM has transported and continues to transport refugees to the following places in Iraqi Kurdistan:

- Aarbad District of Sulaymaniyah
- Gawer Gosik, Erbil
- Baharka Camp, Erbil
- Kawa Camp in Qushtapa, Erbil
- Qushtapa, Erbil
- Basrima Camp in Hariri District of Erbil



IOM staff receive the buses that come from Kalak and continue the process of registration. To address refugees’ immediate needs, IOM provides non-food items (NFIs) and, in coordination with UNHCR, equips tents with a fan and a cooling system that alleviates the harsh summer heat. IOM has now begun carrying out needs assessments in the camps and host communities to inform their assistance from the ground up.





An IOM staff member registers a bus of refugees during a stop in Dahuk, 19 August 2013.

Hope to Return Home

Dara & Misgheen's Story



The beige UNHCR tent in Baharka Camp isn't much, but Dara, his wife Misgheen, and their four young children are happy for even this temporary home after nearly a week on the move. The family left their home in Qamishlu in anticipation of the border opening, yet it was closed when they arrived. Dara and Misgheen kept hoping for some luck - hoping the border would open to lead them to safety and security at last.

Misgheen: "There was no security in Syria, nothing but danger and hardship. You would sleep and hear bullets; young children were being killed and women were being kidnapped by militias. Fear was all around us - it was suffocating us. Not only that, there were also shortages. Sometimes electricity would be cut off for 24 hours, and we couldn't even afford to buy water. We had to leave to find safety."

Dara: "It was a long road to get here. We waited and hoped against hope that the border would open. For two nights we slept there with our children, just waiting. Then the crossing opened on Thursday, our luck I guess. We had to run away, but we hope to return home one day when there is peace in Syria."

Misgheen: "When we crossed the border, it was so good to see all these people helping: giving food, giving items, taking us from one place to the other. The buses were crowded, but I didn't mind because, really, there was so much help. When I see people helping others like this - it's like seeing God at work."

Moving Forward

With funding from the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, IOM Iraq remains on site to assist local authorities and newly-arrived Syrians, providing transportation, water, and food at the border, as well as NFIs and shelter in the camps and host communities. Thanks to the tireless efforts of its staff, IOM has maintained constant assistance to these Syrian refugees.



To serve the increasing number of refugees, IOM, in coordination with UNHCR and the local authorities, has allocated 200 tents that will provide shelter for newly arrived Syrian refugees. Installation of 170 tents in Baharka camp began at 2:30 a.m. on 24 August, and was completed by 4:00 pm the same day. Thirty additional tents will be installed in another location. As part of IOM's emergency preparedness and response action plan for natural disasters and humanitarian crises, IOM maintains a centralized warehouse in Erbil stocked with tents, NFIs, and other supplies needed to respond rapidly to developing situations. Since 15 August, IOM has been able to immediately deliver aid supplies to vulnerable Syrians.

With an intricate prepositioning, logistics, and supply chain management system, IOM has been able to respond rapidly to the exponentially increasing needs of the growing refugee population.

With the border influx ongoing, Iraqi Kurdistan continues to receive a wave of refugees unprecedented since the start of the conflict. IOM Iraq stands ready to utilize its dedicated staff and streamlined logistics to provide assistance for vulnerable Syrian refugees. From the border to the checkpoint to the camp, IOM walks with these refugees throughout the whole process, helping them to continue moving forward.

"We don't know if and when the borders will close; we have no way of knowing. But as long as the borders are open and Syrian refugees continue to cross into Iraq, IOM will be here."

-Nazar Mousa, Head of IOM Dahuk Sub-Office

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A child in the newly created Baharka camp, 20 August 2013.