Alice Petren - 0:30

Hello and welcome to Delmi-podden, the Delmi-podcast. My name is Alice Petrén and in this episode we will delve into the topic of return and readmission of migrants. Why are migrants with no permission to stay in Sweden still in the country? How can we promote effective and sustainable return in humane forms? It is a hot topic and it keeps moving up on the political agenda compared to years ago. Only one out of five or maybe one out of four with the decision to leave the country does this. Migrants do return voluntarily, but others are deported. Why is the implementation of returns complicated? This pod will explore what mileage the Nordic countries can gain by cooperating more intensely in the field of returns and in the capacity building of the countries of origin. Mileage in terms of both humane, financial and organizational aspects, for example. There is already cross-border cooperation in place, but does it work? Can it be improved? Anna Hammarstedt and Iris Lutman, you are both research coordinators at DELMI. Most welcome to the pod.

Iris Luthman - 1:48

Thank you very much. Thank you.

Alice Petren - 1:50

You are also authors of the upcoming report, Nordic Cooperation Within Return and Readmission. Your work has been made possible thanks to EU funds. AMIF, the Fund for Asylum, Migration and Integration, a three-year project to improve migration management in member countries. So please introduce us to your fundings. Give us a brief so we can dive into details. The air is yours.

Iris Luthman - 2:18

Right. Thank you very much. So as you mentioned, that is our report focuses on Nordic cooperation on return and readmission. And this might seem like quite a niche topic, but it's actually a subject that has become increasingly relevant in recent years. And that is because return, post-2015 roughly speaking, is now a political priority, as you mentioned, in all the Nordic countries. And this reflects a broader shift in migration policy throughout the region, really, where we're seeing a growing emphasis on strengthening return mechanisms and ensuring better coordination across borders. And one kind of key indicator of this growing political emphasis within the Nordic context is a press release that was issued after a high-level meeting of the Nordic Joint Advisory Group on Refugee Policy, the NSHF. And this meeting took place in Copenhagen in October of 2023. And in this press release that was issued after the meeting, the five ministers of the Nordic countries, a responsible… for migration issues reaffirmed their commitment to closer collaboration on return and readmission, stating, and now I'm quoting directly from the press release, a strong commitment to strengthen and expand Nordic cooperation in the area of return.

Iris Luthman - 3:30

But despite this growing political focus, Nordic cooperation in this specific area when it comes to return and readmission is quite under-researched. So while there is quite a lot of research on migration and return policy from an EU perspective and a national perspective, relatively little is still known about how the Nordic countries cooperate when it comes to return and readmission. So our study set out to fill this gap by examining how and to what extent the Nordic countries cooperate on implementing return and readmission policy. And we were particularly interested in trying to map out and analyze the various networks, informal and formal, that currently exist and underpin Nordic cooperation in this area. And to do this, we performed interviews. I think we ended up with 36 or 37 interviews with key stakeholders in working on return and readmission in all the five Nordic countries. And we're not going to go into our findings in too much detail because that's not the subject of today's podcast.

Iris Luthman - 4:35

But I do want to bring out a few key findings that I think might still be of relevance to today's discussion. And the first key finding that I want to highlight is the fact that cooperation is largely driven by operational level actors. And that is to say civil servants and agency officials rather than sort of top down political instructions or mandates. And we found in the report that this bottom up approach, it's beneficial because it fosters flexibility and innovation, but it can also raise some questions about consistency and also accountability. And we might touch upon that later in the conversation today, I think. Another key finding that I wanted to highlight was the fact that shared administrative traditions and the sense of what we in the report call Nordic like -mindedness or Nordicity really plays a key role in facilitating cooperation. But in the field of return and readmission, many initiatives remain informal and ad hoc, and they rely quite heavily on personal networks. which we hypothesize in the report might limit their long-term sustainability and the longevity of the cooperation.

Anna Hammarstedt - 5:45

I can also say that, just as Iris was saying, the report shows that there's a prevalence of operational networks when it comes to Nordic cooperation. And we realized that when we were interviewing people for our report, a lot of people kept mentioning something called NORAQ. NORAQ  stands for Nordic Support on Return and Reintegration in Iraq. It's an intra-Nordic initiative, which includes Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Finland, in which each country finances their own capacity-building project within this broader platform called NORAQ. The projects are implemented on the ground in Iraq by the ICMPD, which stands for the International Center for Migration Policy Development. And why we and the people that we interviewed found this initiative so interesting was that it was often mentioned as successful in terms of avoiding project overlaps in the field. And it was also an innovative way for countries to work together, countries that have their own funding streams, to be able to finance something together.

Anna Hammarstedt - 6:48

Iris and I, together with our colleague Jenny, were also privileged enough to be able to go to a trip to the Kurdish region of Iraq, where we attended the opening of the Migrant Resource Center in Sulaymaniyah. And that's a center that was funded, or is funded currently, by Sweden and is part of this NORAQ platform, which we might touch upon later on.

Alice Petren - 7:08

Okay, so you are talking about an informal network working on a sort of operational pragmatic level. And of course, present here are people in this network who actually created this network. Kjell-Terje Torvik from the Swedish Migration Agency, Peter Krogh Sørensen from Denmark, and also on link from Oslo, we have Knut Holm at the Directorate of Immigration. I think I'm going to start with you, Kjell-Terje Torvik. What would you say are the benefits of this Nordic cooperation that you created?

Kjell-Terje Torvik - 7:45

Well, one of the key elements here is coordination. Because when we operate and do activities in a country like Iraq, it's not that we come to an empty table. Things have happened there for many years. But there has been a substantial lack of coordination between what has been done on the ground. And so I think that coordination is one of the most beneficial aspects on working together.

Alice Petren - 8:16

So you mean the Nordic countries were overlapping each other?

Kjell-Terje Torvik - 8:20

I would say that there are many actors in play in Iraq and from basically from governments and international organizations. We are in Iraq together with many others. And yeah, so I don't know if there was substantial overlapping between what we were doing, but if you look at the whole community in Iraq, there are overlaps, yes.

Alice Petren - 9:01

Let's talk about what exactly you're doing, because you are returning individuals. and you are there for capacity building. So can you please outline a bit what exactly is done?

Kjell-Terje Torvik - 9:16

Well, the long-term objective is, of course, we want to see a stronger ownership of this process by the Iraqi government, and we want to support them in the building of their own capacity, because in some aspect the process is also managed by international. organizations also from the EU side and we really want the Iraqi government and authorities to have to be present in working with their own citizens on the ground in Iraq.

Alice Petren - 9:51

When we talk about return how many people individuals are we talking about?

Kjell-Terje Torvik - 9:56

Well you know it depends because this is a very relevant and very If we can ask questions, I would say that the returns from Europe is low compared to the returns and migration in the region. This we can see everywhere that when we talk about returns, we often talk about it from EU or European perspective. And those returns are for us very complicated. Greater volume is not from Europe, it's from within the region.

Alice Petren - 10:34

Which means that the capacity building part in the project is maybe more important than the returns from Sweden, or not more important, but it's very important also that it's done actually.

Kjell-Terje Torvik - 10:46

Returns from Sweden is of course on the table, but if we were supposed to go to Iraq and say that, hey, we want to isolate, this is only the thing that you will be doing. You will be only assisting Sweden when it comes to this area. That is, of course, very difficult to actually make progress. So, of course, this is a way for us to meet that, okay, we have our priorities, we have our concerns, but we will, of course, listen to your perspective in this.

Alice Petren - 11:26

What would you say are the advantages to do it not on a national level but on a Nordic level and not on a European level? Because now we're talking about Nordic cooperation and in between the different levels you could say.

Kjell-Terje Torvik - 11:40

I would say that we share Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway working on a turn we share a great deal of the same challenges and same opportunities as well. And also that, as you were saying before, there is this Nordic like-mindedness. So we don't have any issues with being transparent. We don't put prestige in what we are doing. So we can share easily information between each other in the sense also that our governments and our bureaucracy is very, very into spending money in effective way because the money is taxpayers. That might be kind of stating the obvious but If you scratch the surface, it's not. So I think that we can enter a room and we can almost read each other's body language and we can almost immediately say, is this going in the right direction or wrong direction? But there is less prestige and this is very important to state that in NORAQ we do things with the NORAQ flag. So any achievements or any challenges, we face them. together.

Alice Petren - 13:06

What would you say are the advantages of NORAQ?

Knut Holm - 13:11

Good morning Alice, good morning Terje and Peter and colleagues from DELMI. Thank you very much for being present at this podcast. I look very much forward to that. The advantages in addition to what Traje already has underlined I believe is one thing I would like to stress is that To go into a cooperation in Iraq is a field of a lot of complexities.

Knut Holm - 13:44

To have solely a bilateral approach means that you are more vulnerable for all the changes that take place in an environment like Iraq. Being a Nordic cooperation, which NORAQ is, makes us stronger in the sense that we are able to communicate with the different partners in Iraq, both in the regional level, at Kurdish level, and also at the federal level in Baghdad, with more or less one voice. And I think that gives us a benefit. Doing capacity building and doing training and doing the activities we do, the awareness campaigns and other elements of our programs, means that you come into situational challenges. And in these situational challenges we are then able to to be together in communicating with our key partners in Iraq. A concrete example could be that in the project implementation we could have an issue with reaching some of the targets, some of the objectives. Let's say for example that we believe that there is a campaign, an awareness campaign that needs to be taking place in a specific location.

Knut Holm - 15:11

Then in the regular meetings we have our partners that is something we can highlight all of us in the meeting and it's a different doing that from a nordic perspective a joint perspective than doing doing it bilaterally

Alice Petren - 15:28

Peter Krogh Sørensen from Denmark what is your perspective?

Peter Krogh Sørensen - 15:34

Yeah, if I should be very down to the ground, then you can say that none of the Nordic countries, they have the funding available to really have a countrywide program in Iraq. So having a corporation we are able to, as long as we are moving in the same direction, then we are able to actually reach out to much more of the beneficiaries by doing programming together. So if you take a very practical example, then you can say that Denmark has funded the Migrant Resource Center in Baghdad for several years. But the needs were much greater. than just in that area. So then suddenly we, via this cooperation here, are able to add Norway so that they are funding the MRC in Erbil, and Sweden is coming in funding the Migrant Resource Center in Sulaymaniyya. So this is a very practical example of why this is actually so effective when we are able to work together.

Alice Petren - 16:36

Some money would come from international aid money, some would come from Ministry of Justice, some money would come from other sources. This mixture, it doesn't interfere with the work on the ground. It doesn't, no? You are shaking your head. The pod listeners cannot hear you shaking your head, so no.

Peter Krogh Sørensen - 16:55

No, but you can say very clearly no, because again, as I said, if you have the platform in place and we have this increased, very, very close cooperation among the different partners, then every time there is an issue, we are able to discuss it, we are able to find solutions, and that's the way that we have been operating now for more than two years under this cooperation here.

Knut Holm - 17:14

I also like to just to fill in that I don't see that as a challenge in the current cooperation we have. What we have stressed in our cooperation platform is that there needs to be funding in the project, meaning that you cannot be part of NORAQ without having funding any programs in Iraq. That is a key condition for being part of NORAQ. So outside of that, I don't see that we have experienced a challenge in having separate fundings from the different countries.

Alice Petren - 17:47

Iris Luthman, Anna Hammarstedt, writing this report in your interviews, was this brought up as a problem or as a difficulty or was it just ignored actually?

Anna Hammarstedt - 18:00

When it was brought up, it was brought up as a success story, that this is finally a way to be able to coordinate different funding streams. So it was only brought up in positive terms, I'd say, by those that we interviewed. But I should also add that when we were in the Kurdish region of Iraq, the purpose of that trip was also to speak to national authorities on the ground there to see how they interpreted NORAQ. And I can just say that mainly the response that we got was that Nurak really fills the gap when it comes to coordinating the projects on the ground. So it was seen as positive as well.

Alice Petren - 18:40

For this part, we have also talked to the responsible counterpart in Baghdad, Fatimah Jarkas, who is the head of the office at the International Center for Migration Policy Development. This abbreviation you are using, ICMPD. It's not always easy on the radio to listen to abbreviations like that. She underlines that the Iraqi government is very open-minded to projects and to collaborate in the migration field. We can hear what she's saying.

Fatimah Jarkas - 19:09

Actually, NORAQ cooperation comes as a must or a need from the ground. We keep mentioning for our national counterparts from time to time that there is a lack of cooperation in the national level, but step by step and when we dig more in the international work, we find out also that there is a lack of coordination on the international level. Step by step, few countries, including Nordic countries, start to really see the needs of joint framework to coordinate the world in order not to do an overlap and avoid any kind of miscommunication between different partners. And it's really starting to become bigger because all of those now international counterparts start to feel the need for more communication mechanisms.

Alice Petren - 20:12

NORAQ is one example, a model to work together, and it's in Iraq. Could it be in other countries, like, for example, Somalia? What do you say, Knut Holm? Could it be, for example, in Somalia?

Knut Holm - 20:28

I think that Somalia could be a good example to see if there is any scope for replicating some of the key success elements from NORAQ in Iraq because of two reasons. One reason is that return to Somalia is a priority for all the four Nordic countries involved in NORAQ. The second reason is that return is something also in Somalia clearly in need of coordination in communicating with the different agencies, the different ministry and different partners on the ground in Somalia. So yes, there is a need. On that note, I would also say that at the Nordic level there has been I group, coordinating group with the different agencies both at ministerial level and at directorate level to coordinate the approach towards Somalia. Not at the level of NORAQ, not in terms of having joint programming, but in terms of sharing information on what activities are taking place in the different countries.

Alice Petren - 21:46

Norway has a very long history with Somalia. You've been doing this for quite a while. Are you open to share your experiences, your contacts? Because that can also be delicate to share important contacts.

Knut Holm - 21:59

We have a cooperation with Somalia going back 12 years, both with different agencies in Somalia. We communicated very much with some countries in the start and we are open to share both what we are doing on the ground in Somalia, and we are sharing the content of the program and projects we are having in Somalia and we are in close cooperation for the time being with the Nordic partners. And we are, I know that some of the other Nordic partners have just been to Kenya and Somalia lately and are going back again the coming weeks. So this is something we are looking into for the time being.

Alice Petren - 22:50

Kjell-Terje Torvik from the Swedish Migration Agency. What do you say? Are you interested in developing this in Somalia? And maybe you can name other countries where you would like to replicate this NORAQ experience?

Kjell-Terje Torvik - 23:04

Well, yes. I don't think that the… The limits for the North Iraqis in Iraq, of course Somalia as Knut mentioned, countries like Afghanistan, you know, I think that when you are having activities or any initiatives in countries on that level. so to speak, where you need to be supported by friends and colleagues in logistics, in networks and in content. There would be for sure interest in that, but I would also like to stress that we are still very much in the beginning in Iraq when it comes to this platform. We had the inauguration in June last year. And this is of course a long-term horizon. I think that what we see happening in Iraq, I think that it will be a great way to see what we can replicate in other countries as well. But as a foundation, yes.

Alice Petren - 24:39

Let's get into that, how NORAQ exactly is working. But let's get back to NORAQ, because it is a platform. And it was created more or less by you guys, actually. And it's very much informal, or it was very informal, although you're talking about inauguration. What can be said? Because I think in the report that you are, Iris and Anna, you are stressing that it's on an agency-to-agency level. Anna, how much that you would like to comment on this?

Anna Hammarstedt - 25:10

Yeah, I would just like to clarify. I think in the report, when we speak about NORAQ, we're talking about it as being kind of birthed within an informal culture, but is now formalized. Like I would classify NORAQ as a formalized platform or network, but that, and correct me if I'm wrong, it feels strange retelling this to both of you who are part of finding it, but it feels like it, you were all in contact with each other through different return and readmission networks before, and together you then decided to start NORAQ. So, yeah, I would classify it as a formalized platform that has come out of a sort of informalized network.

Peter Krogh Sørensen - 25:53

I think you're touching on something very, very important here, and that is that, you know, everyone is talking about cooperation. But cooperation is not something that is just coming by itself. Cooperation is something that needs to be a lot of coincidences available or happening at the same time. And then someone will need to pick up those opportunities that are there and then move them forward. So if we don't have someone here that will really be able to move this corporation forward, then it could stop in that sense. Because again, as you also referred to in the introduction also, that for many, many years, the Nordic high-level corporation on refugee issues, that has been always one part of their statement. And they have met four times a year for many, many years. They said, we would like to increase this cooperation, but it has not happened. So again, on the political level, you can sit and say, we would like to see, but there is a huge gap from there and then to what's actually happening on the ground.

Peter Krogh Sørensen - 26:50

So again, if those are not being picked up by someone that will get it to move, then it will not continue to move. And that is the main problem here, that for the moment, again, as I said, everyone is talking about cooperation, but no one really understands how complicated it is. And also that actually it requires some dedicated funding, because you need to have dedicated human resources available in order to get it to move. And that means also that you need funding for that. And that is not happening. It's not happening at our level. It's not happening at the EU level, but everyone is sitting talking about the need for cooperation.

Knut Holm - 27:27

I just also wanted to stress that I think it's not a coincidence that the cooperation takes place now. Because in many ways, the Nordic countries have a relatively, as we touched upon earlier, similar response and similar setup. and I think that is important in our cooperation. The second thing I believe and which has been touched on by both Terje and Peter is that, yes, clearly we need to make this work also within our own systems. In Norway we have an embassy in Amman with an immigration liaison officer that has a clear role in following up on the project activities in Iraq. He's covering Iraq. Also the development side at the embassy is involved in the project, and also the Ministry of Justice in Norway have an ownership to the project. So I think both on the Norwegian, Swedish, Danish and Finnish side, we need to be good in implementing this program and to inform about it and include also our other partners in our national governments to have a benefit from the NORAQ cooperation in the long term.

Alice Petren - 28:55

Are you talking mostly about the capacity building side and how the Iraqis should be more experienced or handle their management better on their side? Because another part is also the return of individuals. And I think there is little mentioned here about the return and how the cooperation is going on that and what is actually meant with being effective and sustainable and humane in that sense. Kjell-Terje, what do you say about that?

Kjell-Terje Torvik - 29:30

Well, one thing that is striking when you go to Iraq is that there are many, quite many opportunities for migrants, for returnees, but the opportunities are not too well known. And this we have been discussing that over the years there tends to be quite a confusion amongst returnees and migrants and so on. And some of these confusion are being rooted in Europe. So we have our homework to do on our side, but there also needs to be things in place in Iraq. And one of the starting points here is to actually have a capacity within the government to actually deal with their own citizens, because this is an important topic here because we are doing government to government and the government should be responsible and take responsibility for their own citizens. So I think that from our side, also from the Swedish side, we are looking at returns from Sweden strictly from the point of view of Frontex. Because Frontex is the structure that we are using when we are returning people to Iraq. But landing on the airport in Baghdad or in Erbil or in Sulaymaniyah, you will be facing a reality that are consisting of more than just Frontex and their service partner.

Kjell-Terje Torvik - 31:08

So again, the key here is not only for coordination within the Nordic Group, but also on the ground in Iraq with the different stakeholders working on returns. And I think that as long as there is this confusion, the potential on the reintegration service will never be fulfilled.

Alice Petren - 31:31

And there is another thing adding to this, that Kurdistan will not receive their citizens unless they come voluntarily. So they go to Baghdad first. And as someone of you told me, that's like 40% are actually going to Kurdistan and 60% staying in the Baghdad area or in other areas in Iraq. So quite a lot of people you have to deal with are deported, not voluntarily. What does that mean for your cooperation? Peter, maybe you would add something on that.

Peter Krogh Sørensen - 32:07

First of all, all the Nordic countries, we encourage a voluntary return. But there will always be people there that are choosing not to return. So again, going back to what Terje is saying also, what is very important for us is that the programs that we are implementing is also kicking in immediately after a person has been told that they are not allowed to stay legally in our countries, so that we can make them aware of what is actually now available and what is the situation in their own country, so that we are minimizing this amount of people that are returned with force. So at the same time, I would say that actually when I look at it, it doesn't matter if we are doing return directly to the northern part of Iraq or not. We are dealing with the central government, and that means that that's where we get our travel documents from. And all return are going to Baghdad. And then after that, they are being distributed to the different regions. where they actually come from in Iraq. So again, that's a situation.

Peter Krogh Sørensen - 33:08

And if they are eligible, they will all receive the different kind of support. They are being made available from the different countries. So again, the packets that they are eligible to are different from the one that are being provided by Norway, Sweden, and Finland, and Denmark. So again, this is where, you know, when we have individual programs also, if it's a person, being returned from Denmark, then that one is eligible for the package that is coming from Denmark. If it's one from Sweden, then that one is eligible for the package coming from Sweden and so on and so on. But we don't need to do return directly to Erbil, for instance.

Alice Petren - 33:47

The recommendations of the authors of this report, Iris and Anna, you are recommending that this cooperation should be more structures and that should be goals on a political level. Strategy paper in the budgets or what exactly are you proposing?

Iris Luthman - 34:07

Well, essentially that I think Sweden recently actually adopted a new strategy for global development cooperation on migration return and voluntary return. And this strategy states actually that activities should, to the extent possible, be carried out in collaboration with the Nordic countries, not least strengthen local capacity and infrastructure for return, such as return centers. So basically what's going on in Iraq within the platform, within the NORAQ platform. But this is a Swedish strategy. And from what we could see during the empirical phase of our study, similar statements are not found in the other Nordic development strategies. What we want to see or what we recommend is that this is incorporated into, as you said, strategies and budget propositions within all the Nordic countries. And this obviously needs to be done collectively and there needs to be a conversation about what. this should look like, what are the aims and goals and what are the sort of normative values underpinning.

Iris Luthman - 35:06

We've talked about humanity and effectiveness being similar and there seems to be an understanding here, a Nordic understanding of that they are the same. But I think, or rethink, that this needs to be made explicit. There needs to be a normative aim which is then put into political practice.

Alice Petren - 35:21

Another recommendation from the authors, Anna and Iris, is that NGOs should be included, in particular, as far as I understand it, in the sort of planning part in the beginning. When talking about Nordic cooperation in general, the authors are recommending that NGOs should be included. included more than presently because apparently in NORAQ they are included, but you suggest more inclusion of NGOs. What would you say about that, Peter? Is that a good thing?

Peter Krogh Sørensen - 35:53

It's definitely a good thing because again, what we need to ensure is that whenever we are developing programs that they are also having or they are based on the reality on the ground. So NGOs are normally those people that have a lot of people distributed in the different countries or regions. very important that we get whatever information that they have brought up so that it's part of the development of the action that we are involved in.

Alice Petren - 36:20

Anna and Iris, is this something that you want to add?

Anna Hammarstedt - 36:24

No, I can just agree with what's been said today. I feel like NORAQ is obviously an example of how on an operational level actors can come together due to like-mindedness, ways of cooperating can come together on the ground. But I would also want to stress again with our policy recommendation about having a political goal when it comes to Nordic cooperation. This is also to avoid cooperation being used as a buzzword without real meaning or weight behind it. The reality of the situation is that Some of the Nordic countries are EU member states, others are affiliated in different ways. So if there is going to be a larger political cooperation, then this really has to be defined. And like you said, if words such as effective, sustainable, humane are to be used, then they have to be unpacked so that there's a common understanding of what those terms mean, so that there can also be an evaluation process. And that evaluation process can then involve NGOs and other actors.

Alice Petren - 37:24

Okay, that's going to be the final words. Thank you so much Kjell-Terje Torvik, Peter Krogh Sørensen and Knut Holm in Oslo for taking part in this podcast. And of course, thanks to Anna Hammarstedt and Iris Luthman, the authors behind this report. The title of the report is Nordic Cooperation Within Return and Readmission. And you listening to this podcast, you who are interested in return and readmission, do visit our website, Delmis website. You can find other reports and other podcasts on this topic. Bye bye. Hej då.