

In Iraq, Brazilians Find a Friendly Eager to Buy Kurdistan

Contributed by Alexandre Rocha
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The secretary general of the Arab Brazilian Chamber of Commerce, Michel Alaby, visited the cities of Erbil and Sulaimaniyah, last month, in Northern Iraq, a region known as Kurdistan. There he saw another face of country, much different from the violent scenario shown on a near-daily basis in the media.

"It is a relatively calm, safe region, and the people are avid to consume," said Alaby, who went there to attend the multisectoral trade fair DBX Trade Show, in Sulaimaniyah, which had the reconstruction of Iraq as its theme.

The fair had a stand of the Arab Brazilian Chamber and of the Brazilian embassy to the country. Alaby travelled a lot alongside the Brazilian ambassador to Iraq, Bernardo de Azevedo Brito.

Contrary to what takes place in other regions of Iraq, the presence of the United States Armed Forces is not so strong. Still, according to Alaby, the sentiment among the population is that the North Americans have already spent enough time in the country. What the people of Kurdistan want is freedom to get on with their lives.

The main source of income in the region, as well as in the rest of Iraq, is oil. During the decades of Saddam Hussein's regime, Kurdistan was left to its own devices. Currently, part of revenues obtained from the commodity by the central government, in Baghdad, is transferred to Kurdistan, which has been investing most of the money on infrastructure.

One of the problems is shortage of electric power supply, which is interrupted many times a day, thus leading many people to own generators.

Most of the population is poor, but there is potential for development. Living under a certain political and economic autonomy, local businessmen seek to make direct contact with suppliers and investors from other countries so as to close deals while avoiding middlemen.

The province touches borders with Syria, Turkey and Iran, therefore there is strong presence of Turkish and Iranian companies, in addition to Chinese and German ones.

Some Brazilian products are already present in the local market, the most common being those of food company Sadia, but, according to Alaby, there is still little awareness of first-class goods from Brazil, and many deals are closed by means of intermediaries.

Although there are other relevant economic activities, such as wheat culture, sheep farming, tapestry weaving and the cement industry, the Iraqi Kurdistan needs to import the most varied types of products, from building materials to processed foodstuffs.

Besides the consumer market, there is potential for developing tourism. The region features beautiful landscapes, well-defined seasons - during Alaby's trip, for example, the weather was already cold - and roughly 1,300 archaeological sites of the many civilizations that settled there since the Ancient Mesopotamians.

Due to the fact that the region is located inside an Arab country, but lies at an intersection of territories that harbour other ethnicities, the local culture is a combination of many different cultures.

The Kurdish is a language of Indo-European origin, with traces of Turkish, Farsi and Arabic; the music and cuisine have strong Arab influence, the most common dishes being Koftas and Kebabs made of chicken and lamb meat. The majority of the population is Muslim, but there are Christian communities as well.

Another feature of the population is its hospitality. "If you say that you are Brazilian, well, they are likely to throw a party," said Alaby, who highlighted the agreeability of the population several times.

During the visits that he made to authorities and businessmen, he noticed a strong desire to do business with Brazil. The Kurdistan Chamber of Commerce, for example, wants to sign a cooperation agreement with the Arab Brazilian Chamber so as to encourage the promotion of business missions, and the Sulaimaniyah Chamber of Commerce wants to bring a delegation to Brazil in order to get to know the country and seek business opportunities.

The cities of Erbil and Sulaimaniyah are large: the former has approximately 1.1 million inhabitants and the latter, 800,000. Despite their size and the poverty, Alaby said that the cities are clean and organized.

In trade, he noticed the presence of Turkish supermarket chain and of small retailers, as well as souks, Arab-style markets that are located in narrow streets and sell a bit of everything.

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