

BAGHDAD - Compared to many Iraqis, Mohammed Falah concedes that his life isn't so bad. He has a career, a home.

But nonetheless, the 24-year-old civil engineer from Baghdad plans to fly to Turkey next week in order to join the surge of migrants and refugees making a bid for a better life in Europe. It is part of what Iraqi officials describe as a new "brain drain" as young graduates seize what they perceive as a rare opportunity to leave a country wracked by violence.

More than 50,000 Iraqis have left the country over the past three months, according to the United Nations, joining the hundreds of thousands making the perilous journey across the Mediterranean.

Nearly 3.2 million people have been forced to leave their homes since fighters from the Islamic State group began to seize Iraqi territory early last year — the fastest-growing displacement crisis in the world.

Iraqi officials, however, say a disproportionate number of those leaving are not among the displaced, but educated young men who can afford the journey.

"I saw this wave of young people who were going, many of my friends going, and I saw this as a chance," said Falah, who hopes to make it to Germany. "I'm in a better position than many people, but I want to make a better future for my family."

Unlike many displaced families who make the potentially deadly journey together, Falah plans to leave his wife and 6-month-old daughter behind in Baghdad, hoping they can join him legally once he has settled.

The Iraqi government does not keep figures on the number leaving, but Joseph Sylawa, a member of the Iraqi parliament committee for migration and displacement, said the number is estimated to be as high as 1,000 a day.

"It's a death blow," he said. "Without its young people, Iraq will never be able to rebuild."

Having suffered successive wars since the 1980s, Iraq has long struggled to hold onto its talent. Many educated Iraqis who returned after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 fled again in the instability and sectarian violence that followed.

Life in Baghdad then was "way, way worse," but there was more hope that one day things would improve, Falah said.

Now, Iraqis in the capital have lived through a decade of near-daily car bombs, more than a quarter of the country is controlled by the Islamic State, and a fall in oil prices is causing an economic crisis.

"I think about my country, and how it needs people like me," he said, adding that five of his friends have also left. "But my country hasn't given me anything. I need to get a future."

The burgeoning of militia forces that are fighting the extremists has also contributed to a growing sense of lawlessness, as the government struggles to control the plethora of armed groups on its streets.

At the airport, the young migrants are easy to spot. Two young men with backpacks hug their friends goodbye.

"There's nothing here for us," said one, a 24-year-old accounting graduate and body-building fanatic, who declined to give his name in case it affects his asylum case. He plans to travel to Finland, an increasingly popular choice for migrants who hold the belief it has easier asylum laws. "I hope to find a job there," he said.

Mohammed Jassim, 25, plans to go to Finland. He says he was in the top 10 students in his year when he graduated in engineering two years ago but has struggled to find a job and works at a car washing station.

"My wife and my friends encouraged me to leave," he said as he boarded a bus at the airport. "There are thousands like me that are leaving. I expect to see death on the journey, but I depend on God."

"I'll speak in a Syrian accent if I need to do it to settle somewhere," he said.

Young Sunnis in particular are struggling to envisage a future for themselves in Iraq, said Shiite Iraqi politician Mowaffak al-Rubaie. But across the board it's the "crème de la crème" who are leaving, he said.

Meanwhile, in Iraq's camps for the displaced, many who have been forced to flee their homes because of Islamic State's advance say they are trapped - Europe is just a distant dream. Thousands of displaced people remain stranded in Iraq's Anbar province, unable to obtain permission from the Iraqi authorities to leave amid concerns about the security threat of allowing people into the capital or Iraq's Shiite south.

The fact that many need to fly to Turkey to escape the country may mean that those who make it out are the ones "who can get together the fare," said Ariane Rummery, a spokeswoman for the U.N's refugee agency.

"But that doesn't mean they aren't vulnerable," she said. "A lot of people we speak to don't feel safe and that's why they are going."

Iraqis currently make up just 4 percent of the more than 500,000 people who have arrived in Europe this year, but that proportion is expected to rise.

"There are more Iraqis now leaving," Rummery said. "That is definitely a trend, and it's not surprising when you think of what's happening there."

But many can't afford to leave the country. In a camp for displaced families from Anbar in the Iraqi capital, the Obaid family say they lost everything when they were forced to flee their home in Fallujah at the beginning of 2014, when the Islamic State seized control.

Rafideh Manfi, 60, says her husband, the mayor of a district in the city, was shot dead by the militants outside his home, in front of his son.

"I'd tear up my identity card right now for the chance to go to Europe," said her son, Arkan Naji Obaid, 37, who was disabled after an American airstrike hit his house in 2003. "If there was an Iraq, those people who are dying in the sea wouldn't have left in the first place. If people had the money to go, this camp would be empty."