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# THE UK IRAQI DIASPORA AND THEIR MOBILIZATION TOWARDS IRAQ

*HOMELAND POLITICS, INTERNAL DYNAMICS, AND THE  
FRAGMENTATION OF DIASPORIC TRANSNATIONALISM*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Oula Kadhum is a postdoctoral research fellow at the University of Birmingham. Her research explores diaspora politics and transnationalism between Europe and the Middle East.

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Cover Image: 'The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist' by US conceptual artist, Michael Rakowitz. The artwork, commissioned for Trafalgar Square's fourth plinth, is a recreation of a statue destroyed by ISIS in 2015 made out of up to 10,500 empty Iraqi date syrup cans. March 2018.  
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JULY 2021

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# *Executive Summurray*

In 2003, for the first time in decades, Iraqis in the diaspora were able to return to their former homeland and help in the rebuilding of their country. Many returned in 2003 with ambitious plans and ideas to help in the country's development, some through political parties and others through civil society. Due to political developments in Iraq however, and the subsequent ethno-sectarian political system installed under the US-led intervention, diaspora mobilization has been affected and shaped by homeland politics and dynamics, privileging some while thwarting others. Indeed, the post-2003 political system contributed to the fragmentation of diasporic mobilization along ethnic and sectarian lines due to homeland political dynamics. This, in turn, has shaped the issues and the type of transnational and translocal mobilization carried out by different groups.

Focusing predominantly on the UK context and to a lesser extent the Swedish one,<sup>1</sup> this study explores both top-down and bottom-up approaches to Iraqi diaspora transnational mobilization, and assesses the opportunities and constraints for coordination in diasporic transnationalism. Drawing on 15 semi-structured interviews conducted with community gatekeepers, organizational representatives, and professionals working in specific sectors, as well as numerous informal interviews, and supplemented by interviews conducted from 2013 to 2018 in both London and Stockholm, this study assess the different waves of migration and socio-economic profiles of Iraqi migrants, how pivotal moments in Iraq's recent history have affected diasporic transnationalism, and underlines the hindrances to mobilization.

The study finds that where the first waves of UK migration saw the arrival of political and religious elites, medical professionals, and artists, latter waves saw the arrival of less skilled and educated workers, as well as refugees. This provides the background both to Iraqi diasporic mobilization and links to the post-2003 political system and to the fragmentation that would ensue. While some diasporic elites went on to serve in the Iraqi government, other diaspora individuals worked through civil society, providing development, training, knowledge transfer, and social welfare. The study also finds that the instability in Iraq, homeland dynamics affecting the positionality of groups vis-à-vis the country, and lack of funds are major obstacles to broader mobilization. To this point, while there is no denying the will of the diaspora to help in the rebuilding of Iraq, distrust in the diaspora among ethnic and sectarian groups presents a particular challenge to collaboration and cooperation. Building trust and reconciliation, helping to create a platform between diaspora groups, the wider public, and Iraqi organizations, and focusing efforts on cultural, heritage, health and developmental issues - and avoiding party politics - could help overcome these obstacles to allow the diaspora to play a greater role in supporting the Iraqi state and society.

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<sup>1</sup> Both European contexts have the highest population of Iraqis and both have been active in mobilizing towards Iraq pre- and post-2003, making them pertinent case studies.

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## BACKGROUND:

### *The diverse and fragmented Iraqi diaspora in the UK*

Iraq has witnessed the exodus of millions of Iraqis due to the 2003 US-led occupation, the subsequent sectarian conflicts, and ongoing political and economic turmoil. Indeed, there are currently Iraqis in countries as far afield as the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, Sweden, and Canada, as well as closer to home in Jordan, Turkey and Syria.<sup>2</sup>

Yet the diasporization of Iraqis began at a much earlier date, in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Iraqi Jews, Christians, and Monarchists migrated to European countries to escape persecution and the political uncertainty facing their respective communities. As a former British mandate, Iraq maintained colonial links with the United Kingdom, opening a gateway for many religious minorities and Monarchists, who were allies of the British, to migrate and settle in the UK. The first wave of Iraqi migrants were Iraqi royal elites, Iraqi Christians who served with the British Royal Air Force, and Iraqi Jewish politicians, educators, merchants, journalists, and government officials.<sup>3</sup>

The second migration wave to the UK came as a result of the 1963 Baathist coup, which overthrew the government of Abd al-Kareem Qassim. This time the profile of migrants was somewhat different, with mostly middle-class professional doctors, lawyers, artists, and intellectuals.<sup>4</sup> Many were able to leave the country with student scholarships from the Baath government to study medicine, dentistry, architecture, and engineering abroad and would eventually stay on to practice their chosen professions as a part of the diaspora. This profile of migrants continued to arrive after the Baathist leadership coup in 1968, from which a young Saddam Hussein emerged as the new leader. Amongst this wave were also middle-class Kurds and Christian Assyrians, who felt increasingly pushed out by the regime's intolerance of Iraq's other ethnic identities, political opposition movements, and general climate of repression.<sup>5</sup>

Following the flow of political Leftist and Kurdish leaders and more affluent Iraqis into London, the 1980s saw a new wave of Iraqi migrants enter the UK. The Iraq-Iran war, which began in 1979 and ended in 1988, brought in largely Shia families who were Islamic Da'wa party activists, sympathisers, or those accused of "*taba'iya Irania*" (Iranian ancestry) and who would later be deported by the regime as tensions with Iran increased.<sup>6</sup> This wave of Iraqis was mixed, from merchants who had lost their wealth, to professionals left without an occupation, to semi-skilled and unskilled workers with poor education and qualifications.<sup>7</sup>

The next flow of migrants arrived in 1990 and 1991 during the First Gulf War and following the Shia and Kurdish uprisings.<sup>8</sup> Those who had the material wealth were able to seek asylum through legal channels, while others arrived with few resources

and were dependent on the UK's social welfare system to support their families. Many were persecuted Shia families and others were economic migrants looking for a better life. Others still had migrated previously to neighbouring Middle Eastern countries or to one of the Soviet Union's satellite states, which were now no longer stable or welcoming of refugees.

After the 2003 occupation of Iraq and the subsequent conflicts, civil war, and more recently the threat from Islamic State, more and more Iraqis have found themselves in the diaspora. Many have followed a pattern of chain migration and joined extended family in host countries where family reunification has been possible. Meanwhile others have pursued more perilous and illegal journeys into Europe.

As a result of the continued instability in Iraq, it is unlikely that migration will abate any time soon and the diasporization of Iraqis will subsequently continue for years to come. While there are no exact figures for the number of Iraqis in the UK, by some estimates this ranges between 350,000 and 450,000 according to the Iraqi Embassy in London, 200,000 according to the International Organization for Migration.<sup>9</sup>

Due to the vintages of migration waves and backgrounds of Iraqis who migrated to the UK, the composition of the Iraqi community in the UK is very mixed. The majority are Iraqi Arab Shia and Sunni Kurds, while many other minorities such as Iraqi Sunnis, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Syriacs, Mandeans, Iraqi Turkmen, Faili Kurds, and Iraqi Jews also form part of the Iraqi diasporic landscape.

The socio-economic backgrounds of those who came earlier were wealthier, better skilled, and educated and consequently found integration into the UK far easier than some of those

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2 Joseph Sassoon, *The Iraqi Refugees the New Crisis in the Middle East*. London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009.

3 See Madawi Al-Rasheed, "Political Migration and Downward Socio-Economic Mobility: The Iraqi Community in London," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 18(4), 1992; Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq's Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba'athists, and Free Officers*, London: Saqi Books, 2004; Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, (2001) *Iraq since 1958: From Revolution to Dictatorship*. Rev. ed. London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2001; Tamar Morad, Robert Shasha, and Dennis Shasha (eds.), *Iraq's Last Jews: Stories of Daily Life, Upheaval, and Escape from Modern Babylon*, Palgrave Studies in Oral History. 1st ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

4 Al-Rasheed 1992.

5 Al-Rasheed 1992.

6 Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 3rd ed. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

7 Al-Rasheed 1992, p.539.

8 Tripp 2007.

9 IOM, *Iraq Mapping Exercise*, 2007.

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who arrived in the 1980s and 1990s. Many who came later, even those with qualifications, have found it hard to find employment opportunities, while the traumas of displacement, exile, and war have left many with mental health problems that make them reliant on social welfare<sup>10</sup>

While Iraqis are not exclusively concentrated geographically in any one area, the majority live in London, with concentrations in the borough of Brent, Ealing, and Kingston. With the exception of secular Iraqis, those of a liberal or left-leaning background, and second-generation Iraqis who have met other Iraqis through their university experiences, most ethnic and sectarian communities within the Iraqi diaspora do not readily mix with other Iraqi diasporic worlds outside their geographical or ethno-sectarian communities.

## THE IRAQI DIASPORA, DEVELOPMENT AND THE REBUILDING OF IRAQ

Diasporic aid and development directed towards Iraq have been shaped by a number of factors including the historical period and the access that has been permitted for the diaspora, homeland political/sectarian dynamics, social profiles of diaspora, levels of violence, as well as links and relationships to power brokers in Iraq. With each phase, diasporic contributions have either shifted to cater for specific events and needs or been shaped by the constraints and opportunities afforded to certain individuals depending on their positionality vis-à-vis the corridors of power in Baghdad.

### *The Pre-2003 Opposition Years*

Various groups and individuals from within the diverse Iraqi diaspora have been mobilized transnationally towards the homeland since the 1980s. As more and more political elites and exiles found their way to London following persecution and clampdowns due to underground or prohibited political activity, London soon emerged, along with Damascus and Tehran, as a nucleus for opposition activity for Iraqi political elites. These included Islamic religious families such as the Al Hakim and the Al Khoei families, and later the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the Islamic Da'wa party, as well as the two Kurdish parties the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. There were also many other liberal

groups including Arab nationalists, socialists, and communists<sup>11</sup>

As tensions between Iraq and the international community heightened following Saddam Hussein's attempted occupation of Kuwait in 1990, the Iraqi opposition in London saw an opportunity to influence policy makers in London and Washington and push for regime change in Iraq. It is within this context that the Iraqi National Congress (INC) under the leadership of Ahmed Chalabi emerged to represent the full spectrum of Iraqi oppositional groups. Another group led by Ayad Allawi - the Iraqi National Accord (INA) - also worked with the US and UK governments during this time to similarly push for regime change. It is hard to underestimate the influence of figures such as Ahmed Chalabi and Ayad Allawi on policy makers in the US and UK. Working tirelessly to shape policy towards Iraq was their mission and to a large extent they were successful in pushing through the agenda for regime change, which was eventually written into US law under the Iraqi Liberation Act of 1998.

Though the INC had some initial success in gathering the diverse interests of the opposition groups who were united in their goal for regime change, many groups, including SCIRI and the Kurdish parties, would eventually splinter off. Additionally, the diverse groups had very different ideas about how regime change would look, including the role of the US military, the nature of their deployment, and the role of native Iraqi opposition groups, which further contributed to the disunity of the INC. As the drums of war started to beat ahead of the 2003 Iraq war, opposition groups were fomenting their own relationships with the US-led coalition in anticipation of forming part of the government once intervention had taken place. The fragmentation of the opposition and their unaligned interests during this time were precursors for events that would take place in the aftermath of regime change in 2003. It is also important to note that the political parties in opposition in no way represented the diverse Iraqi diaspora in London. Many were in fact against the intervention and marched in the historic anti-war demonstration of February 2003.

Beyond elite political mobilization in opposition, many groups within the Iraqi diaspora worked to provide humanitarian relief during the crippling sanctions regime, which lasted from 1991 to 2003. Organizations including World Wide Welfare and other now-defunct organizations used channels through Iraqi Kurdistan, which at the time was protected under the no-fly zone UN agreement in 1991. This gave the Kurds a certain level of autonomy and protection from Baghdad and provided a backdoor for entering Iraq. Donations and funds raised in the diaspora paid for medicine and medical tools, school equipment, clothes, and many other items, all of which were smuggled into Iraq through the Kurdish borders<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Great Britain & Department for Communities and Local Government, *The Iraqi Muslim Community in England: Understanding Muslim Ethnic Communities*, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace*. New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Oula Kadhum, *Diasporic Interventions: State-Building in Iraq following the 2003 Iraq War*. Coventry: Warwick University, 2017.

## **The Remaking of Iraq Post-2003**

Once intervention and the occupation of Iraq took place in 2003, many millions of exiled Iraqis were able to return to their homeland physically for the first time in decades and contribute directly. Many were motivated to help in the rebuilding of Iraq and returned in the early years of occupation to assess the ways in which they could contribute to the politics of the country or civil society.

### **Diasporic Elite Mobilization**

In the early years of occupation and leading up to Iraq's first elections in 2005, the majority of Iraqi transnational mobilization was defined by elite diasporic political parties who had by then firmly positioned themselves in the corridors of power. The Da'wa party, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), the INC, the INA, the Iraqi Communist party, and many other individuals from the diaspora were now tapping into their transnational social networks in London to recruit loyal members to their cause and to fill political positions in ministries, governorates, and other administrative positions. London thus became a recruiting ground for many of the political and bureaucratic positions which were now governing the Iraqi state. Indeed, five of Iraq's prime ministers were formerly residing in the diaspora, including Ibrahim Al Jaafari, Ayad Allawi, Nouri Al Maliki, Haider Al Abadi, and Mohammed Tawfik Allawi. Of these, four resided in the UK.

This trend in diasporic transnational recruitment continues unabated to this day. Nonetheless, in more recent years this has steadily declined, as many of the former exiles have served their time in Iraq and returned to their diasporic lives whilst continuing an existence of circular migration between London and Iraq.

Since 2003, however, and certainly in the last 5 years, political mobilizations in support of political parties in the diaspora has waned due to the general disappointment and disaffection of the Iraqi diaspora with diasporic elites they supported in 2003 who have contributed rather than dealt with corruption, not addressed Iraq's poor public services, and reinforced sectarian politics that have plagued the country. Party representation and attendance at political events have declined significantly and mobilization has been oriented more towards non-state actors, civil society, and the charitable sector.<sup>13</sup>

### **Diaspora Grassroots Mobilization**

Diasporic involvement in the homeland since 2003 has also worked on the grassroots level to support a new civil society in Iraq as distinct from the state-sanctioned and

monitored civil society. Many Iraqis living in the diaspora have been involved in areas related to mental health, women's rights, education, health services, welfare and provision for Iraqi widows and orphans, democracy building, election training, the preservation of Iraqi heritage, and many more translocal initiatives serving local community needs. Examples include a roaming medical doctor to support Iraqis living in remote areas, mental health professionals supporting the professionalization and development of Iraq's mental health services and training of mental health staff,<sup>14</sup> the provision of university books and textbooks for Baghdad University in partnership with US universities, sanitation initiatives to provide public toilets,<sup>15</sup> and the resurrection of Iraqi cultural heritage,<sup>16</sup> including arts and crafts and reed boats that serve the southern marshes, amongst many others.

Some initiatives were successful in delivering much needed resources or public services to disenfranchised groups or communities. Others, meanwhile, were met with hostility and violence due to instability and dominant cultures of corruption and sectarianism, both of which prevented those unconnected to political parties from carrying out their work. This trend has marked the post-2003 order, where sectarian politics and the corruption that sustains them have infiltrated all aspects of Iraqi society and life.

Other diasporic mobilization has been oriented towards lobbying the EU, the UK parliament, and other organizations such as Amnesty and Human Rights Watch to address the violence, land grabs, and religious discrimination faced by Iraqi minorities such as the Yezidis, the Mandeans, Iraqi Christians, and Turkmen. Meanwhile the issue of women's rights and the personal status law and violence against women has also been raised repeatedly in the diaspora by the Iraqi Women's League and the Iraqi Democratic Movement.

### **Diaspora and Ethno-Sectarian Divisions**

On the grassroots level, diasporic mobilization is also fragmented and shaped by power dynamics. For instance, due to the strengthening of Shia identity and power since 2003, there has been an increase in Iraqi Shia organizations in the diaspora raising funds for Iraqi orphans, widows, and the impoverished in Iraq.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile in the case of the Iraqi Kurdish diasporic organizations, their need has been diminished due to the fact that Iraqi Kurdistan is relatively autonomous and safe to

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<sup>13</sup> Oula Kadhum, "Unpacking the Role of Religion in Political Transnationalism: The Case of the Iraqi Shi'a Diaspora Post 2003", *International Affairs*, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Author interview with Mental Health Professional in London, October 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Kadhum 2017.

<sup>16</sup> See work by Nahrein Network <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/nahrein/> and Safina Projects <https://www.safinaprojects.org/>

<sup>17</sup> Kadhum 2020.

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visit. Furthermore, the presence of the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government representation in the UK has meant that there is less need for a diasporic organization to exist, with the KRG London office acting as the bridge between the diaspora and Iraqi Kurdistan.

Other organizations have come and gone or are inactive in the diaspora due to lack of funds and resources. Older organizations such as the Iraqi Association and the Iraqi Welfare Organization have succeeded in institutionalizing and professionalizing and have hence been able to continue serving their respective Iraqi communities.

More recent organizations have also emerged, including the Iraqi Democratic Movement in 2011 and Collective Action for Iraq in 2019, who are activist organizations raising awareness and acting in solidarity with Iraq's civil and youth movements. Working with British and Iraqi audiences, these organizations support anti-sectarian platforms that champion an Iraqi nationalist agenda that does not discriminate against ethnicity, sect, or religion.

## **Post-ISIS Diaspora Mobilization**

The takeover of Mosul by IS in 2014 and the failure of the Iraqi forces to protect Iraqi soil marked a turning point for many in the Iraqi diaspora. While disaffection with Iraqi politics and the diaspora politicians they had previously supported was steadily waning over the years, the events of 2014 marked a total loss of trust in the government and its ability to protect the nation, Iraqi sovereignty, and its territorial integrity.

It was Grand Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani's 2014 fatwa that, for many in the diaspora, saved Iraq. Indeed, this was an oft-repeated phrase heard during several interviews with Iraqi gatekeepers and diasporans of all generations. Sistani called on Iraqi citizens to join the security forces and fight against IS. This religious call to arms saw the birth of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), a group of paramilitary forces of mainly Shia, but also Christian and Sunni, groups join in the fight. With the help of the PMF, the Iraqi security forces were able to defeat IS by 2017 and reclaim Mosul and Iraq's territorial integrity.

During the battle for Mosul from 2014 to 2017 diaspora mobilization saw three important trends emerge. The first was a move towards religio-political mobilization where mobilizing towards Iraqi politicians was replaced by a mobilization motivated by non-state actors including Sistani and the PMF.<sup>18</sup> During rallies and protests against IS incursions seen in London, the PMF and Sistani were often hailed as heroes who were the saviours of Iraq. Furthermore, during the holy month of Muharram, where the killing of the Prophet's grandson Imam Hussain at the Battle of Karbala in 680 AD is commemorated by Shia Muslims, placards and posters during Ashura processions were linking the killing of Imam Hussain with the killing of Shias at the hands of IS.

The transnational mobilization served to demarcate Shia Islam as different to Sunni Islam and to remind the public that Shia Muslims were the main victims of IS.

The rise in martyrs fighting against IS and the resultant rise in orphaned children led to an increase in charitable fundraising for Iraqi orphans in the period 2014 to 2017. Organizations such as Al Ayn and Noor Trust, among many others, were overwhelmed by the donations coming from the diaspora, who wanted to help and alleviate the conditions for those families whose fathers fought to protect their country. Millions of GBP were raised and remitted back to Iraq from the UK predominantly, though not exclusively from Iraqi Shia diasporic charities.

While most of the transnational mobilization witnessed in the diaspora is conducted by diasporic ethnic or religious groups, with few cross-ethnic or sectarian alliances formed, one exception to this trend was witnessed during the fight against IS. Indeed, Iraqis of all ethnic, social, and political backgrounds joined the protests against terrorism and appealing for the protection of Iraqi heritage, which was being destroyed by IS in Mosul and Ninevah province. Various protests were held in Trafalgar Square and in front of the Iraqi embassy in London attended by Iraqi diaspora artists, writers, musicians, various political party representatives, and students.

## **The Diaspora and Iraq's 2019 Protest Movement**

In early October 2019, Iraq's civil and protest movement, which had been gathering pace from at least 2015, took a serious turn as thousands of youthful protesters from across Iraq called for the overhaul of the Iraqi government, an end to the ethno-sectarian system and the corruption it has spawned, improved services, and better economic prospects for all Iraqis. The October protests – as they are popularly referred to – have continued in different cycles despite government crackdowns, kidnappings, torture, and various attempts by foreign and domestic actors to thwart them.

In the diaspora, many solidarity protests were witnessed in the UK, the US, and across Europe in support of protesters and their demands. In the UK, the Iraqi Association and the Iraqi Democratic Movement organised several solidarity protests in front of the Iraqi embassy and in Trafalgar Square to raise awareness of the protests occurring in Iraq and to condemn the government's actions and lack of protection both for protesters and their legitimate concerns. New youth groups have also since emerged, including the Collective Action for Iraq (CAFI), which has organised various vigils in London in solidarity with

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18 Oula Kadhum, "Where Politics and Temporality Meet: Change in Shi'a Political Transnationalism over Time, Identity and the Iraqi State", Conference paper, University of Chicago, 04 May 2019.

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protesters, but also whose purpose is to raise awareness of what is happening inside the country amidst the dearth of news from Iraq reported in Western media outlets.

As a result of the killing of General Qassim Soleimani and Abdul Mahdi Al Muhandis in January 2020 in drone strikes executed by the United States, the protests were side-lined by domestic politics and the Iraqi government's preoccupations with how to respond to the US attack on Iraqi soil. This event led to a lull in diasporic activities in relation to the protests as tensions between Tehran and Washington, and their implications for Iraq, were closely watched.

In the Shia diasporic community in Brent, several mourning events and commemorations were also held for General Qassim Soleimani and Abdul Mahdi Al Muhandis, who are now seen as Shia martyrs by certain segments of the Iraqi Shia diaspora. One event held at the Islamic College was reportedly well attended, with over 300 participants from across the first and second generations participating in paying their respects to the fallen martyrs. The killing of the Shia leaders in Iraq will further strengthen sectarian identifications in the diaspora as they further feed the Shia victimization narratives so prevalent in Shia history and mythology. Consequently, Shia Islam and its politicization continues to be transported transnationally from Iraq to the Shia diaspora.

## CURRENT DYNAMIC IN THE DIASPORA AND OBSTRUCTIONS TO MOBILIZATIONS

The issues facing the Iraqi diaspora are complex and varied. Four areas in particular are hindering the diaspora's ability to contribute towards Iraq: lack of unity, diaspora positionality, instability and violence, and lack of funds and professionalization.

### *Lack of unity*

The Iraqi diaspora is fragmented along multiple lines and categories including ethnicity, religious conviction, sect, class, ideology, and geographical location in the UK. It is therefore mistaken to talk of the Iraqi diaspora as one homogenous group; rather it is a collection of diverse groups each living their own traditions, memories, imaginations of community, and individual transnational connections to Iraq. There is very little overlap between these groups and often very little knowledge about the events, activities, and lived experiences of others. Put simply, there is no unity or sense of a collective Iraqi identity in the diaspora.

This has been exacerbated by homeland politics, which reverberates in the diaspora, affecting how people feel and creating mistrust between diaspora groups. As a result, very little coordination or collaboration has existed between diasporic groups, save for the aforementioned protests against Islamic State and for the protection of Iraqi cultural heritage.

### *Positionality*

Since 2003, some groups, namely the Arab Shias and the Kurds, have been empowered due to their political positions in Iraq. As mentioned previously, many have been recruited transnationally to serve in ministerial and government positions since 2003 forming a diasporic elite political network in Iraq that is connected to London. On the level of civil society, too, the powerful position of both groups has facilitated charitable and development work where a culture of sectarianism, corruption, and nepotism can mean the difference between being able to execute a project or not.

The relative stability of Iraqi Kurdistan has further meant that many from the diaspora are able to visit family and friends regularly and continue a diasporic existence of circular migration. Meanwhile for many within the Shia community, the ability to travel to their heavily protected holy sites in Najaf, Karbala, Baghdad, and Samarra and take part in Shia rituals and commemorations has strengthened their faith and Shia identity, bringing them closer to Iraq and their religion.

On the other hand, for Iraqi minorities, be they ethnic, sectarian, or sexual, transnational connections have been hindered due to insecurity, kidnappings, and attacks due to land disputes, as well as Islamic violent extremism, which have led many to no longer see Iraq as a place of return. Ethnic and sectarian minorities such as the Yezidis, the Turkmen, Faili Kurds, Mandeans, and Christians in the diaspora have therefore worked from the diaspora either to lobby on their kin group's behalf to Western audiences and governments or to support their ethnic compatriots through fundraising, helping with asylum claims, and raising awareness. Finally, for Iraqi Sunnis in the diaspora, the legacy of Saddam's reign, and the marginalization of the Iraqi Sunni community in Iraq post-intervention, has left many excluded from participating in the rebuilding of Iraq. A sectarian role reversal has occurred, where the once secure and powerful Sunnis in the diaspora have been dethroned by the formerly insecure and powerless Shias.

### *Instability and violence*

The civil war and violence of 2006-2008, the threat from Islamic State from 2014, the killing of Soleimani and Muhandis, and more recently the instability and crackdowns perpetrated against the Iraqi civil protest movement, have inevitably affected the ability of the Iraqi diaspora to mobilize, return, or help in the development of Iraq. So though transnational connections have been shaped by the positionality of diaspora groups vis-à-vis positions of

power in Iraq,<sup>19</sup> it is also important to stress that transnational connections and mobilization have been hindered for all groups by the levels of conflict and violence in Iraq. This has inevitably impacted some areas more than others (Iraqi Kurdistan being less affected) and obstructed the transfer of remittances during times of conflict. It has also affected the gendered dimensions of transnationalism where women, who have been the targets of gender-based violence, have been adversely affected and thus discouraged from participating.<sup>20</sup>

## **Lack of funds and professionalization**

There are variances in the organizational and financial positions of Iraqi diaspora organizations in the UK. Some receive large philanthropic funds from Iraqi and British-Iraqi religious clerics and figures and wealthy businessmen, or UK government or organizational funding, for their survival. Some meanwhile depend on donations from their respective ethnic or sectarian diasporic communities in the UK or small contributions from members for operational costs and rely on volunteers for the continuation of their work. This reality explains why some communities are more active and have more organizations in their midst and why organizations from other communities have come and gone or continue to struggle financially, limiting their events and activities.

In the last ten years in the UK, government austerity has dealt a blow to the charitable and non-profit sector, where financial cuts have made it even harder for diaspora organizations to survive. Consequently, a lack of funds makes it difficult to employ staff, strategize, have a physical office and presence, and therefore professionalize and institutionalize the organizations' work both domestically and transnationally.

## **CONCLUSIONS: Opportunities for the Iraqi diaspora**

In assessing the Iraqi diaspora's contributions to politics and development before and since 2003, what is clear is that while some projects were successful, others were obstructed by conflict, corruption, and a culture of sectarianism and nepotism. What is also clear is that the ethno-sectarian system institutionalized under occupation has shaped the transnationalism of the Iraqi diaspora, creating opportunities for those connected to the corridors of power, while hindering the efforts of those marginalized by the exclusive system.

The myriad projects and initiatives attempted bear witness to the desire and will of many Iraqis in the diaspora who in 2003 wanted to return and help in the rebuilding of their country of origin. Yet, homeland dynamics have inevitably affected the diaspora and their transnationalism, shaping not only who can mobilize and how but also creating disunity and distrust amongst the various Iraqi diasporic groups. Cooperation has been impeded as some communities have mobilized an ethnic or sectarian identity rather than a national Iraqi identity. For example, the territorial threat from the Islamic State and the killing of Abu Mahdi Al Muhandis and Qassim Soleimani have heightened identity politics in the diaspora for some within the Shia community. Likewise for the Kurds, Baghdad's stance towards Kurdish independence, the Kirkuk issue, and oil shares have also served to distance Iraqi Kurds from their Iraqi compatriots further.

For Iraq's religious and ethnic minorities, their preoccupations with regaining land, freedom to practice their religions in peace, and to receive security from the state and feel safe amidst existential threats are battles that will continue to be fought so long as there are enough members inside the country for the diaspora to support. For many, including the Iraqi Mandaeans and Iraqi Jews, the diaspora is where the majority now reside, and the future of the homeland population remains dubious at best.

For others, meanwhile, the Iraqi civil protest movement represents a bid for Iraqi national unity that gives hope of ascending ethnic or sectarian loyalties and is supported by many secular Iraqis in the diaspora. For now, at least, these contrasting stances remain prevalent and supplant any unified national vision, which has distanced diaspora groups rather than brought them closer.

As their relationship with the homeland widely differs, the concept of development has a different meaning for each Iraqi diasporic group. This reality orients the focus towards a plethora of agendas, making it even more difficult for the disparate Iraqi diaspora groups to work together. Ultimately Iraqi diasporic mobilization for development for the large part comprises a multitude of ethnic, sectarian, and religious claims, stances, and projects rather than a unified collaborative effort to develop the country. Moreover, as a result of the disunity, conflict, and instability, there is a lack of institutionalization and professionalization of diasporic organizations across the Iraqi diaspora. Nonetheless, this study offers several recommendations in order to support the Iraqi diaspora and its transnationalism towards Iraq.

First, work in the diaspora might focus on building trust between the different communities by bringing groups together and in dialogue with one another under the auspices of an independent and impartial international organization with experience in

<sup>19</sup> Oula Kadhum, "Ethno-Sectarianism in Iraq, Diaspora Positionality and Political Transnationalism," *Global Networks*, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Oula Kadhum, "Assessing Co-Development Projects for Civil Society Building in Iraq: The Case of the Iraqi Diaspora and Swedish Institutions Following the 2003 Intervention in Iraq," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 46(2), 2019.

working with diasporas. The chosen organization could facilitate a forum for Iraqi diasporic gatekeepers in the spirit of truth and reconciliation commissions (see the interesting example of the Liberian truth and reconciliation commission that the Liberian diasporas formed a part of),<sup>21</sup> bearing in mind the particular political sensitivities and dynamics of Iraq's different religious and ethnic communities. Giving the different diaspora communities a chance to speak their truths and realities may create more empathy and understanding as a first step towards future cooperation and collaboration. Secondly, such a dialogue may open the ground for agreed priorities for mobilization towards Iraq that cut across ethnic and sectarian interests.

In order to bring the diaspora together and build a more united community for Iraqi diasporic organizations, the creation of an umbrella organization or simply a digital platform, as in the case of Sweden's Iraqi diasporic organizations, is instructive. In 1995, the Federation of Iraqi Associations in Sweden was created, an umbrella organization that united the growing number of Iraqi diasporic organizations being created as a result of increased migration to Sweden. In doing so, the umbrella organization helped to publicize the work of the Iraqi diaspora in Swedish society, professionalize the group, and facilitate partnerships with Swedish organizations. The umbrella organization also coordinates public messaging with regards to Iraqi politics and the Iraqi diaspora in Swedish society and, more importantly, it has helped the diaspora groups to work more effectively together and support each other's work. As mentioned previously, there is very little communication between groups and knowledge of one another's activities in the UK Iraqi diaspora. Currently there is no platform, organization, or network that exists that can unite or build social capital between the disparate groups. Creating such a structure would allow diasporic groups to be connected, in dialogue, and co-ordinate work with both Western audiences, Iraqi organizations inside Iraq, as well as the wider Iraqi diaspora in other countries. Participation and membership would be voluntary and based on democratic values.

Nonetheless, it is also clear that one of the biggest impediments to sustaining the work of diasporic organizations is funding, which then prevents the professionalizing and institutionalization needed for continuity and development. Capacity-building in the form of fundraising, bid-writing, and social media would go a long way in training the Iraqi diaspora to sustainably manage finances, retain staff, and mobilize effectively. One idea might be to organize a workshop with selected and successful individuals from the Iraqi diaspora already engaged and working in Iraq. This would be useful for gathering data on best practice in relation to working transnationally between Europe and Iraq. A second workshop would then be useful to bring together Iraqi professionals working transnationally and other Iraqi diaspora organizations seeking to do the same but lacking the professional know-how, compliance knowledge, and risk assessments needed for working in turbulent environments. For some diasporic groups interested in mobilizing towards Iraq, it may simply be worthwhile to partner with bigger organizations rather than creating new organizations from scratch. This would

also help diaspora groups to gain experience, professionalize, and build networks and capacity should they wish in the future to create their own organizations.

Finally, due to political sensitivities, areas of collaboration should avoid political issues and focus on national projects that address more unifying themes such as Iraqi culture and heritage, civil society, education, health, the environment, etc. where skills and expertise guide the projects and not politics or ideology. Due to the instability the country currently faces, projects and mobilization should focus on small-scale local initiatives that can make a difference on the community level through existing translocal networks. One way to circumvent conflict in times of instability and violence is through digital collaborations. Video-calls, WhatsApp, and social media channels are routinely used by the Iraqi diaspora. Skilled professionals such as doctors, dentists, engineers, teachers, academics, mental health professionals, and many others can therefore set up online video conferences and training sessions in times of intense conflict.

Instability in Iraq and homeland political dynamics have affected the unity and transnationalism of the Iraqi diaspora. In recognizing the inevitable divisions this creates, not to mention the uneven playing field for diasporic transnationalism, it is unrealistic to expect cross-ethnic or -religious transnational mobilization with regards to Iraqi high politics. However, as the case of mobilizations against IS terrorism and calls for the protection of Iraqi cultural heritage show, opportunities for diaspora collaborations and cooperation are possible on issues that affect all Iraqis. There is no reason to believe therefore that the diaspora could not also collaborate on issues pertaining to civil society, social welfare, the environment and health, and other important areas where assistance is needed in Iraq and where political dimensions can be avoided.

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21 Laura A. Young and Rosalyn Park, "Engaging Diasporas in Truth Commissions: Lessons from the Liberia Truth and Reconciliation Commission Diaspora Project", *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 3(3), 2009.

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### About the Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.

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