Iraqi International Migration: Potentials for the Postwar Period

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Abstract

This article aims to fill a gap in the current literature on migration and conflict. Utilizing
the conceptual framework of an "environment of insecurity," Iraqi migration trends are
analyzed and projections are made for future migration patterns. An attempt is made to
make sense of Iraq's demographic data in relation to the broader context of internal
and external conflicts that Iraq has been involved in over the past two decades. In light of
previous findings on post-conflict Turkish migration patterns involving the Kurds, it is
argued that similar migration patterns will likely surface in postwar Iraq due to
similarities in respective post-conflict environments. The potential impact on
international migration resulting from a worsening pattern of ethnic conflict between and
among Shiites, Sunnis, Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen in Iraq is explored.

Keywords

Iraq, Iraqi, international migration, Turkish, Turkmen, Kurds, Shiite, Sunnis, Arabs,
environment of insecurity, war, ethnic conflict

Overview

Over the past two decades the people of Iraq have managed to endure numerous internal and external conflicts. This seemingly incessant pattern of internal/external conflict has increased the level of "insecurity" among various segments of the Iraqi populace. And this heightened level of insecurity is doubtless a major factor influencing the decision-making of Iraqis to migrate. Utilizing the conceptual framework of "*an environment of insecurity*," Iraqi migration trends are analyzed. In light of findings from an earlier study on Turkish migration patterns and ethnic conflict involving the Kurds, it is argued that postwar migration trends in Iraq are likely to be similar to those that materialized in post-conflict Turkey. This study discusses the possibility of an increasing migration outflow from Iraq (primarily to European destinations) in response to changes in the political situation of the country after the March-April 2003 war. The overall instability in postwar Iraq--where the political scene is dominated by ethnic tensions between and among Shiites, Sunnis, Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen--significantly impacts international migration trends originating from within Iraq. Throughout this paper international migration refers to all cross border movements types, including refugees and asylum seekers.

The Unwritten Account of Recent Iraqi Migration

According to Waxman (2001), research on the migration experience of Iraqis is either absent or negligible. Only a few studies can be found in the recent literature. Of these, most are focused on the Kurds. And of these, most include only a few passages about Iraqi international migration (e.g. Nezan 1996, Griffin 1999, White 2000, Sirkeci 2000). One can speculate that the dearth of migration research is in part associated with the internal/external conflicts that have occurred in Iraq over the past two decades. Relatedly, the lack of data is no doubt related to the fact that it was, and continues to be, a dangerous country to do research in.

   In spite of the data limitations, there are striking and verifiable examples of large scale migrations within the region. For example, in the early 1990s about half a million Kurdish refugees fled from Iraq to Turkey (Hobsbawn 1994, p51). Immediately

Table 1. Inflow of foreign born from Iraq to selected industrialized countries, 1990-2001

	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Australia	191	1,407	1,539	1,092	2,539	2,617	1,966	1,793	1,510	1,673	--	--
Canada	262	270	371	192	240	324	303	272	271	363	282	398
France*	108	174	237	179	202	236	279	217	331	245	262	296
Germany	707	1,384	1,484	1,246	2,066	6,941	10,934	14,189	7,435	8,662	11,601	17,167
Italy*	13	89	26	31	22	181	151	336	3,362	1,838	6,082	1,985
Netherlands	--	--	--	--	--	2,990	4,673	6,130	7,372	3,346	4,445	3,119
Norway	90	131	111	137	126	99	113	272	1,296	4,073	766	1,056
Sweden	3,928	4,589	6,964	6,808	5,087	5,007	4,429	7,136	9,379	9,212	10,180	12,869
UK	985	1,495	1,240	1,105	1,120	1,470	1,580	2,690	2,945	4,010	10,190	8,345
USA	1,856	1,832	4,268	4,245	6,170	5,713	5,903	5,572	2,398	3,520	5,464	5,569
Total	8,140	11,371	16,240	15,035	17,572	25,578	30,331	38,607	36,299	36,942	49,272	50,804

* Asylum flows only.
Source: MPI (2003).

following the Gulf War in 1990, industrialized countries faced a rapid and large inflow of Iraqi immigrants (see Table 1). Within the following ten-year period, the annual number

of Iraqi immigrants arriving in these countries rose from 8,140 in 1990 to 52,500 in 2001, representing a 545 percent increase. As detailed below, these inflows were mainly dominated by refugees and asylum seekers.

In 2001, UNHCR reported more than 530,000 refugees originating from Iraq. Iraqis, therefore, accounted for the third largest group among the 12 million refugees in the world recorded that year (UNHCR 2003) (Table 2). They also constituted the largest group among asylum seekers arriving in industrialized countries in recent years.

Table 2. Iraqi Refugee populations in industrialized countries, 1992-2001 (thousands)

	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Iraqis	1.343.8	771.1	749.8	718.7	705.0	698.3	665.2	641.4	525.5	530.1

Asylum applications by Iraqis, 1980-2001

Year	Number	Year	Number	Year	Number	Year	Number
1980	1,590	1986	3,157	1990	13,473	1996	27,139
1981	2,530	1987	2,003	1991	11,629	1997	43,187
1982	4,730	1988	2,350	1992	17,658	1998	45,516
1983	4,212	1989	3,901	1993	15,204	1999	36,560
1984	3,468			1994	12,937	2000	47,184
1985	3,185			1995	18,672	2001	50,763
Total (1980-89): 31,126				Total (1990-2001): 335,922			

Source: UNHCR (2003), UN (2002).

Table 2 summarizes the total Iraqi asylum applications filed in industrialized countries. Europe, Germany, Turkey, Netherlands, Sweden and Denmark were the most preferred destinations for Iraqi asylum seekers between 1992 and 1996 (Table 3). But in the period of 1997-2001, Turkey and Denmark were replaced by the UK and Italy (Table 3).

Table 3. Top five countries for Iraqi asylum applicants, 1992-2001

Asylum country	1992-1996	Asylum country	1997-2001
Germany	22,671	Germany	59,054
Turkey	17,914	Netherlands	25,746
Netherlands	13,666	Sweden	20,181
Sweden	10,551	UK	18,450
Denmark	4,730	Italy	13,603
Total	69,532	Total	137,034

Source: UNHCR (2003).

The increasing number of Iraqi asylum seekers is evident from table 3. An analysis of the trends between 1980 and 2002 gives clues to future postwar trends (Table 4). Overall, the pattern of Iraqi asylum applications seems responsive to changes in the international affairs of Iraq during the twelve-year period between 1990 and 2002. This period was marked by two wars that resulted in great instability within Iraq in the form of, among other things, destruction of infrastructure and post Gulf War sanctions.

As table 4 indicates, approximately 25,000 Iraqis applied for asylum in the 1980s compared to roughly 200,000 during the 1990s. This increase undoubtedly started with the first Gulf War following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and continued during the economic embargo years (1991-2002). The dispute between Iraq and the USA resurfaced at the beginning of the new century, eventually resulting in the invasion of Iraq by the US in March 2003.

Table 4. Iraqi asylum applications by country of asylum, 1980-2002

	1980-89	% of total	1990-99	% of total	2000	% of total	2001	% of total	2002	% of total
Austria	530	2.1	11,250	5.5	2,361	5.5	2,115	4.5	4,570	10.0
Belgium	90	0.4	1,510	0.7	569	1.3	368	0.8	461	1.0
Denmark	2,000	7.9	10,690	5.2	2,458	5.7	2,689	5.8	1,032	2.3
Finland	20	0.1	850	0.4	62	0.1	103	0.2	107	0.2
France	560	2.2	2,210	1.1	254	0.6	295	0.6	242	0.5
Germany	3,940	15.6	55,050	26.8	11,721	27.2	17,357	37.2	10,367	22.6
Greece	4,650	18.4	13,700	6.7	1,334	3.1	1,972	4.2	2,567	5.6
Italy	750	3.0	6,050	2.9	6,082	14.1	1,985	4.3	1,170	2.6
Netherlands	670	2.7	36,430	17.8	2,773	6.4	1,329	2.9	1,022	2.2
Norway	560	2.2	6,450	3.1	766	1.8	1,056	2.3	1,624	3.5
Portugal	10	0.0	10	0.0	*	0.0	*	0.0	*	0.0
Spain	600	2.4	2,220	1.1	118	0.3	64	0.1	82	0.2
Sweden	7,840	31.0	25,200	12.3	3,499	8.1	6,206	13.3	5,447	11.9
Switzerland	400	1.6	5,530	2.7	918	2.1	1,228	2.6	1,191	2.6
UK	2,130	8.4	9,710	4.7	7,080	16.4	6,710	14.4	14,945	32.6
Australia	531	2.1	11,350	5.5	2,361	5.5	2,118	4.5	175	0.4
Canada	*	0.0	2,868	1.4	303	0.7	406	0.9	235	0.5
USA	*	0.0	4,116	2.0	398	0.9	622	1.3	537	1.2
Europe	24,750 **	97.9	186,860 **	96.6	42,244 **	98.1	45,595 **	97.8	45,002 **	98.3
Total	25,281 **	100	205,194 **	100	43,057**	100	46,623 **	100	45,774 **	100

* Data not available.
** Partial figures include only some European and other industrialized countries, as there are no available data for other countries.
Source: UNHCR (1999), UNHCR (2003), MPI (2003).

In between wars, there is a special four-year period, specifically 1998 – 2001, in which the United States and Britain increased their presence in the Persian Gulf in response to Iraq's refusal to allow United Nations weapons inspectors access to all of the presidential palaces. This period was characterized by military strikes on Iraqi soil starting with a four-day bombing campaign in December 1998 (i.e. Operation Desert Fox) and continuing with almost daily attacks. It would not be wrong to expect a relationship between these attacks on Iraq and a sharp increase in out-migration. The number of applications in 2000, 2001, and 2002 totaled 146,000, six times more than in the 1980s and close to the ten year total for the 1990s (Table 4).

Accompanying the increasing number of Iraqi asylum seekers in the period following the Desert Fox operation, the preferred destination countries also changed (see Table 3). Germany, which had been the most popular destination throughout the 1990s, retained this ranking receiving about 40,000 in the first three years of the 2000s (Table 4). However, the UK and Sweden became increasingly popular. In the 2000s, the number of Iraqi asylum applicants in the UK reached the level of 28,700, a 210 percent increase over the numbers in the 1990s. Sweden witnessed a sharp increase in the 1990s, a 220 percent increase over the figures in the 1980s (see Table 4). Since 1980, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, and the UK have become the most popular destinations for Iraqi asylum migration.

The Environment of Insecurity Concept

The concept of an Environment of Insecurity (EOI) was first formulated by the author of this paper and his colleagues to analyze the causes of Kurdish ethnic rivalry in Turkey (Icduygu et al 1999). Later the concept was extended to explain Turkish-Kurdish international migration in response to ethnic conflict in Turkey (Sirkeci 2003a). Sirkeci concluded that ethnic conflict in Turkey had triggered an environment of insecurity that particularly affected the Kurdish segment of Turkey's population. This EOI provided an opportunity framework for those who intended to migrate regardless of the conflict (Sirkeci 2003a: 244-255).

   The concept of EOI is built around two complementary components. The first component is a material environment of insecurity characterized by widespread poverty, deprivation and armed conflict. The second component is a non-material environment of insecurity, characterized by fear of persecution, legal restrictions (such a barriers to use one's mother language), human right violations, lack of ethnic freedoms, and discrimination (Sirkeci 2003a: 11). When applied to the Turkish case, characterized as it was by an ethnic-oriented environment of insecurity, two major strategic options were left for those subjected to the EOI: exit or status quo. "Exit" options meant adopting a Kurdish identity, defending Kurdishness, joining the rebel forces, and/or moving abroad to other regions. "Status quo" options involved adopting a Turkish identity or Turkish civic identity, aligning with government forces (managing relations with both the rebels and the army), staying in the region of origin or moving to other parts of the country (Sirkeci 2003a: 12; Icduygu et al 1999). People exposed to this EOI frequently developed hybrid strategies to avoid risks.

   Because of its seemingly obvious nature, the notion that "insecurity often causes migration" is not terribly informative. As this author discovered during previous research in Turkey, the main value of the EOI concept for understanding international migration arises from its relationship to "opportunity frameworks." The notion that EOI leads to the formation of "opportunity frameworks" that contribute to international migration--especially clandestine migration--is informative and interesting. Clandestine migration is a subject that is receiving increasing attention by European scholars (Papademetriou 2003, Martiniello 2002, Faist 2000, Bauboeck 1999). Thus far, however, the EOI concept has not been incorporated into their models.

   The EOI establishes a set of push factors for international migration. It provides opportunity frameworks for those who have been contemplating migrating prior to the rise of a conflict situation (Sirkeci 2003a: 243). These people are often linked to the conflict region via various, longstanding social networks. In addition, they frequently enjoy a relatively high standard of living within the conflict region. There can also be a group of "free-riders" willing to take advantage of the conflict situation. By way of example, many Turks filed asylum applications in Germany on the false basis that they were Kurds undergoing massive suffering and hardship in Turkey (Sirkeci 2003a). EOI places emphasis on the interrelatedness among different potential causes of migration such as socioeconomic deprivation, political deprivation, ethnic tension or conflict, and core-periphery relations (see Massey et al 1993; Faist 2000). Networks and admission rules imposed by receiving countries, as well as regulatory laws enforced by sending

countries are significant factors facilitating or restricting international migration (Bauer et al 2002, Light et al 1990, Boyd 1989, Fawcett 1989).

In contemporary Iraqi, opportunity frameworks are in place for ethnic minorities such as Shiites, Sunni-Arabs, Kurds and Turkmen. Unless a perfect representative system is established in post-war Iraq, there will be tensions between and among these ethnic groups. Some of them will claim deprivation due to unequal treatment by other (dominant) ethnic groups, creating a sound push factor for minority emigration. The importance of "opportunity frameworks" in understanding migration also comes from the fact that actual conflict does not have to be evident to trigger migration. Just the possibility of such a conflict is enough.

Applying the EOI Concept to Contemporary Iraq

The EOI was shown to have had a particular influence on the Kurdish population in Turkey (Icduygu et al 1999). This was due to the fact that it was the Kurds who suffered most from the EOI that developed there. In the Iraqi case, the widespread destruction of infrastructure and social chaos and frustration that is surfacing in the aftermath of the March-April 2003 war is expected to affect all ethnic groups equally. It should be noted, however, that while particular details vary, the current EOI event is not something new for Iraq. In point of fact, several well-known events have shaped the character of the current environment of insecurity in Iraq. Among the most important: the Iran-Iraq war between 1980-88; Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and the ensuing Gulf war in 1991; the sanctions and embargo years beginning in August of 1990 (Alnasrawi 2001); the Iraqi War in 2003; the unsuccessful Shiite rebellion in 1991; the Kurdish conflict between the Kurdistan Democratic Party and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (rivalry started in 1975 and they fought each other between 1994 and 1998 when the two groups signed a peace agreement); and numerous socioeconomic and demographic factors such as widespread poverty, the uneven distribution of wealth, and lack of health facilities and educational opportunities. Collectively these events have strengthened the current EOI in Iraq.

Some optimistic pundits anticipate a reconstruction of normal life in Iraq that will last at least ten years (Day and Freeman 2003, p.309). We can only hope that is the case. But it is important to note that, after the cessation of war, it is almost certain that winning the peace will be more difficult than fighting the war. US experiences in Haiti, the Balkans and Afghanistan illustrate this point (Barton and Crocker 2003). Disputes over who is to control Iraq's valuable oil reserves are likely to delay the reconstruction process further. One can speculate that the US administration's decision to act unilaterally to remove Saddam Hussein from power (and associated reduced level of international cooperation) will also hamper reconstruction efforts. Using Haiti, Cambodia, Vietnam, Cuba, Nicaragua, Panama and Afghanistan as examples, Pei (2003, p. 53) argued that US unilateral actions in the past have failed and will fail again in the future. Whether US unilateral action in Iraq will prove to be a success or failure remains to be seen.

Another factor that is likely to delay the reconstruction of Iraq is that neighboring countries, acting in their own self-interest, want to influence events in Iraq (for a similar perspective, see the United States Institute of Peace, 2003). For example, Turkey wants to control the reconstruction process in Iraq in favor of unitary state formation--one that will not allow Kurdish independence in northern Iraq (Judah 2002, Oguzlu 2002).

Turkey has consistently opposed Kurdish autonomy in northern Iraq, fearing that it would create unrest and independent aspirations among Kurdish populations within Turkey. Any successful reconstruction movement in northern Iraq involving the Kurds will, therefore, have to be the product of negotiations between both the Iraqi and Turkish governments. Negotiations of this type will likely delay the process of normalizing life in northern Iraq via reconstruction efforts.

  Contributing to the EOI in Iraq is the presence of different ethnic units with conflicting interests. Similar to Turkey (see Sirkeci 2000), Iraq hosts a multiethnic population comprised of Arabs (72%-77%), Kurds (12%-15%), Turkmen, Assyrians and others (5%-15%). These ethnic groups are divided among different religious groups (Shi'a Muslims 60%-65%, Sunni Muslims 32%-37%, Christians and others 3%), speaking mainly Arabic, Kurdish, Assyrian, and Armenian (CIA, 2003) (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Ethnic and Religious Units in Iraq

Source: UT Map Library

  The available demographic data indicate that Iraq's population has increased from 12.9 million in 1980, to 17.3 million in 1990, to 24.7 million in 2003. This reflects a population growth rate of around 3% (UN 2001 2002, and CIA 2003). This is much higher than similar growth rates in Europe and North America. For example, the population growth rate between 1995 and 2000 was 2.78% in Iraq, whilst the corresponding figures were 1.35% in the world, 1.07% in North America and 0.02% in Europe. This rapidly growing Iraqi population includes a very large and young segment. Individuals under the age of 14 years constitute 42% of the Iraqi population, compared to 21.5% in North America and 17.5% in Europe (UN 2001, 2002). Infant mortality rates are high and reflect Iraq's environment of insecurity. Between 1995 and 2000 the infant

mortality rate was 94.9 per thousand in Iraq, compared to 5.9 in the UK, 9.7 in Europe and 7.1 in North America. Total fertility rates are also high in Iraq. Iraqi woman are having more than 5 children during their lifetime, compared to 2 in North America and 1.4 in Europe. Educational opportunities are far from satisfactory in Iraq. Literacy rates among Iraqis are strikingly low. As of 2003, only about 40% of total population could read and write and less than a quarter of women were literate, compared to 56% of men.

In contrast to the available demographic data, there are few available sources that illuminate the current socioeconomic EOI in Iraq. But some general figures are available. The statistics are often crude estimates by international agencies with a wide range of error. It is hoped by this author that the new Iraqi administration will begin the process of gathering accurate statistics so that the country's socioeconomic profile will become known again with an acceptable degree of accuracy. What is known is that the Iraqi economy is dominated by the oil sector. The oil sector is responsible for about 95% of all foreign exchange earnings. Even so, it has not been able to substantially alleviate the socioeconomic deprivation of the majority.

Financial problems for the country abound. The current fiscal situation can be traced to massive monetary expenditures during the eight-year war with Iran in the 1980s and subsequent Gulf wars. Three consecutive wars in less than 25 years drastically reduced Iraq's economic activity. The economy was further damaged by post Gulf war sanctions. Saddam Hussein's flagrant misuse of the nation's treasury was yet another important factor that contributed to the sorry state of the economy. The March-April 2003 Iraq War was the "nail in the coffin," bringing the country's economy to a complete halt. Living conditions for average Iraqi citizens do not appear to be getting better. In the short span of 25 years, Iraq was transformed from an oil rich, independent country to one in need of humanitarian aid.

The picture that has been drawn above reveals an Iraq that is beset with a strong set of push factors for migration. Within the EOI context, opportunity frameworks will be created, and potential Iraqi migrants will take their chances. Following the establishment of a representative government in Iraq, and after most of the Coalition Forces have left the country, ethnic discord among different ethnic units in Iraq will no doubt continue to stimulate large-scale migration outflows toward the prosperous countries in the West.

Possible Outcomes for Europe: A New Wave of Iraqi Asylum Migration

As the post-conflict period in Turkey illustrated, the end of overt conflict does not necessarily result in a halt to migration outflows. The arrest of the Kurdish leader Abdullah Ocalan in November of 1998 was thought by many Turkish residents to mark the end of ethnic conflict. However, international migration of Turkish Kurds did not halt (Sirkeci 2003b). A similar migration scenario is likely to unfold in postwar Iraq.

The current pattern of Iraqi international migration must be understood in relationship to existing inter-ethnic conflicts, deteriorating socioeconomic conditions, and international migration rules and regulations. European migration patterns (especially in-migration patterns) have been particularly responsive to conflicts taking place in surrounding areas. For example, during the 1990's thousands of Bosnians arrived in Europe due to the conflict in former Yugoslavia. This same conflict led to the migration of thousands of Kosovans from Kosovo and Kurds from Turkey, both ethnic groups

seeking asylum in Europe. Conflicts in the periphery of Europe, like those currently taking place in the Middle East, should be considered as important causes of migration to Western European countries.

Despite the massive refugee flows from Iraq to neighboring countries like Iran, Jordan, Syria and Turkey, most asylum migration from Iraq has been to Western European countries. In recent decades, more than 90 percent of Iraqi asylum applications were filed in Western European countries (Table 4). This pattern is significant and can be explained on the basis of "opportunity frameworks." These asylum seekers may well have already possessed a migration agenda and chose to take advantage of the EOI context when the conditions became appropriate to seek asylum. Given that contemporary Iraq is characterized by economic, social and political instability—all of which combine to create an environment of insecurity--more asylum migrations from Iraq to Europe can be expected in the coming years. And many of these attempts will be clandestine, involving illegal migration flows originating from within Iraq. This prediction is based on a number of reasons. First, international migration rules and regulations have changed, leaving limited room for regular migration. Second, inter-ethnic/religious conflict within Iraq is likely to delay the political and economic reconstruction of the country. Third, the reconstruction of Iraq's economy will likely take at least a decade to complete.

The cumulative effect of the abovementioned factors will result in a long period of "insecurity" (primarily material insecurity) for the majority, resulting in the establishment of strong push factors that will impact migration patterns. Because of preexisting migration networks, Iraqi migrants are likely to continue to be attracted to specific European countries like Germany, the UK, the Netherlands and Sweden. Each of these countries already contains a large Iraqi immigrant community. Other countries like Italy, Greece, and Turkey are also likely to receive their fare share of Iraqi migrants. Turkey will undoubtedly continue to be a "transit country," as has been the case during the last two decades. In a repeat of the 1990s, Greece and Italy, constituting the permeable borders of the EU, are likely to face boatloads of Iraqis arriving at their shores.

Within this picture, the Kurds warrant specific attention. Because of Saddam Hussein's oppressive regime targeting the Kurds, the Kurds dominated the asylum flows during the 1980s and 1990s. Consequently, the Kurds were able to form strong migrations networks during this period--stronger networks, in fact, than most other ethnic units in Iraq. The Kurds can be expected, therefore, to comprise a large share (if not the largest share) of future migration flows. More research is needed to shed light on this matter. Migration flows will also be affected by the new governmental structure that is being formed in Iraq. Early indications suggest that more privileges will be given to the Kurds as a reward for their support during the war of March-April 2003.

The influx of asylum seekers is currently a big issue in Europe, especially in the UK. The UK is currently the most popular destination for asylum migration. Public debates in the UK are becoming heated, focusing on the increasing number of asylum seekers and the perceived burden they place on British taxpayers. Problems arising from the establishment of large asylum seeker populations in European countries will likely grow in concert with future migrant inflows. European migration policies, in this regard, need to be revised to better reflect an understanding of the complex nature of the ethnic and political conflicts that are taking place at its periphery. For example safe country

definitions need to be revised to distinguish specific ethnic groups in countries that are labeled as "safe." The new asylum law in Europe is a good example of such a revision, but only if the voices of UNHCR and other concerned groups are heard and acted upon. The EOI concept represents a novel approach that can be used to better understand and foresee migration trends. The concept appears especially useful in making sense of cases where migrants are subjected to economic stress and inter-ethnic conflict. The EOI concept can, therefore, be applied to various other cases bearing similar characteristics.

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