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Published in:
International Affairs

DOI:
[10.1093/ia/iia322](https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia322)

2023

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Kadhum, O. (2023). Nation-Destroying, Emigration and Iraqi Nationhood after the 2003 intervention. *International Affairs*, 99(2), 587-604. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia322>

Total number of authors:
1

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Nation-destroying, emigration and Iraqi nationhood after the 2003 intervention

OULA KADHUM

While emigration and population displacements have long been a feature of Iraqi history,¹ this article argues that the 2003 Anglo-American intervention of Iraq and its legacy have contributed to the gradual disappearance of many non-Muslim Iraqi minorities from Iraqi territory. The institutionalized system of *muhasasa ta'ifiya*, where parliamentary seats are apportioned along ethnic and sectarian lines, and de-Baathification policies put in place under the auspices of the Anglo-American occupation, along with a lack of security and protection for Iraq's most vulnerable communities, have played a significant role in the emigration of hundreds of thousands of members of Iraqi minorities, as they faced violence, land grabs and genocide.

Though the legacy of 2003 Iraq can be attributed to a confluence of several domestic and geopolitical factors, I will argue here that the intervention set in motion a process of *nation-destroying* instead of *nation-building*, as Iraqi nationhood was divided along primordial lines.² Caught between more dominant and competing ethnic and sectarian nationalisms, non-Muslim Iraqi minorities became targets in the quest for territorial gain and political power, or were *otherized* through *takfir* campaigns and imagined out of the nation.³ This heralded an unprecedented and steady level of emigration among non-Muslim minorities.⁴ This, I contend, has changed the ethnic and religious demographic of Iraq and the identity of the Iraqi nation-state, as well as fragmenting Iraq's multiple ethnic and religious nations both inside and outside the country.

Indeed, within the process of migrating from Iraq, the effects of *nation-destroying* have been transported to the diaspora, strengthening communal identities, altering attachments to Iraq and sowing division among Iraqi communities abroad. This has led to the creation of fragmented and distanced transnational ethnic and

¹ 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, 2004); Charles Tripp, *A history of Iraq*, 3rd edn (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Phebe Marr and Ibrahim al-Marashi, *The modern history of Iraq*, 4th edn (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2017).

² Walker Connor, 'Nation-building or nation-destroying?', *World Politics* 24: 3, 1972, pp. 319–55, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009753>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 25 Nov. 2022.)

³ *Takfir* campaigns refer to the campaigns by ISIS to target non-Muslim and Muslim infidels; see e.g. Jamileh Kadivar, 'Exploring *takfir*, its origins and contemporary use: the case of *takfiri* approach in Daesh's media', *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 7: 3 2020, pp. 259–85, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2347798920921706>.

⁴ Minority Rights Group International, *Crossroads: the future of Iraq's minorities after ISIS*, report (London, 2017).

religious Iraqi nations in diaspora. While some groups, such as the Kurds and the Shi'a, have been empowered as a result, for others of Iraq's minorities, now scattered all over the globe, dispersal threatens the survival even of their identities as they contend with assimilation and a loss of culture and language in the absence of physical links to Iraq.

This article thus sheds light on a less discussed aspect of the intervention of Iraq; the emigration of Iraqi minorities and its broader significance for Iraqi nationhood. In doing so, it attends to acknowledged gaps in our understanding of population displacements and the nation-state.⁵ While there are a few important scholarly studies on internal displacement and its effects on return and citizenship, which present their own dynamics for Iraqi nationhood,⁶ to this author's knowledge this article offers the first comprehensive study of the effects of *emigration* of Iraq's non-Muslim minorities, including its effect on Iraqi nationhood within the new Iraqi nation-state. Also, it brings the studies of migration and nationalism into conversation in discussing *emigration* in nationalizing processes, a much-neglected area in migration scholarship, where there is a strong bias towards perceptions of immigration in western receiving states and its effect on the nation-state.⁷ Finally, and conceptually, this article builds on the concept of *nation-destroying* proposed by Walker Connor, to show that in ethnically and religiously divided conflict states, *nation-destroying* is a more apt term for describing nationalist struggles; for in these contexts, ethnic competition for power often leads to the destruction or subjugation of weaker ethnic nationalisms before one ethnic group succeeds in dominating and homogenizing the nation with the state.⁸ The term *nation-destroying* is thus a useful concept for analysing the nexus of emigration and nationalism in ethnically divided conflict states where citizens may experience, and simultaneously undergo, very different nationalizing processes, entailing inclusion for some and exclusion for others. Importantly for migration studies, it also has implications for transnational nations who are implicated in the nationalizing struggles of their homelands, empowering some while distancing others.

The article proceeds with a section on methodology, where data-gathering, interview methods, participant selection and positionality are discussed to elucidate how the research was conducted. This is followed by a review of the literature on migration, emigration and the nation-state; here *nation-destroying* is introduced as a useful analytical concept for the study of emigration and nationhood in ethnically divided conflict states such as Iraq. The literature review also draws attention to the concept of conflict-generated diaspora, providing a more

⁵ Géraldine Chatelard, 'The politics of population movements in contemporary Iraq: a research agenda', in Jordi Tejel, Peter Sluglett, Riccardo Bocco and Hamit Bozarslan, eds, *Writing the modern history of Iraq: historiographical and political challenges*, World Scientific/Imperial College Press, pp. 359–78, 2012, https://doi.org/10.1142/9789814390576_0022.

⁶ David Romano, 'Whose house is this anyway? IDP and refugee return in post-Saddam Iraq', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 18: 4, 2005, pp. 430–53, <https://doi.org/10.1093/refuge/feio39>; Irene Costantini and Dylan O'Driscoll, 'Practices of exclusion, narratives of inclusion: violence, population movements and identity politics in post-2014 northern Iraq', *Ethnicities* 20: 3, 2020, pp. 481–500, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796819858712>.

⁷ Hein de Haas, 'A theory of migration: the aspirations–capabilities framework', *Comparative Migration Studies* 9: 8, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-020-00210-4>.

⁸ Connor, 'Nation-building or nation-destroying?'

intersectional and nuanced account of how transnationalism can simultaneously provide opportunities for some while negating opportunities for others.⁹ Next comes the empirical section, divided into two parts. The first discusses the findings of the data and reveals how *nation-destroying* was set in motion following the institutionalization of the ethno-sectarian system, de-Baathification policies and their attendant security vacuum, and the impact of these factors on Iraqi minorities. The second explores how *nation-destroying* migrated into the diaspora because of events in Iraq; here it has also distanced Iraq's ethnic and religious nations from one another. It also demonstrates that the results of the process of migrating, the dispersal of Iraq's minorities all over the globe, is threatening their existence as transnational nations, owing to assimilation and the loss of connections to Iraq. Finally, the article reflects on the concept of *nation-destroying and conflict-generated diaspora*, illuminating our understanding of nation-building processes in ethnically and religiously divided conflict states, and the likely future fate of Iraq's minorities.

Methodology

This article is interested in exploring how *nation-destroying* in Iraq and the emigration of Iraqi minorities has fragmented Iraqi nationalism both inside and outside Iraq. Because of continuing conflict in Iraq and ethical considerations at the time of research, it was not possible to conduct fieldwork inside the country. Thus the diaspora, defined here as individuals who continue to see themselves as belonging to an 'imagined transnational community', physical or otherwise, and who are mobilized transnationally through various 'stances, projects, claims, idioms, practices',¹⁰ provided a lens through which to look into the effects of intervention and war. They not only followed events from afar,¹¹ but mobilized politically to ensure the representation and protection of their kin, political parties and organizations, illuminating their conceptions and visions of Iraqi nationalism. Thus, interviews with the diaspora allowed me not only to learn about the effects of the intervention on different ethnic and religious communities, to observe how conflicts in Iraq were transported into the diaspora,¹² and to examine the divisions that existed within and between communities, but also to observe how this process altered connections to Iraq as well as identities in the diaspora. Furthermore, in the absence of fieldwork in Iraq, interviews with the politically mobilized diaspora and those with connections to Iraq became even more crucial for providing insights into the political and social conditions faced by ethnic minorities, as well as dominant groups, all of whom related experiences of family, friends and their communities inside the country.

⁹ Oula Kadhum, 'Ethno-sectarianism in Iraq, diaspora positionality and political transnationalism', *Global Networks*, 12 Dec. 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1111/glob.12222>.

¹⁰ Rogers Brubaker, 'The "diaspora" diaspora', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28: 1, 2005, p. 13, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0141987042000289997>.

¹¹ Zainab Saleh, *Return to ruin: Iraqi narratives of exile and nostalgia* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

¹² Élise Féron, 'Transporting and re-inventing conflicts: conflict-generated diasporas and conflict autonomisation', *Cooperation and Conflict* 52: 3, 2017, pp. 360–76, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836716671759>.

The article draws on fieldwork conducted with over 150 members of the Iraqi diaspora in Germany, Britain and Sweden from 2013 to 2016 for my doctoral work on Iraqi political transnationalism, and from 2017 onwards for my post-doctoral research on Iraqi religious transnationalism. For both periods I conducted semi-structured interviews with Iraqis of different ethnicities and religions, who had participated in different waves of migration spanning the period from the 1950s to the early 2000s. My interviews explored the drivers of Iraqi migration, interviewees' transnational connections to Iraq from 2003 onwards, their transnational mobilization, their identities and senses of belonging. They involved Iraqi gatekeepers from different communities, political parties and charitable organizations, as well as first- and second-generation Iraqi migrants. Conducting interviews with the Iraqi diaspora over time has also provided valuable insights into differences in migration flows and changes in national attachments from 2003 onwards.

All interviewees were briefed prior to data collection on the nature of the research, and permissions were sought from all participants before proceeding and recording. Participants were also briefed about the use of the data, and assured of their anonymity with reference to storage of the data and its use, as well as their right to withdraw their interview at any time.

Though the article draws on insights from the data collected throughout the years I have been working with the Iraqi diaspora, it engages directly with twelve interviews from the collected fieldwork, which elucidate the dynamics and consequences of *nation-destroying* both for Iraqi minorities and for Iraq's dominant ethnic and sectarian groups. These include interviews with three Mandaean, three Christians, two Yazidis, one Jew, two Kurds and one Arab Shi'a. Owing to the sensitive nature of the interviews, and to protect the anonymity of the respondents, I have not revealed the gender or age of participants interviewed.

Access to participants was initially conducted through trusted gatekeepers and personal networks, before snowball sampling of Iraqis from all ethnicities, sects and classes in the diaspora who were engaged in transnational activism towards Iraq. As a researcher of Iraqi heritage, access to the community was also facilitated by my perceived 'insider' status and my knowledge of the community, language and history of Iraq.¹³

I also carried out interviews with the UN refugee agency UNHCR in Lebanon and Jordan, and with NGOs in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2021, to glean a better understanding of the issues facing Iraqi refugees in Middle Eastern camps and host societies, which also shed light on the ethnicization and sectarianization of migration corridors, networks, processes and systems.¹⁴

¹³ Robert K. Merton, 'Insiders and outsiders: a chapter in the sociology of knowledge', *American Journal of Sociology* 78: 1, 1972, pp. 9–47, <https://doi.org/10.1086/225294>.

¹⁴ Costantini and O'Driscoll, 'Practices of exclusion, narratives of inclusion'.

Migration, emigration and the nation-state

The immigration bias in migration studies has seen the question of nationalism and belonging largely explore the effects of *immigration* on predominantly receiving western states by non-citizen others.¹⁵ Indeed, a vast literature exists on the citizenship regimes of western nations, underlining how non-citizen *others* have come to be integrated or excluded by states and societies and the ideologies that have motivated their populations.¹⁶ Less explored in the migration scholarship is the other side of the equation related to the *emigration* of ethnic minorities and its effect on nationalizing processes in the sending state.¹⁷ How does emigration of excluded minorities influence nationalism and the nation-state in sending states?

Certainly, there is a vast empirical literature on conflict-generated diasporas, including the Jews of Babylon, Armenians, Sri Lankans and Kurds, among others, who have fled from persecution and created transnational nations in their bid to maintain their ethnic identities, communities and connections to their ancestral homelands.¹⁸ The concept of conflict-generated diaspora has emerged in recent years as a means of delineating the formation of ethnic nations dispersed owing to conflict, as opposed to other types of diaspora formation, which might have emerged due to alternative migrations. Scholars have drawn attention to the ways in which conflict shapes the identities and emotions of conflict-generated diasporas, which in turn motivate political action.¹⁹ Diasporas are said to be more emotive because they reside outside the territorial nation. They are therefore more inclined to act as a means of performing their identities and asserting their place within the ‘people’.²⁰ Thus, many studies have concluded that conflict-gener-

¹⁵ De Haas, ‘A theory of migration’.

¹⁶ See e.g. Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and nationhood in France and Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992); Ruud Koopmans, Paul Statham, Marco Giugni and Florence Passy, *Contested citizenship: immigration and cultural diversity in Europe*, Social movements, protest, and contention, vol. 25 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Yasemin Nuhoglu Soysal, *Limits of citizenship: migrants and postnational membership in Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Ruud Koopmans and Paul Statham, ‘How national citizenship shapes transnationalism: migrant and minority claims-making in Germany, Great Britain and the Netherlands’, in Christian Joppke and Ewa Morawska, eds, *Toward assimilation and citizenship: immigrants in liberal nation-states* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1057/9780230554795_8, pp. 195–238.

¹⁷ A seminal textbook of migration is Hein de Haas, Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, *The age of migration—* and yet even here only a single page is dedicated to mentioning how forced migration of ethnic minorities can occur in nationalizing processes (p. 86), while the section on migration and origin societies focuses on development and brain-drain; there is no section on emigration in nationalist struggles. See Hein de Haas, Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, *The age of migration: international population movements in the modern world*, 6th edn (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

¹⁸ Fiona B. Adamson and Madeleine Demetriou, ‘Remapping the boundaries of “state” and “national identity”’: incorporating diasporas into IR theorizing’, *European Journal of International Relations* 13: 4, 2007, pp. 489–526, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066107083145>; Khachig Tölölyan, ‘Elites and institutions in the Armenian transnation’, *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 9: 1, 2000, pp. 107–36, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dsp.2000.0004>; Khachig Tölölyan, ‘The nation-state and its others: in lieu of a preface’, *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 1: 1, 1991, pp. 3–7, <https://doi.org/10.1353/dsp.1991.0008>; Sarah Wayland, ‘Ethnonationalist networks and transnational opportunities: the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora’, *Review of International Studies* 30: 3, 2004, pp. 405–26, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266210504006138>; Gabriel Sheffer, *Diaspora politics: at home abroad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Gabriel Sheffer, *Modern diasporas in international politics* (London: Croom Helm, 1986).

¹⁹ Terrence Lyons, ‘Conflict-generated diasporas and transnational politics in Ethiopia’, *Conflict, Security & Development* 7: 4, 2007, pp. 529–49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14678800701692951>.

²⁰ Yossi Shain and Aharon Barth, ‘Diasporas and International Relations theory’, *International Organization* 57: 3,

ated diasporas are more likely to engage in political transnational activities than economic migrants.²¹

However, with a few exceptions,²² most research on conflict-generated diaspora has focused on an assumption that all members have a proclivity towards political transnational engagement.²³ This homogenizing approach has lacked intersectionality and nuance in failing to demonstrate why not all conflict-generated diasporas are motivated to engage politically with their homelands, and why different attitudes may exist even within diasporas from the same homeland.²⁴ Furthermore, this literature has neglected to take into consideration how the type of conflict, the extent of violence and the degree of existential threat can shape the differential attachments of diasporas to their former homelands, as well as their identities. Indeed, the case of Iraqi minorities since 2003 reveals that though initially motivated to mobilize towards Iraq, the legacy of the 2003 intervention and the violence perpetrated against Christian, Mandaean and Yazidi minorities, among others, has reduced political transnationalism and national attachments to Iraq. More work is therefore needed in understanding the intra-diaspora emigration dynamics of multiple ethnic and religious minorities from the same homeland and their exclusion from nationalizing processes. How do these affect nationhood and senses of national belonging?

Lessons from history and nationalizing states attest to the fact that population displacements and the forced migrations of minorities have occurred in many different eras and geographical locations, and within various civilizations as dominant nations have imposed their conceptions of nationhood on the rest of the population.²⁵ At best, the exclusion of ethnic or religious minorities has often resulted in the displacement of persecuted minorities or exclusion from the national imaginary;²⁶ and at worst it has resulted in ethnic cleansing in the creation of emerging nation-states.²⁷ Indeed, ethnic cleansing, which refers to

2003, pp. 449–79, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818303573015>.

²¹ Alejandro Portes, 'Conclusion: towards a new world—the origins and effects of transnational activities', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22: 2, 1999, pp. 463–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/014198799329567>; Lyons, 'Conflict-generated diasporas and transnational politics in Ethiopia'; Alice Bloch, 'Zimbabweans in Britain: transnational activities and capabilities', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 34: 2, 2008, pp. 287–305, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830701823822>.

²² For one of these exceptions, see Élise Féron and Bruno Lefort, 'Diasporas and conflicts: understanding the nexus', *Diaspora Studies* 12: 1, 2019, pp. 34–51, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09739572.2018.1538687>.

²³ See e.g. Terrence Lyons, 'Diasporas and homeland conflict', in Miles Kahler and Barbara F. Walter, eds, *Territoriality and conflict in an era of globalization* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 111–29; Gabriel Sheffer, 'Ethno-national diasporas and security', *Survival* 36: 1, 1994, pp. 60–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396339408442724>; Maria Koinova, 'Sustained vs episodic mobilization among conflict-generated diasporas', *International Political Science Review* 37: 4, 2016, pp. 500–516, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192512115591641>.

²⁴ Kadhum, 'Ethno-sectarianism in Iraq'.

²⁵ Jennifer Jackson-Preece, 'Ethnic cleansing as an instrument of nation-state creation: changing state practices and evolving legal norms', *Human Rights Quarterly* 20: 4, 1998, pp. 817–42, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/762790>.

²⁶ Ahmet İçduygu, Şule Toktas and B. Ali Soner, 'The politics of population in a nation-building process: emigration of non-Muslims from Turkey', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31: 2, 2008, pp. 358–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870701491937>; Andreas Wimmer, 'Ethnic exclusion in nationalising states', in Gerard Delanty and Krishan Kumar, eds, *The Sage handbook of nations and nationalism* (London and Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006), pp. 334–44.

²⁷ Jackson-Preece, 'Ethnic cleansing as an instrument of nation-state creation'.

the cleansing of an ethnic group by a dominant ethnic group in a given area, to render the nation-state more homogeneous, has been a recurring feature in building nation-states.²⁸

In ethnically diverse countries such as Iraq, characterized by conflicting and competing ethnic and sectarian nationalisms, the ability to impose one's nationalist vision relies on the domination and suppression of other ethnic or sectarian nationalisms, whether through assimilation (integration), domination (authoritarian rule) or forceful removal (ethnic cleansing). It is the destruction of *other* ethnic identities that often lies at the heart of building nation-states.²⁹ In that sense, nation-building, as Walker Connor argues, is a misnomer for a process that should more aptly be addressed as '*nation-destroying*'.³⁰ Certainly, though there are multiple definitions of nation-building in the literature,³¹ the majority of scholars broadly agree that it is a process of political integration between political institutions and a nation's collectivity, with loyalty to co-nationals ranking above loyalty to ethnic tribe or group.³² As such, it suggests a consensus shared by a majority population within a state:³³ a key component that is missing in conflict and divided ethnic states.

Connor's argument that nation-building is a misnomer therefore is not entirely correct; rather, for ethnically divided conflict states, *nation-destroying* must occur *before* nation-building can commence, since nation-building implies the victors, the dominant nationalists, have achieved hegemonic status and succeeded in unifying the nation with the state. An historical example from Turkey following the fall of the Ottoman empire exemplifies this process of *nation-destroying*; here, gradually and over time, the meaning of Turkish nationalism shifted through the eradication of its non-Muslim populations so that Turkey became a unified ethno-cultural nation sharing a single language and religion.³⁴ In time, non-Muslim minorities—Armenians, Greeks and Jews, who had previously resided in the multinational territory of the Ottoman empire—came to be viewed as foreign elements. This was particularly the case following Turkey's war of independence (1919–22), which saw the Turks fighting non-Muslim minorities, some of whom fought with the allied forces, as well as the occupying forces. Non-Muslim minorities were effectively imagined out of the Turkish nation, which eventually led to their forced emigration and deportation, solidifying Turkey's ethno-cultural national identity with Islam.³⁵ So, whereas in 1914 non-Muslims constituted 19.5

²⁸ Jackson-Preece, 'Ethnic cleansing as an instrument of nation-state creation', p. 822.

²⁹ Jackson-Preece, 'Ethnic cleansing as an instrument of nation-state creation'.

³⁰ Connor, 'Nation-building or nation-destroying?'

³¹ Remi Chukwudi Okeke, Chinyere Patricia Ikeh and Christopher Chukwu Oku, 'The concept of nation-building: theoretical expositions', *Journal of Humanities and Social Policy* 8: 1, 2022, pp. 17–27, <https://www.iiardjournals.org/abstract.php?j=JHSP&pn=The%20Concept%20of%20Nationbuilding:%20Theoretical%20Expositions%20&tid=2810>.

³² Andreas Wimmer, *Nation building: why some countries come together while others fall apart* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvc77kjjx>.

³³ Harris Mylonas, 'Assimilation and its alternatives: caveats in the study of nation-building policies', in Erica Chenoweth and Adria Lawrence, eds, *Rethinking violence: states and non-state actors in conflict* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), pp. 83–116, <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262014205.003.0004>.

³⁴ İçduygu et al., 'The politics of population in a nation-building process'.

³⁵ Nesim Şeker, 'Demographic engineering in the late Ottoman empire and the Armenians', *Middle Eastern Stud-*

per cent of the Ottoman/Turkish population, by 1927 that figure had decreased to 2.5 per cent, changing the demographic of Turkey towards a more homogeneous nation.³⁶ *Nation-destroying* and *emigration* thus solidified Turkey's nation-state.

Although the historical contexts differ and the dissolution of the Ottoman empire was a nationalizing moment *par excellence* for many ethnic nations, I make the claim in this article that a similar process has been occurring in Iraq. Iraq's ethnic and religious minorities, specifically its non-Muslim minorities, have not only been imagined out of the nation because of post-2003 ethnic and sectarian state-building, but have also been left unprotected from state actors, militias and terrorist groups such as Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), who have fought for competing conceptions of the nation-state. The result, as I argue in the empirical section below, is that the intervention in Iraq and its legacy have resulted in *nation-destroying*, which has seen the gradual and persistent emigration of Iraqi minorities who have suffered all the hallmarks associated with the concept of ethnic cleansing, including '[...] confiscation of property; political violence in the form of pogroms and purges; or terror campaigns inflicting beatings, rape, castration, and even death'.³⁷ This of course has led to their dispersal all over the world, further homogenizing the Iraqi nation and strengthening Shi'a and Kurdish state-building inside Iraq.

The intervention of Iraq, nation-destroying and Iraq's non-Muslim minorities

Throughout Iraq's history and nationalist struggles, the fate of the country's non-Muslim minorities has been shaped by the confluence of multiple regional, geopolitical and imperial interventions.³⁸ Indeed, from the creation of Iraq by the British in 1921 to the present day, Iraqi Christians, Jews, Faili Kurds and many more have found themselves political scapegoats or pawns in wider nationalist or sectarian struggles. For instance, the Christians of Iraq were seen as allies of the British during the mandate period, and the role they played in crushing a revolt against the British in 1941 created further hostility towards them on the part of the Iraqi government. Though they were nominally included in the nation, the discrimination they felt, linguistically, religiously and culturally, resulted in many leaving after the departure of the British in 1955 and beyond.³⁹ For the Jews of Iraq, anti-Zionist sentiment and Arab nationalism unleashed a pogrom against them in 1941, in which 130 were killed and many injured. The fate of Arab Jews, however, was sealed following the creation of the State of Israel in 1948. The resulting anti-Zionist sentiment, which swept through the Middle East, led to their deportation,

ies 43: 3, 2007, pp. 461–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263200701246157>; İçduygu et al., 'The politics of population in a nation-building process'.

³⁶ İçduygu et al., 'The politics of population in a nation-building process'.

³⁷ Jackson-Preece, 'Ethnic cleansing as an instrument of nation-state creation', p. 822.

³⁸ Marr and al-Marashi, *The modern history of Iraq*.

³⁹ Madawi al-Rasheed, 'The myth of return: Iraqi Arab and Assyrian refugees in London', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 7: 2–3, 1994, pp. 199–219, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/7.2-3.199>.

emigration and near-complete disappearance from Iraq's social fabric.⁴⁰ Similarly, Fails Kurds, and those perceived to have Iranian descent, were subject to forced deportations by the Ba'athist regime, as a result of which thousands emigrated as hostilities with Iran reached a peak in the 1970s.⁴¹

In many respects, then, we can see that the persecution and emigration of Iraqi minorities has been a feature of Iraqi history and Iraqi nationalism spanning the country's turbulent past. However, while this process has been attributed to nation-building,⁴² I argue instead that it has been as a result of *nation-destroying* in a bid to homogenize the ethnic nation with the state. Indeed, the link between *nation-destroying* and emigration has continued to define Iraq's nationalist struggle since 2003; yet, as I argue here, the key difference between the pre-2003 and post-2003 periods has been the *scale* of emigration of Iraq's non-Muslim minorities, as a result of ethno-sectarian state-building and its violent legacy, which has permanently changed the demographic and imaginary of Iraq from a multinational state to a Shi'a/Kurdish nation-state.

Three important drivers following intervention have contributed to the emigration of Iraq's non-Muslim minorities. In the first place, as the intervention in Iraq turned into an occupation, state-building in Iraq was officially ethnicized and sectarianized under a confessional system, which allocated seats on the basis of ethnic and sectarian quotas. As demographic majorities, the Kurds and the Shi'a of Iraq were automatically empowered under this new system, while Iraq's other communities were cast to the political and social periphery. Iraqi minorities were no longer discriminated against linguistically or culturally, as they were under the Iraqi constitution,⁴³ but their citizenship has been relegated from an active one to a passive one as their electoral power has effectively been curtailed. Indeed, apportioned just nine out of 329 parliamentary seats in the parliamentary electoral laws,⁴⁴ the ability of Iraqi minorities to participate with any significance in Iraq's democratic governance has been negligible if not non-existent.

Effectively, post-2003 ethnic and sectarian state-building in Iraq by coalition forces and Iraqi elites essentially precipitated the process of *nation-destroying*, since the imagined community of Iraq did not rest on a civic nationalism, founded on shared political values and a shared commitment to upholding liberal institutions;⁴⁵ rather, it championed allegiance to ethnic nationalisms and primordial identifications. This led to competing ethnic and sectarian nationalisms in the fight for power, leaving Iraqi minorities in a precarious position in relation to dominant groups. For instance, the disputed territories in northern Iraq, such as Nineveh governorate, where many minorities have historically resided, have

⁴⁰ Tamar Morad, Dennis Elliott Shasha and Robert Shasha, eds, *Iraq's last Jews: stories of daily life, upheaval, and escape from modern Babylon*, Palgrave Studies in Oral History (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

⁴¹ Tripp, *A history of Iraq*.

⁴² Chatelard, 'The politics of population movements in contemporary Iraq'.

⁴³ See articles 2 and 4 of the Iraqi constitution.

⁴⁴ Victoria Stewart-Jolley, *Iraq's electoral system: why successive reforms fail to bring change* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2021), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/10/iraqs-electoral-system>.

⁴⁵ Anna Stolz, 'Civic nationalism and language policy', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 37: 3, 2009, pp. 257–92, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1088-4963.2009.01160.x>.

become a battleground for conflict between the Kurdish regional government and Baghdad's central government, leaving Iraqi minorities vulnerable to deportation, detention and arrest.⁴⁶ Disputed territories and competing nationalisms between Kurdish and Shi'a state-building have therefore led to the destruction of many of Iraq's minority communities, who, unprotected by the state, have either migrated internally or emigrated to neighbouring countries and beyond.⁴⁷

Also, as the process of *nation-destroying* was set in motion by the dominant ethnic and sectarian groups, the marginalization of Arab Sunni populations, who had held political supremacy until 2003, began. Hundreds of thousands of teachers, military officers and soldiers found themselves jobless, dismissed from state and society through processes of de-Baathification and disbanding of the army.⁴⁸ These indiscriminate policies pursued by coalition forces and diasporic elites led to the political and social disenfranchisement of Iraq's Arab Sunni population, and would inevitably lead to sectarian contestations for power as the old guard fought to carve out their place in Iraq's modern nation-state.⁴⁹ Once again, Iraqi minorities found themselves in the crossfire during Iraq's civil war, this time between opposed Sunni and Shi'a forces. Christian and Mandaean communities faced 'destruction and defacement of religious buildings, mass murder of congregations ... abduction, ransoming, and murder of religious and civic leaders and individuals including children, forced conversion to Islam using tactics such as death threats, rape, and forced marriage' at the hands of Shi'a and Sunni militias, Al-Qaeda, Ba'athists and criminal gangs, leading to their exodus.⁵⁰ Indeed, as one Mandaean interviewee who mobilized from Sweden to protect Mandaeans stated: 'During Saddam's time there was state oppression, there was some kind of boundary to persecution but now persecution is general, you don't know where it's coming from.'⁵¹

It was during this time that minorities in the diaspora mobilized heavily to protect their kin inside Iraq by appealing to their European governments, members of parliament and the UN, while simultaneously trying to help family and friends to flee the bloodshed. One Mandaean gatekeeper in the UK described this period of *takfir* campaigns against non-Muslims with a personal anecdote:

So, my parents in 2007, they entered their house, ... in Iraq and they left them a bullet in an envelope. My mother saw armed men enter our property, they broke the door, it was a wooden door, and they entered the house, didn't touch anything but left us a bullet in a letter and said, you infidels, you have 24 hours to leave Iraq. Our area was taken over

⁴⁶ Samer Muscati and Peter Bouckaert, *On vulnerable ground: violence against minority communities in Nineveh province's disputed territories* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2009).

⁴⁷ According to a report of September 2022, there remained 1,177,234 internally displaced Iraqis spread over 18 governorates. See Displacement Tracking Matrix, *Iraq Master List Report 126*, 2 Sept. 2022, <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/iraq-master-list-report-126-0>. See also Joseph Sassoon, *The Iraqi refugees: the new crisis in the Middle East* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2011).

⁴⁸ Marr and al-Marashi, *The modern history of Iraq*.

⁴⁹ Tim Jacoby and Nassima Neggaz, 'Sectarianism in Iraq: the role of the coalition provisional authority', *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 11: 3, 2018, pp. 478–500, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2018.1487178>.

⁵⁰ Preti Taneja and Minority Rights Group International, *Assimilation, exodus, eradication: Iraq's minority communities since 2003* (London: Minority Rights Group International, 2007).

⁵¹ Interview with Mandaean gatekeeper, Stockholm, 8 Oct. 2014.

by Sunnis ... This happened to a lot of Mandaeans in 2007, the Mandaeans were forcibly expelled from Iraq in an official way due to their religion. The Sunnis and Shi'a both drove us out.⁵²

Thus, despite the provisions of article 7 of the Iraqi constitution, aimed at protecting Iraq's territory from 'any entity or program that adopts, incites, facilitates, glorifies, promotes, or justifies racism or terrorism or accusations of being an infidel [*takfir*] or ethnic cleansing, especially the Saddamist Ba'ath in Iraq and its symbols, under any name whatsoever',⁵³ Iraqi minorities were left unprotected and vulnerable, leading to their consistent emigration from Iraq. Tragically, while article 7 also states that the 'State shall undertake to combat terrorism in all its forms, and shall work to protect its territories from being a base, pathway, or field for terrorist activities', the state itself has been infiltrated by state-sponsored militias;⁵⁴ thus, as one report rightly stated, 'protection from State authorities would, in almost all cases, not be available'.⁵⁵

This situation led to the creation of the Mandaean Human Rights Group, which worked tirelessly to lobby European governments and the UN to protect the Mandaeans from ethnic cleansing and accept their asylum claims.⁵⁶ Though their lobbying did not achieve protection for the Mandaeans inside Iraq, their work helped Mandaeans to claim asylum abroad, where the majority of Mandaeans now reside.⁵⁷ Indeed, according to the Mandaean Human Rights Group and the Mandaean Associations Union, 90 per cent of Mandaeans now live abroad, with the largest populations in the United States, Sweden and Australia.⁵⁸

The outcome for Iraqi minorities in Iraq would only worsen with the rise of ISIS and its eventual takeover of Mosul in 2014. Though it would be simplistic to attribute the rise of ISIS solely to the intervention in Iraq and the coalition's policies, it is certainly the case that the fateful de-Baathification policies enacted in 2003 by the Coalition Provisional Authority and diasporic elites ignited a sectarian conflict, which led to the continuing marginalization of Sunnis in Iraq by the Shi'a, and eventually support for the Al-Qaeda-affiliated ISIS from Sunni tribes.⁵⁹ Within this context of extremist conceptions of nationalism and *nation-destroying*, non-Muslim minorities as well as Shi'a Muslims suffered immensely.

⁵² Interview with Mandaean gatekeeper, London, 4 Dec. 2019.

⁵³ US Commission on International Religious Freedom, 'Iraq's Permanent Constitution (March 2006)', 2022, <https://www.uscirf.gov/publications/iraqs-permanent-constitution-march-2006>.

⁵⁴ US Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom, *Iraq 2021 International religious freedom report* (Washington DC, 2 June 2022), <https://www.state.gov/reports/2021-report-on-international-religious-freedom/iraq/>.

⁵⁵ Chris Chapman and Preti Taneja, *Uncertain refuge, dangerous return: Iraq's uprooted minorities*, (London: Minority Rights Group International, 2009), p. 33.

⁵⁶ See the Mandaean Associations Union website for the statements by the Mandaean Human Rights Group: <https://www.mandaeanunion.org/>.

⁵⁷ Interview with Mandaean gatekeeper, London, 4 Dec. 2019.

⁵⁸ Salam Farhan, Layla al Roomi and Suhaib Nashi, 'Submission on behalf of the Mandaean Human Rights Group to the Human Rights Committee's periodic review of Iraq in October 2015', 2015, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/IPeoples/EMRIP/CulturalHeritage/MandaeanHumanRightsGroup.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Willem Theo Oosterveld and Willem Bloem, *The rise and fall of ISIS: from inevitability to inevitability* (The Hague: Hague Centre for Strategic Studies, 2017), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep12613>.

The Yazidi genocide of 2014 in Sinjar saw 400,000 people killed, captured or forced to flee. Thousands now languish in Kurdish refugee camps or are adjusting to new host lands abroad. Only tens of thousands have been able to return to Sinjar, where they continue to face aerial attacks from Turkey, and a lack of representation and protection from Baghdad.⁶⁰ According to figures from UNHCR, there were 4.4 million internally displaced persons in Iraq in 2015,⁶¹ a year after the fall of Mosul. The numbers continued to rise until 2018, after the 2017 offensive by the Iraqi army against ISIS had successfully recaptured the city.

Inevitably, this existential threat has provoked further migrations across Iraq's borders, with an estimated 100,000 Iraqi Yazidis now residing in Germany alone and others in the United States, Sweden and the UK.⁶² The same fate has befallen Iraq's Mandaean and Christian populations, most of whom now reside all over the world outside Iraq.⁶³

Consequently, the external displacement of Iraq's minorities since 2003 has created one of the most significant demographic shifts in Iraqi history. While in 1990 there were around 60,000 Iraqi Mandaeans, it is reported that there are currently only around 5,000 left in Iraq.⁶⁴ Similarly, whereas before 2003 there were roughly 1.5 million Christians in Iraq, today that figure stands at just 250,000.⁶⁵ More generally, minorities in Iraq were said to comprise 10 per cent of the Iraqi population in 2003; these included Armenian, Syriac and Chaldo-Assyrian Christians, Baha'is, Jews, Sabaeen-Mandaeans and Yazidis as well as ethnic minorities such as Shabaks, Turkmen and Palestinian refugees.⁶⁶ By 2010, and even before the 2014 threat from ISIS, that number had dwindled to 3 per cent for Iraq's most vulnerable minority groups, excluding Turkmen and Faili Kurds.⁶⁷

Minorities, particularly non-Muslim minorities, are therefore being erased from the Iraqi nation through a gradual and consistent process of *nation-destroying*, which continues in Iraq in the shadows of the 2003 intervention and its legacy. Though some communities have been able to return to Iraq since 2017, owing to improved security and government incentives,⁶⁸ the majority of Iraq's minority populations now reside abroad, whether in refugee camps or as part of migrant communities. Most vulnerable groups have no wish to return to Iraq following the atrocities perpetrated against them—and those who do often have no homes, towns or livelihoods to return to. Consequently, the intervention in Iraq, and

⁶⁰ 'In Iraq's Sinjar, Yazidi returns crawl to a halt amid fears of Turkish airstrikes', *The New Humanitarian*, 10 Feb. 2022, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2022/2/10/Iraq-Sinjar-Yazidi-returns-halt-Turkish-airstrikes>.

⁶¹ UNHCR, 'Iraq', *Global Focus*, 2015, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/iraq?year=2015>.

⁶² Interview with Yazidi gatekeeper, Germany, 17 April 2016.

⁶³ Interviews with Mandaean and Christian Iraqis in the UK and Sweden, London, Oct. and Nov. 2014, and Stockholm, Oct. 2015.

⁶⁴ Interview with Mandaean gatekeeper, London, 4 Dec. 2019.

⁶⁵ Frank Gardner, 'Iraq's Christians "close to extinction"', *BBC News*, 23 May 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48333923>.

⁶⁶ Taneja and Minority Rights Group International, *Assimilation, exodus, eradication*.

⁶⁷ Elizabeth Ferris and Abbie Taylor, 'The past and future of Iraq's minorities', *Brookings* (blog), 8 Sept. 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/the-past-and-future-of-iraqs-minorities/>.

⁶⁸ Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 'Country profile: Iraq', 2021, <https://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/iraq>.

the political instability it catalysed inside the country, have since given rise to an economic instability which prevents the return of minority groups despite relatively improved security conditions. For many minority Iraqi communities, therefore, migration is a double-edged sword, which offers liberation but also dislocation from a territorial nation. In the place of that home nation, a transnational nation is emerging for Iraqi minorities as they rebuild in the diaspora. To this I now turn.

Fragmentation, transnational ethnic nations and belonging in the diaspora

The Anglo-American intervention in Iraq has touched the lives not only of Iraqis inside the country but also those of Iraqis in the diaspora, as the *nation-destroying* effects of ethnic and sectarian state-building inside the country have also led to nation fragmentation outside Iraq. As one Kurdish respondent put it:

After 2003 we found out our differences were more than what united us, the thing that united all these groups was for Saddam Hussein to be in power or against him. Unfortunately, and then, Americans started to deal with the Iraqis ... they started to mismanage the system altogether. And their mistakes affected us then we started to look all of us for our interests and to forget about Iraq.⁶⁹

The divisive politics of 2003 that fragmented Iraqis along confessional lines has had a resounding impact on Iraqis living in the diaspora who, owing to their ethnic, religious and ideological differences, have been positioned either more or less favourably in post-2003 Iraq.⁷⁰ This has had significant implications for Iraqi minority diasporic communities who were established in the West before 2003, as their transnational connections to Iraq have been transformed and have become increasingly tenuous. Simultaneously, Iraqi diasporic communities have also been divided in the diaspora as the corruption and power politics of 2003 have sown distrust and distance between Iraqi communities and groups. One Mandaean gatekeeper who tried to deepen relations with Iraq's other communities recounted that his attempts came to nothing as parties were ethnically and religiously divided.⁷¹

Migration patterns since 2003 have reflected this fragmentation. Historically, Iraqi migrants were drawn to broadly Arab or Iraqi communities in the West in cities such as London; but since 2003 Iraq's most vulnerable communities have increasingly relied on more narrow migrant networks, kin groups, and religious organizations or host-land governments to support their asylum efforts. In Sweden, Iraqi Christian and Mandaean communities have been supported by their kin groups who have lobbied the Swedish government to hasten their asylum applications. In Sweden, the Mandaean community, for instance, has been able to work with the migration ministry to authenticate the identities of Iraqi Mandaeans to expedite

⁶⁹ Interview with Iraqi Kurd, Skype call between London and Kurdistan region of Iraq, 22 March 2013.

⁷⁰ Kadhum, 'Ethno-sectarianism in Iraq.'

⁷¹ Interview with Mandaean gatekeeper, Södertälje, 16 Oct. 2014.

their asylum in Sweden.⁷² Meanwhile, Christian communities whose members have migrated from the 1960s onwards have used family reunification policies to bring their families over to Sweden, while chain migration within the community has seen populations from back home migrate en masse.

The process of migration and settlement in European host lands has also resulted in geographical isolation among Iraqi communities in the diaspora, who have relocated to where their co-ethnics reside to maintain their social, religious and cultural traditions. For instance, larger populations of Iraqi Yazidis live in Helsingborg, north of Malmö, while in Sodertalje, a small city south-west of Stockholm, thousands of mainly Christian and Mandaean Iraqis have been housed in tenements where Christian churches of all denominations—Syriac, Assyrian and Chaldean—exist to accommodate Iraqi Christian communities. Sodertalje thus has become a haven and home for Iraqi non-Muslim minorities who no longer feel able to return to Iraq because of the persecutions that their respective communities still face inside the country.

A ‘homing desire’,⁷³ a yearning to feel at home without physically returning, has been met by their religious institutions, ethnic diaspora associations and political parties, and transnational linkages with co-ethnics and co-religionists—and, increasingly, the internet, social media sites and web communication apps. Indeed, as one Mandaean explained in Sweden, the creation of a transnational Mandaean Human Rights Organization aimed to unite Mandaeans who were scattered across the world and ‘protect the Mandaeans from extinction’.⁷⁴ Similarly, for Iraqi Assyrian Christians, an annual convention is held every year in the United States to bring Assyrians together and to help raise funds for Assyrians all over the globe.⁷⁵

At the same time, as each Iraqi community creates their own Iraq and homing desire, Iraq’s diverse diaspora grows further apart and more insular. As their connections to Iraq weaken, their links to a multi-sited ethnic transnational nation strengthen in the absence of a physical space of belonging. As one Iraqi Christian in Sweden recounted:

Our role is linking our diaspora and our organizations inside Iraq and between our community here and there. And don’t forget we are not the same as Arabs and Kurds. Arabs and Kurds, the majority is in Iraq. Our majority is in the diaspora so those on the outside have a role.⁷⁶

For many minorities in the diaspora, that role has gradually been transformed from one of political transnational mobilization—to help rebuild Iraq in the early years of intervention—to one of maintaining their ethnic nation. First-generation minorities are increasingly fearful about assimilation into their host lands. As one diasporan remarked: ‘As an individual and a human you can live in this

⁷² Interview with Iraqi Mandaean gatekeeper, Sweden, 16 Oct. 2014.

⁷³ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of diaspora: contesting identities* (London: Routledge, 1996).

⁷⁴ Interview with Iraqi Mandaean gatekeeper, Sweden, 16 Oct. 2014.

⁷⁵ Interview with Iraqi Assyrian gatekeeper, London, 10 Nov. 2013

⁷⁶ Interview with Iraqi Assyrian, Stockholm, 8 Oct. 2014.

country, but you can't maintain your ethnicity. Those who went to America in our community in 1895 [...] assimilated and became Americans.'⁷⁷

Maintaining ethnicity has become ever harder for minority communities who can no longer physically return to Iraq, such as the Jews of Iraq,⁷⁸ or no longer have family or kin to return to.⁷⁹ More significantly, for the Mandaean community, their inability to practise their religious water baptisms near a river has meant that rituals that have for centuries bound their communities together have declined; today, Mendis (Mandaean temples crucial for birth and wedding ceremonies) are located only in a few cities in the Netherlands, in Lund in Sweden, and in Detroit in the US.⁸⁰

As migratory journeys have physically distanced communities from Iraq, the events of 2003 have also led to more acute dislocations for second-generation Iraqis in the diaspora who, owing to the political and conflict conditions inside their home country, have been prevented from creating their own links to Iraq; this has diverted their transnational links towards their ethnic or religious identities, or towards assimilation in the host land. Interviews with all of Iraq's communities in the diaspora revealed varying preoccupations for the second and third generations, whose links had either altered or were gradually disappearing with time. For instance, the loss of ethnic language in the diaspora and intermarriages outside the community, particularly for the second generation, have further diluted their links to Iraq and their ancestral homeland. As one Mandaean gatekeeper stated, the second generation's 'Arabic is broken, and they don't know anything about Mandaeanism'.⁸¹ For others, Iraq lives on through their ethnic diasporic organizations. As one Yazidi man explained:

When we take our children there, they ask us questions and they feel loyalty to the country. These activities make us feel our Iraqiness. The second generation needs this kind of connection. Without these associations and organizations there is none of this connection.⁸²

By contrast, Iraq's now more homogeneous Kurdish and Shi'a nation-state has provided more favourable opportunities for many Iraqi Shi'as and Kurds as their power position in post-2003 Iraq has strengthened their ethnic and sectarian national identities. For many Iraqi Shi'as who have been able to return to Iraq and practise their religion transnationally, their connections to Iraq have increased and their national identities have become inextricably linked to their Shi'ism, which they can now practise freely across a transnational space. As one adult child of Iraqi immigrants recounted, after 2003 people started 'using faith as a way of showing patriotism. I think that was a key shift, prior to that it probably wasn't really a thing.'⁸³

⁷⁷ Interview with Iraqi Assyrian, Stockholm, 8 Oct. 2014.

⁷⁸ Interview with Iraqi Jewish gatekeeper, London, 26 Nov. 2019.

⁷⁹ Interview with Iraqi Christian, Stockholm, 9 Oct. 2014.

⁸⁰ Interview with Mandaean gatekeeper, London, 4 Dec. 2019.

⁸¹ Interview with Iraqi Mandaean gatekeeper, London, 4 Dec. 2019.

⁸² Interview with Yazidi gatekeeper, Sweden, 14 Oct. 2015.

⁸³ Interview with Shi'a second-generation respondent, London, 8 Aug. 2019.

Similarly, for Iraqi Kurds, who gained further autonomy from Baghdad in 2003, and whose Kurdish region has enjoyed greater economic development and stability than the rest of Iraq, return visits to their ancestral homeland have served to bind their communities together, and these identities have become ever stronger with Kurdistan's nationalist struggle for independence. As one Kurdish second-generation respondent in Sweden stated: 'I can mobilize two thousand people if I want to now.'⁸⁴ Yet the fact that these transnational connections are routed to the Kurdish region and rooted in the Kurdish language, cause and cultural exchanges has further distanced the Kurdish diaspora from the rest of Iraq, so that their links to the country and an Iraqi identity have waned with successive generations. As one adult child of Iraqi Kurdish immigrants in Sweden remarked: 'Iraq hasn't given us anything.'⁸⁵

Concluding remarks

This article has sought to open a conversation between the disciplines of migration and nationalism to counter the receiving-state bias in migration studies, which has focused on immigration and the nation-state, while neglecting the importance of observing *emigration* in nationalizing processes. Using the concept of *nation-destroying* proposed by Walker Connor as an analytical tool, it has explored how the intervention in Iraq in 2003 and its legacy have contributed to the gradual eradication of non-Muslim minorities, who have been violently imagined out of the nation as competing ethnic nationalisms have fought to define the Iraqi nation-state. Indeed, the ethno-sectarian political system built by coalition forces and diaspora elites—along with de-Baathification policies and the security vacuum created by coalition forces and diaspora elites who went on to govern—promoted majoritarian ethnic nationalisms at the expense of Iraq's others, institutionalizing identity politics, political and social marginalization, and eventually violence as multiple communities struggled to claim a piece of the new Iraqi state. Caught in the crossfire of competing nationalisms between Baghdad and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, or sectarian conflicts for power, Iraqi minority communities have gradually but consistently been cleansed from their territories on a significant scale, changing the demography of Iraq and who belongs in Iraq's new nation-state.

In the process of *nation-destroying* and the emigration of Iraqi non-Muslim minorities, Iraqi nationalism has therefore come to be shaped by dominant ethnic and sectarian nations, which has shifted the imagined community from an ethnically and religiously multiple nation to a predominantly Kurdish–Shi'a nation-state. The 2003 intervention therefore catalysed a process of dividing the Iraqi nation into primordial entities rather than unifying it under a civic nationalism.

We have also seen how the fragmentation inside Iraq has been replicated in the diaspora in the process of migration, as the conflict, violence and trauma experi-

⁸⁴ Interview with second-generation Kurd, Sweden, 17 Oct. 2014.

⁸⁵ Interview with second-generation Kurd, Sweden, 17 Oct. 2014.

enced by minority communities has led to their dispersal, isolation and dislocation from Iraq, and from other Iraqi communities abroad. Thus *nation-destroying* in Iraq has fragmented the Iraqi nation not only inside the country but also on the outside, as ethnic and religious nations have been dispersed from one another in faraway lands, where distances have been established from other Iraqi diaspora communities as senses of belonging and identities have shifted.

As familial and physical attachments to Iraq have been severed, transnational mobilization has shifted to the maintenance and protection of the various ethnic nations transnationally through diasporic associations, digital platforms, social media and annual conferences. Yet even here, the effects of *nation-destroying* and emigration from Iraq are threatening the survival of Iraq's non-Muslim ethnic and religious nations, who must now contend with assimilation, and loss of language and culture, with every successive generation. Thus, Iraq and its many new minority nations continue to be haunted by the legacy of the 2003 intervention even outside the country.

Conceptually, what this article has shown is that in the process of nation-state formation in ethnically and religiously divided nation-states, the concept of *nation-destroying* more accurately depicts the process of how nation-states are in fact built. It is the destruction of competing or weaker ethnic nationalisms that often leads to the homogenization of the nation and state. Only once consensus has been reached by the majority can nation-building commence. In that sense, the concept of nation-building assumes prematurely that there is a cohesive or at the very least a peaceful population that is *willing* to be built into a nation, whereas *nation-destroying* captures the violence that often accompanies and predates the building of nation-states. Indeed, the case of Iraq shows that until the process of nation-destroying ends and more peaceful contestations occur between Iraq's remaining communities, the task of nation-building cannot truly begin. We can therefore surmise that nationalism as a political project in conflict states ought to be conceptualized as a sequential process where nation-destroying precedes nation-building. One hypothesis resulting from this acknowledgement is that nation-destroying *precedes* nation-building in ethnically and religiously divided nation-states, and is the first stage in the process of nationalizing states; nation-building should be conceptualized as a secondary phase, aimed at deepening the nation's bonds through institutions, cultural production, education, traditions etc.⁸⁶

The case of Iraq and the concept of nation-destroying developed here as a first stage of building ethnically divided nation-states may also help to explain other nationalist struggles occurring in the Middle East, for example in Syria, Yemen and Libya, as well as in parts of Africa, such as South Sudan, Ethiopia and Cameroon. Exploring the nexus between nation-destroying, emigration and the emergence of nation-states is crucial for our understanding of how modern nation-states are developing and the nationalisms they support; who is othered and who is considered part of the nation. This is of crucial importance not only

⁸⁶ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006).

for scholars of nationalism but also for scholars of migration, as it reveals the need for intersectionality in understanding emigration from the same sending state, as categories of ethnicity and religion are often swept away under the homogenizing category of conflict-generated migrants or diaspora in immigration countries, without attention being given to how the conflict affects individuals from the same homeland differently.

Certainly, it appears at present that Iraq is a long way from finding an inclusive way forward for all its nations. The results of the 2017 referendum on Kurdish independence indicate that Kurdish secessionist ambitions remain strong and may continue to undermine unity. Alternatively, the October 2019 Tishreen protest movement, which has called for an overhaul of the ethno-sectarian system, suggests that Kurdish–Shi'a state-building is being challenged by other anti-sectarian democratic forces. Consequently, it remains to be seen *whether* and *how* Iraq's nationalizing process can unify Iraqis under a civic nationalism, protect its minorities and make the transition from nation-destroying to nation-building.