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Conflict and international migration: Iraqi Turkmen in Turkey

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Abstract

This paper addresses a known issue with a particular focus on an unknown population. As a multiethnic population, ethnic groups in Iraq have been threatened by the conflicts unevenly. Iraqi Turkmen, as a small minority ethnic group has suffered from Arabisation and the wars for decades.

A questionnaire survey is employed to collect data on Turkmen in Turkey. The data is gathered through a questionnaire survey in Ankara and Istanbul where sizeable Turkmen communities live. Reasons for migration and migrant characteristics, choices and intentions are examined to understand past, current and future Turkmen migration flows. At the same time, perceptions about migration are examined.

Turkey is the major destination for Turkmen due to geographical and ethno-cultural proximity. The conflict, wars and ethnic tension are expected to be important triggering factors for their migration, but most Turkmen immigrant in Turkey reported that their migration was motivated by economic and educational aspiration. Individual migrations are commonplace among Turkmen. Results indicate Turkmen immigrants are quite prosperous with higher educational levels. However Iraqi Turkmen in Turkey also reported an intention towards migration to another country.

Introduction

Iraq, similar to other nations in the Middle East, is made up of different ethnic and religious groups. Major ones in its mix are Sunnis and Shiites on the religious axis and Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen on ethnic axis. Like other ethnic groups, there is no reliable figure or estimation of Turkmen population in contemporary Iraq. Reasons for this can be several but two most important ones are the Arabisation policies –and nationality correction forms used in 1997 – and continuous wars and conflicts the country faced through several decades (HRW, 2003: 5). When I first developed an interest in Iraqi population, it was quite a bit of surprise for me to find out that there was almost no study on Iraqi population as a whole, at least in the English literature except few (e.g. Russell, 1992). Then the only way of knowing international migration rates was counting on the data collected by other countries (Sirkeci, 2004).

Turkmen population was particularly interesting for their relative situation within the Iraqi balance of ethnic relations. On the one hand there is competition between long oppressed Shiites and governing Sunnis while on the other the Kurds trying to create a key role for their selves in the power politics of Iraq. Eventually throughout period of the troubles, largely due to Saddam Hussein's and the USA's ambitions, the Kurds gained a significant place in the game, that we may call the kingmaker, especially after the US attack in March 2003. Turkmen mostly live in Kurdish controlled or dominated areas in the north of Iraq and their future is therefore tightly connected to that of the Kurds. However there is another influence, that of Turkey. Turkey is concerned about its own Kurds and the potential spill over impact of an independent Kurdish state in Iraq. To prevent this, Turkmen appears a useful excuse, as well as being a real concern due to their ethnic Turkish belonging. Within the power struggles of Iraq, this smallest of the largest minorities in Iraq becomes also a litmus paper to measure the minority rights in the new Iraq. Therefore it is important to understand their international migration trends and relevance of insecurity to Turkmen's move.

This study aimed at shedding some light on Turkmen migration abroad by examining the experiences and opinions of Turkmen immigrants live in Turkey, which is the destination for largest number of Turkmen immigrants (Sirkeci, 2005). Results indicate that Iraqi government's policies forcing them to resign from Turkish identity for

Arab nationality was one of the reasons for Turkmen migration abroad. However, more importantly Turkmen reported that they immigrated into Turkey for economic betterment and educational improvement.

The relationship between international migration and conflict is a well-known one for the students of migration field (Massey et al., 1993, provided a comprehensive of theories on international migration; for Turkish Kurdish case see Sirkeci, 2003). It has grown into almost a sub-discipline, that of forced migration studies. In multiethnic populations like Iraqis, ethnic groups are likely to be effected by the conflict situations unevenly. Such an uneven suffering may also cause out-migration as a survival strategy. This is what led me to study Turkmen migration.

Oil-rich regions of Iraq are mainly around Basra in the south and Kirkuk in the north and these areas populated by Shiites, and the Kurds and Turkmen, respectively. In these areas, Iraqi governments followed a systematic “Arabisation” policy aimed to erase all non-Arab presence by Arabising all aspects of life including the refusal of registration of new born babies with non-Arabic names (HRW, 2003: 6). This genocidal policy of Iraq dates back to the 1920s and the 1930s when Iraq was under British mandate (Batatu, 1978: 189). Iraqi government systematically resettled Arab tribes in the surrounding region of Kirkuk (Talabany, 2001). As a result of Arabisation for decades and to some extent Kurdisation during the last decade or so, many Turkmen were forced to resign from their ethnicity and many are expected to have fled abroad however many of these Arabised Turkmen are likely to reclaim their true ethnicity or to return home when the opportunity arises” (ICG, 2003: 7 and Ghai et al. 2003: 5).

Most international sources indicate a population of around half a million for Turkmen, whilst Turkmen themselves claim their population about 1.5 to 3 million (Aljazeera, 2004, CIA, 2003, ICG, 2003, Ghai et al. 2003). According to the last census in Iraq when Turkmen were allowed to register themselves as Turkmen in 1957, their population was 567,000 out of 6.3 million total population in the country. However, other ethnic groups, especially the Kurds, deny such a large Turkmen population and claim their population is about 2 percent of the total population. Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITF) suggests a figure of about 3 million Turkmen in Iraq (13 per cent of the Iraqi population). The other group named Turkmen Cultural Association

(TCA) presents a much smaller number: one million Turkmen. (ICG interview with Jawdat Najar, TCA leader, Arbil, 27 August 2002). The head of the Islamic Union of Iraqi Turkmen based in Damascus, Abbas Bayati, pronounced a figure between 1.5 and 2 million for Turkmen in Iraq. (ICG, 2003: 7). It is estimated about ten percent of Turkmen fled Iraq during the last fifteen years (Sirkeci, 2005). Majority of those arrived in Turkey and this study reveals some characteristics of this movement.

Data and Methods

Ankara as a research site was not chosen randomly but for two reasons: a) Turkey seems the most popular destination for Turkmen both because of geographical proximity and of cultural proximity; b) at the time, I was working in Ankara and had good relations within the Turkmen community which provided a practical advantage and so Ankara happened to be research site. Istanbul, as the largest city in Turkey, accommodates largest population of immigrants. It is expected a sizeable community of Turkmen live there too. Therefore as a control group Istanbul was selected.

This study has chosen what we may call 'a convenient random sampling' method and respondents were randomly selected from the records of Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITF) office in Ankara, Turkey. ITF has the only and the most reliable population frame which we can use. However it has problems as many Turkmen immigrants in Turkey are not registered although they need to register with ITF for their legal affairs in Turkey such as police registration. As there is no other source, we had to use this in our convenient random sampling.

175 respondents were randomly selected from the list and 133 of whom an interview could be completed. A control group of 30 respondents were also contacted in Istanbul through convenient sampling. The Istanbul sample was contacted through regular visits to Turkmen Cultural Association.

The selection of samples through Turkmen organisations was methodologically dangerous but the only option within the time and budget constraints of this research. Another problem with the sample seems the domination of males but as it seems consistent with the migration studies literature margin of bias may not be so large. The

sample is not a fully representative sample but provides a sound population to form some ideas on Iraqi Turkmen migration abroad.

A four module questionnaire containing about 80 questions is used to collect data. The data is gathered through a questionnaire survey conducted in Ankara and Istanbul where sizeable Turkmen communities live. Questions about reasons for migration, migrant characteristics, opinions and intentions among Turkmen are included.

In this paper, I focused on few issues to identify main patterns: the reason for migration, intentions for future migration, education and household income.

Findings

Results here are presented in two-way tables showing individual characteristics by religion. I choose religion to shed a light on the fact that Iraq is not a country of Shiia, Sunni, Kurds and others. A correct classification must mention Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen and others informed with the fact that religious divisions cut across these ethnic categories. For example among Turkmen, about one third are Shiites (or Alevis) while the rest is Sunni (Sirkeci, 2005) and there is no reason to assume a similar pattern is valid for other ethnic groups. Similarly, Arabs in Iraq as well as the Kurds also belong to two major denominations of Islam.

Human migration behaviour is explained by a set of various factors including wage differentials, regional unevenness, fear of persecution, education, health and job opportunities, wealth, and so on. However along with these external impulses migration is also a matter of individual decision making and goal seeking. Therefore Iraqi Turkmen in Turkey was first examined to see what they think about migration and their own living conditions which obviously moved them from Iraq to Turkey.

Figure 1 depicts a snap shot of some thought Iraqi Turkmen immigrants in Turkey reported. Most Iraqi Turkmen were satisfied with their current living conditions in Turkey while only about 20% were far from being happy. While about one third is thinking that finding job is easier abroad 40% expressed that it is easier in Iraq. Less than half of Turkmen considered international migration as a

way of improving material conditions referring, income, wealth, employment.

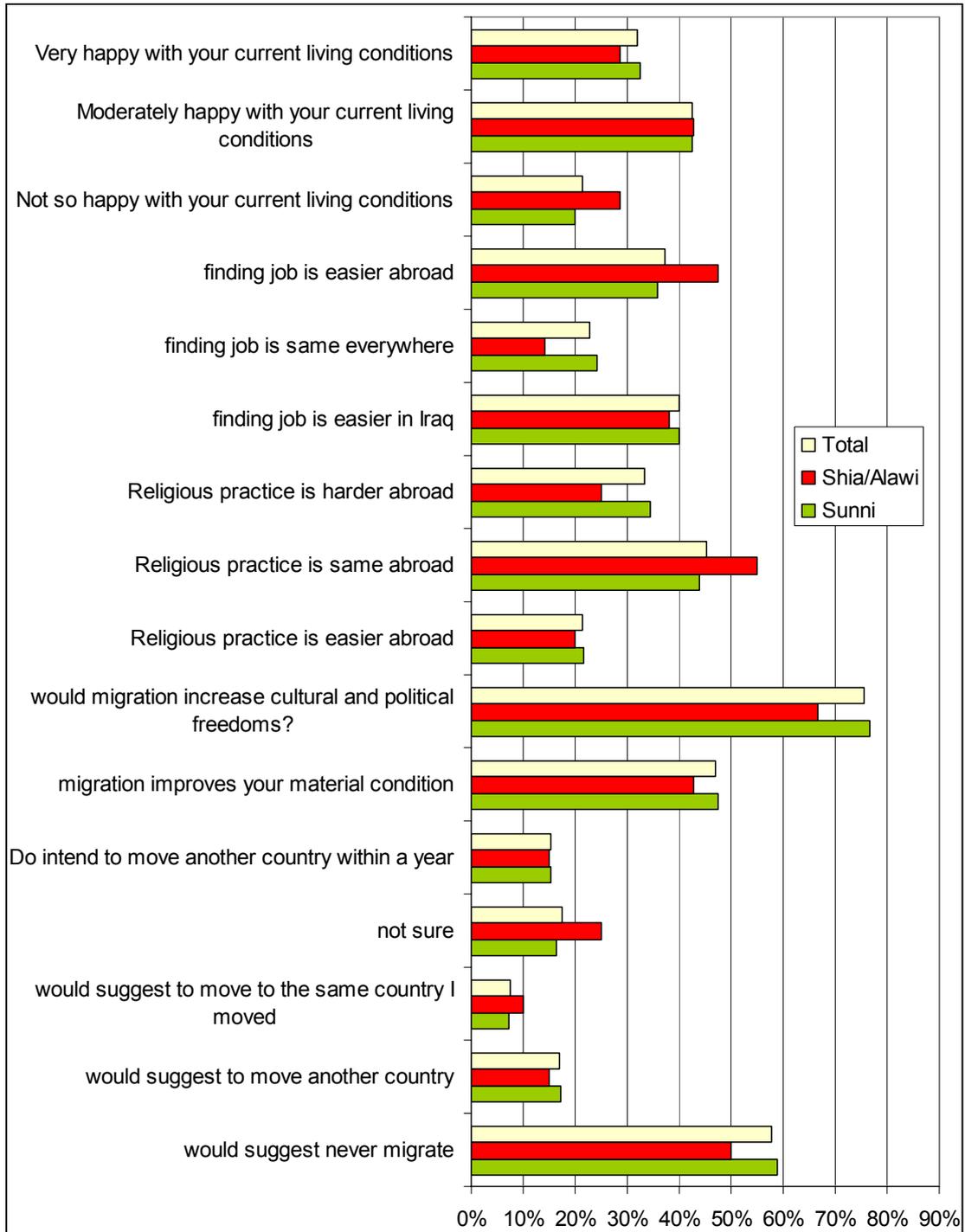


Figure 1. Opinions of Iraqi Turkmen Immigrants in Turkey

Cultural and political freedoms seem the most important motive for moving abroad as three quarters of Turkmen reported that freedoms are improved since they moved abroad although nearly 80% of them also believe that moving abroad does not bring any convenience in religious practices.

On the basis of these beliefs, Iraqi Turkmen would not strongly suggest others to migrate (about 60%). Only around one fifth of them stated they would advice others to move abroad. As they do not see much benefit of migration, they do not intend to move another country in the near future either except a small minority (less than 15%) who expressed a clear intention of further migration.

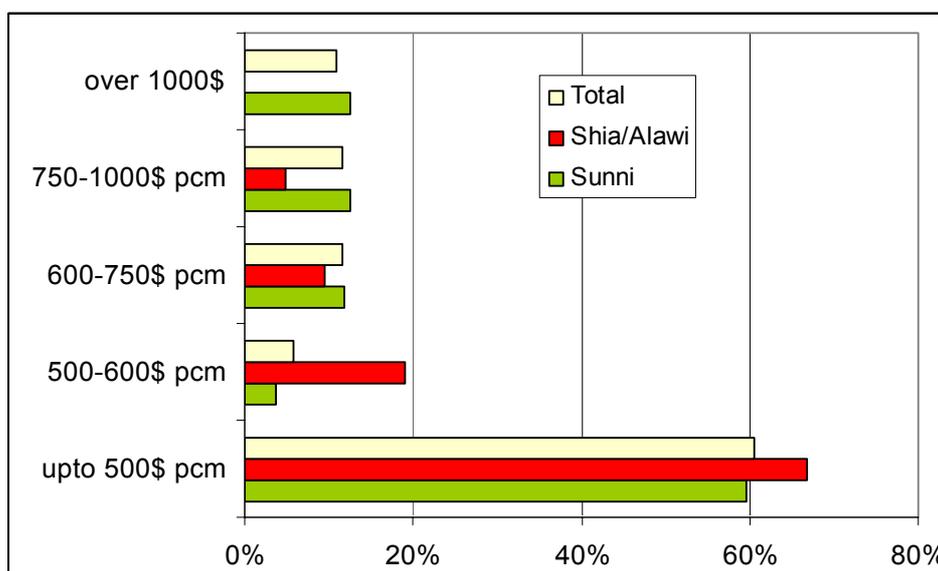


Figure 2. Monthly household income of Turkmen immigrants in Turkey

When Iraqi Turkmen monthly household income levels are examined it does appear they are not living on lucrative salaries as majority of them have less than 500 US dollars to spent every month. Considering living costs in Ankara and Istanbul where interviews were conducted this seems hardly enough to pay only monthly rent of a decent inner city flat. Although they do not complain about their living conditions as presented earlier, their migration experience does not sound a great economic success story.

The following two figures depict their educational attainment levels before and after the migration. 27% of Turkmen immigrants are currently studying in Turkey, among the rest a very high educational attainment level is observed as more than 40% were at least enrolled for a degree program in a university prior to migration whilst another two fifth of them were at high school. Both indicate a significantly high human capital (Borjas, 1998, used educational level as a measure of human capital).

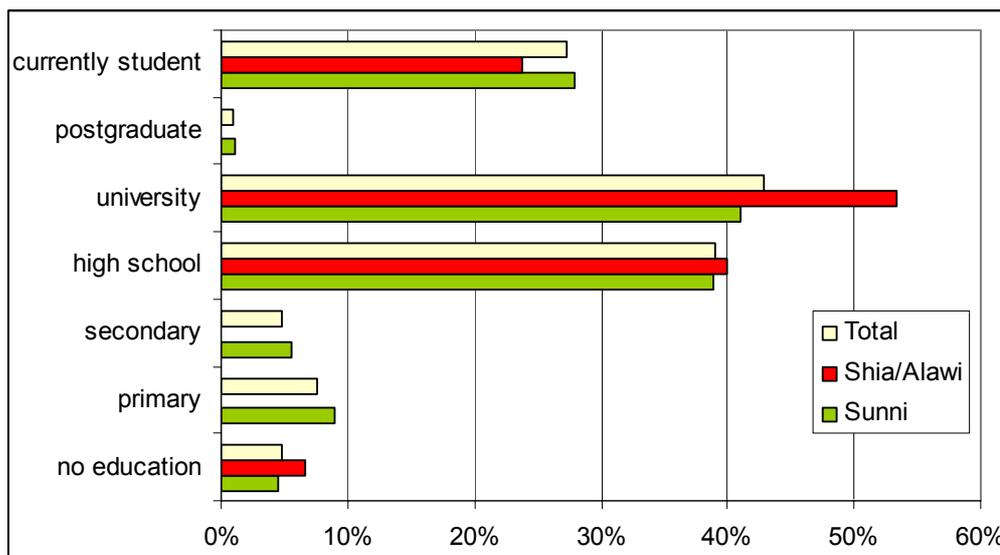


Figure 3. Educational level before the first ever migration abroad

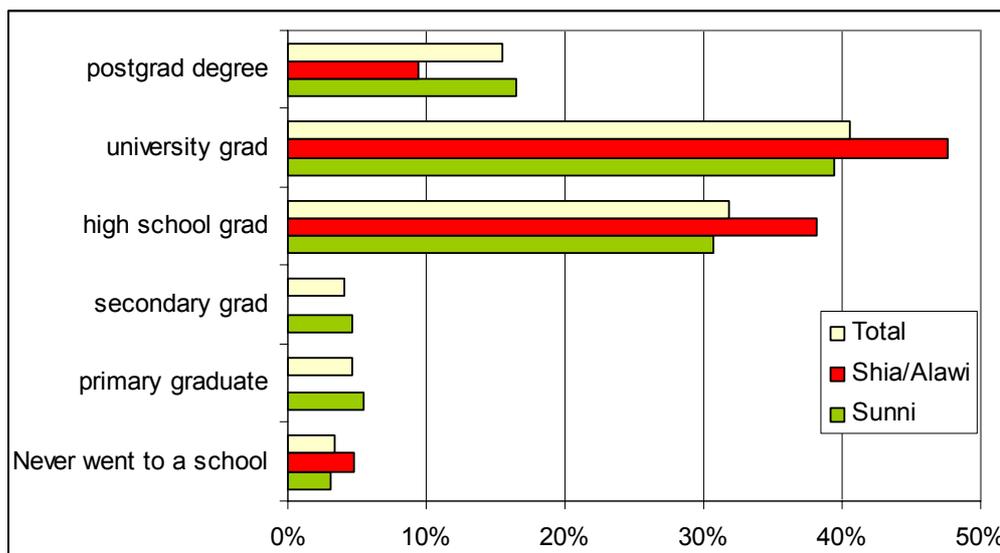


Figure 4. Current educational status: last school graduated

Migration experience either was initially motivated by educational goals or it brought a new impetus for education or by migration Iraqi Turkmen found the opportunity to pursue their educational goals. Since compared to their pre-migration statuses, they are far better educated now as among them about 15% have a postgraduate degree while more than 40% have a university degree. To be noted here, complete illiteracy does not seem a common place incidence among Turkmen as only less than 5% have no education.

An examination of above findings may lead us to a conclusion that Iraqi Turkmen immigrating to Turkey were not heavily occupied with the idea of economic prosperity as they did not do earn enormous incomes and they had relatively good educational qualifications even before the migration. However their self-expressed reasons of international migration do tell an opposite story.

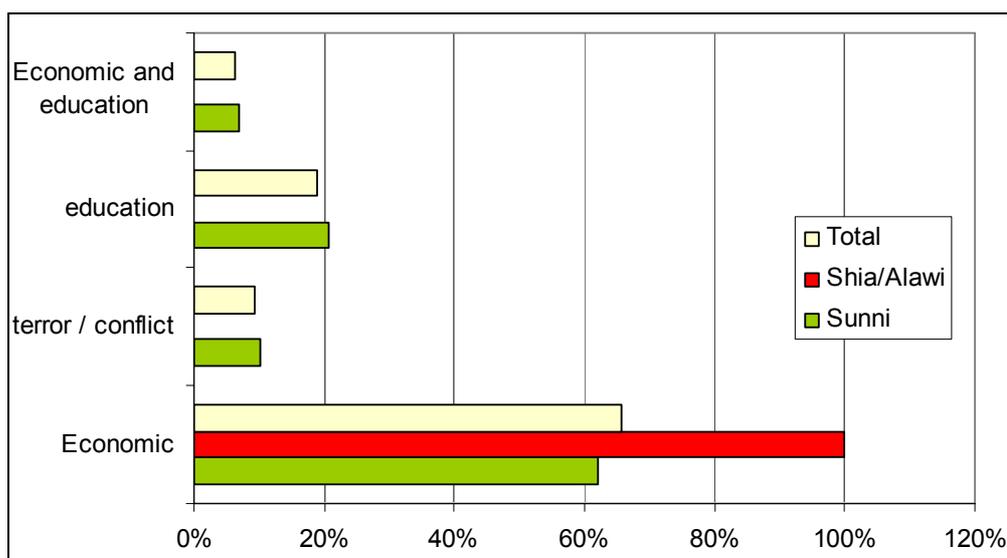


Figure 5. Migration motivations for Iraqi Turkmen

Two thirds of Iraqi Turkmen reported that they moved abroad for economic reasons as opposed to only less than 10% referring terror and conflict as a reason for migration (Figure 5). For another 19%, it was education and this may be an explanation for high proportion of postgraduate degree holders among immigrants highlighted above. This leaves us with migration mainly motivated by economic and educational trajectories.

Discussion

Studying Iraqi Turkmen immigrants in Turkey, at the beginning I was expecting a strong correlation between the conflict, wars and ethnic tensions and their international migration. However, as discussed earlier they largely moved for economic aspirations such as finding a job, better income, and so on. However they yet admit there have been improvements in cultural and political freedoms since they moved abroad.

Educational prospects seem to be very important for Iraqi Turkmen as they had high educational levels prior to migration and also they improved their already high educational profiles after migration. Nevertheless, economic reasons reflecting a betterment of life in terms of earnings was the major reason for almost 70% of Iraqi Turkmen in Turkey.

Turkmen immigrants in Turkey portrayed an unattractive picture of migration as they do not suggest others to migrate abroad. At the same time, only a small fraction of them were interested in migrating to another country in the near future. This can be interpreted as they did not achieve their migration goals or migration did not meet their expectations. Nonetheless, this can be also either a sampling error or a subsystem of Turkmen international migration. Since a recent survey conducted in Iraq about Turkmen emigration reflects a different picture where conflict, war, and fear of persecution takes an integral part in emigration and current migrants are more satisfied with their gains through migration (Sirkeci, 2005).

Within the current circumstances in Iraq, it is both important and quite impossible to understand minority ethnic groups' international migration patterns and intentions. Some studies have shown a trend of out-migration from Iraq during the last two decades, particularly after the Gulf War. However, these trends seem varying among different ethnic groups while creating massive refugee flows for the Kurds in the North, Turkmen signal a steady and less noticed individual flows, and yet there are, for example, no studies allowing us to comment on Shiites' migration from Iraq. Ironically, these ethnic components of Iraq have been put through a reconstruction process even without being proportionally identified as the size of population in Iraq remains a mystery.

There is a need for further studies on ethnic diversity in Iraq as well as significant efforts are required from the governing bodies to sort out an immediate census in the country to alleviate peace among various ethnic groups in Iraq.

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