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Making Broken People Whole Again

Considering the place of trauma and mental health among Christian genocide survivors in Iraq

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Despite millennia of political turmoil and religious persecution, Christianity has maintained a continuous presence in Iraq that dates back almost 2000 years. Christian communities in Iraq were significantly diminished by the atrocities committed by the self-proclaimed ISIS caliphate - an event that occurred within living memory. The consequences of the rise and fall of ISIS, for Iraqi Christians, are not only material, but psychological also. The lingering traumas that are omnipresent among Iraq's Christian minority groups have become a massive but understated problem in the context of post-ISIS reconstruction and recovery efforts, and play a significant role in emigration-driven population collapse. This research article describes the problem of trauma among Iraqi Christians within a cultural and psychological context, and analyzes its demographic and security-related implications.

Post-IS: the end of the war and the beginning of a new crisis

ISIS, Christians, and Iraq: researching a phenomenon of apocalyptic proportions

Collective trauma as a public health hazard

Can Christians in Iraq recover? ISIS trauma and present-day security concerns

Endnotes

Bibliography

Post-IS: the end of the war and the beginning of a new crisis

An overview for 2022: does ISIS even matter anymore?

The Council on Foreign Relations,[1] a US-based foreign policy think tank, publishes an annual report listing the 10 most significant events to have taken place in that year. Its 2014 report,[2] which can only be described as eerily prophetic, includes two entries at first and second place that provide for interesting comparison. First place ranking in the CFR report was given to the Russian annexation of Crimea and the threat posed therein to the nation of Ukraine. Just behind in second place was the declaration by ISIS of an Islamic Caliphate. As accurately predicted, violence and destruction associated with the Russo-Ukrainian conflict has accelerated dramatically since 2014, culminating in the full-scale war launched by Vladimir Putin under the pretext of a "Special Military Operation"[3] on February 24 2022. As the fight in Ukraine continues, and as arms and munitions continue to flood into conflict zones without any sign of a peace treaty or settlement on the horizon, popular fears of escalation into a hot war involving nuclear-armed powers on opposing sides become more and more difficult to dismiss.
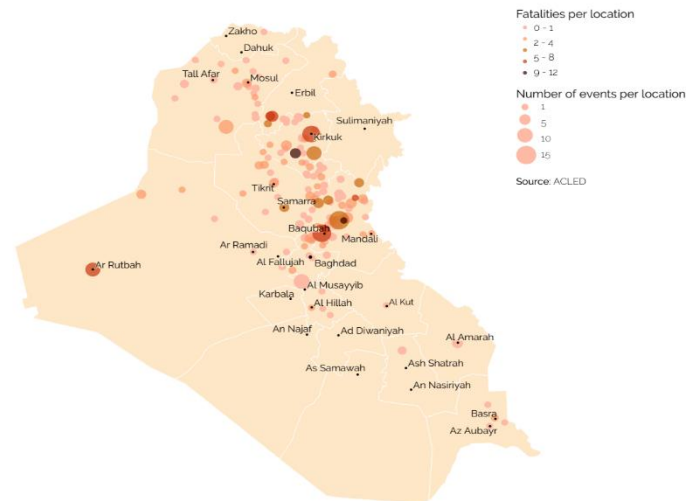
To many observers, the current situation between Ukraine and Russia would seem to validate the CFR's evaluation - especially because ISIS no longer *feels* like a current situation at all. With its infamous leader (and self-declared caliph) Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi left dead in a 2019 military operation[4] ordered by President Trump, ISIS barely registers in public awareness anymore. By experts and the general public alike, the war in Ukraine is considered to be a current, existential crisis, whereas ISIS, if it is discussed, is more commonly referred to in the past tense, as a transient phenomenon; it *was*, but no longer *is*. The fact that such views are now established consensus is both surprising and worrisome, because like Russian aggression against Ukraine, ISIS is by all means still here today in 2022.

By ISIS, I refer not to the Islamic State-Khorasan affiliate group, which has thousands of active fighters[5] in Afghanistan as well as in Pakistan's border province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (used as a base by IS fighters to launch attacks across the country; 257 such incidents[6] were recorded last year in 2021). Rather, by referring to ISIS, I am referring literally to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria - which like the Ukrainian Conflict is very much a present-day phenomenon. Just weeks ago on November 30, 2022, the New York Times reported[7] that Abu al-Hassan al-Hashemi al-Quraishi, former head of Islamic State (encompassing all groups and affiliates worldwide) had been acknowledged as dead by the group - killed by US forces in a battle that took place not in Afghanistan or Pashtun areas in Pakistan, but in Syria, the same place where the group declared a global caliphate in 2014. Reports compiled by Clingendael[8] (also known as the Netherlands Institute of International Relations) show that between September 2021 and February 2022, hundreds of ISIS attacks in Iraq took place, leading to hundreds of civilian deaths, and prompting hundreds of counter-terrorism operations by the Iraqi military and allied forces, all taking place across a massive span of territory encompassing all of the areas of

Iraq previously controlled by ISIS in the central, western, and northern regions, but extending also into those it never held, such as the south and south-east.

Caption: Clingendael summary of Islamic State attacks in Iraq between September 2021 and February 2022

Wars do more than killing: evaluating the damage inflicted by military conflicts

It is not unlikely that the heightened relevance afforded to the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, in comparison with that given to ISIS, can be explained (or even justified) by the staggering cost upon human life incurred by the Russian invasion. Admittedly, estimating the exact cost of Putin's war with a significant degree of confidence is not, and will not be possible for the foreseeable future. Early in November, US Army General Mark Milley stated[9] that Russia and Ukraine had suffered roughly 100,000 military casualties on both sides, with approximately 40,000 civilians also counted dead as a result of the conflict. But in warfare, the term "casualties" encompasses both soldiers who are incapacitated as a result of injury as well as those who are killed in action, and thus without further elaboration the figures cannot be interpreted as equivalent to actual death counts (which are notoriously underreported[10] by both sides in the conflict). Some scrutiny regarding Milley's civilian death count may also be warranted, as it exceeds a UN estimate[11] from less than a month before by more than a factor of two.

Yet to conclude that if Russia-Ukraine results in more quantifiable deaths than ISIS did in an arbitrarily selected time period, then ISIS can be discounted as an ongoing threat, would be a serious oversight and a mistake. Nearly all deaths are a tragedy to one or more people (typically many) but the death toll is only one metric among many used to evaluate the destructiveness of a war and the damage inflicted thereby. For Ukraine, where the cost upon human life is both severe and growing, other costs like the destruction inflicted

upon Ukraine's infrastructure and economy are also existential threats to the nation's survival. On countless occasions President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has rightly decried Russian attacks claiming Ukrainian lives, but he was equally correct when condemning Russia[12] for "economic terrorism" in reference to indiscriminate attacks on infrastructure, some of which killed no Ukrainians at all.

Another increasingly recognized form of harm inflicted upon Ukraine by Russia's invasion is the damage done to the mental and psychological health of the Ukrainian population - from which refugees outside of Ukraine and its conflict zones are by no means exempt. Writing for MedPage Today, a medical news site used by doctors and other medical practitioners, Lviv-based psychology professor Oksana Martsyniak-Dorosh published an evaluation of the 'invisible costs'[13] of the war to the psychological wellbeing of the Ukrainian people, explaining how the damage goes far deeper than the front lines where combat takes place. Her perspective - that the entire Ukrainian nation has and continues to experience collective traumatization at a nearly unprecedented scale - is supported by Ukraine's own Ministry of Health, which in June predicted[14] that roughly 15 million Ukrainians will need psychological support in the future, of which some 3 to 4 million will require prescription medication.

Burden of Trauma

Among the Ukrainian population, key factors of collective traumatization include:

- **Significant prevalence:** It covers the entire population (directly and through online sources), regardless of direct relation to traumatic events.
- **Significant public irritability:** Because interaction between people is much more significant than natural and technical factors.
- **A collective and comprehensive feeling of being wronged:** Painful awareness of the innocence of the victims (e.g., disability of children) and inability of the aggressors to resist (e.g., rape of babies). Where the objects of traumatization are social groups, not just individuals. The entire community feels traumatized. Especially those who managed to leave in time and who were not personally affected by the tragedy (Bucha, Gostomel, Irpin, Moschun, Mariupol, Izyum, etc.). Where the limbs of children, parts of genitalia, and pierced skulls were found in mass graves.
- **The impossibility of quick reaction:** The waiting period is extended, people are forced to wait in enduring tension (current events are superimposed on the 8-year period of the war and are further strengthened due to the traumatic memory of past generations).
- **The long-term nature of the traumatization:** The war continues, there is no period of processing the trauma. Untreated traumas have many invisible psychosomatic effects.

Caption: Qualitative outline of the key factors of trauma among the Ukrainian population, compiled October 2022 by Professor Oksana Martsyniak-Dorosh. The outline represents only a temporal snapshot of these factors, as any future developments in the war (such as further civilian and combatant deaths, which are highly likely) will inevitably increase the burden of trauma upon Ukrainians

Although death counts alone cannot tell the full story of the harm inflicted by violence or war, they are in every sense an integral part of that story, and can be useful when juxtaposed with other types of damage to evaluate the actual extent of a war or conflict's

cost to a population. Ultimately, all kinds of harm are interconnected - a talented Ukrainian student conscripted from university into the army, who is killed by a Russian artillery strike, is a case simultaneously tragic in terms of human life, in terms of Ukraine's human capital and economic potential, and in terms of the mental health of relatives, friends, and romantic partners. The impossibility of quantifying all types of cost or damage incurred through war and violence, or the impossibility of predicting how one cost may relate to or exacerbate other costs long-term, is a factual reality that must be understood and acknowledged by scholars of violence and conflict. And it is especially relevant for any discussion regarding the damage dealt by ISIS to Iraq, and its dwindling Christian population.
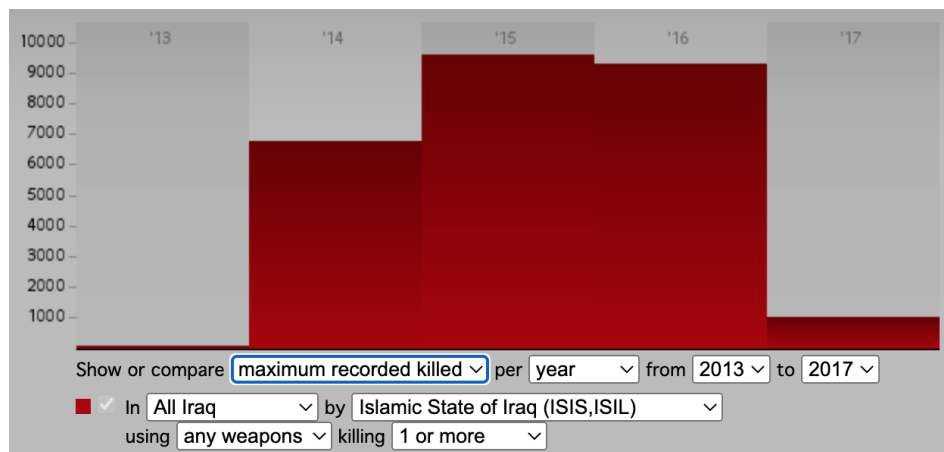
ISIS, Christians, and Iraq: researching a phenomenon of apocalyptic proportions

Methods in ISIS research: the limitations of quantitative analysis and what we can know about the impact of ISIS

Exactly how many people have been killed by ISIS in Syria and Iraq? Ultimately, it depends on who is asked. When attempting to answer this question, for the sake of argument taking Syria rather than Iraq as our case study in doing so, the manifold of obstacles and barriers obstructing researchers from drawing firm conclusions becomes immediately apparent. Turning first to the UN's human rights office for authoritative data and conclusions (who else, after all) the most recent comprehensive report we will find dates back not long ago to September of 2021. In this report, the OHCHR concluded that during the 10-year period between 2011 and 2021, more than 350,000 people were killed as a result of political violence in Syria. This definition encompasses political violence of all times and periods, and thus includes killings during the Arab Spring protest crackdowns, the civil war, and those caused by the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq. To reach the conclusions published in this report would have required a massive endeavor on the part of UN research staff, involving many hours of investigative and confirmatory work by many employees. Nevertheless, it is unclear how we should make sense of these conclusions given the testimony of the BBC, who published an article[15] in 2018 on the unreliability of data regarding deaths and perpetrators in Syria, stated: "The UN no longer keeps track of casualty figures in Syria due to the inaccessibility of many areas and the conflicting reports from the various parties to the war there."

Of course it is perfectly conceivable that this is no contradiction at all; perhaps the BBC corresponded with one office resigned to the impossibility of collecting accurate statistical information on the war, but another office unrelated to that first group went on to produce this report. But even so, the UN figure, which includes both civilians and combatants, is roughly 50% of the 606,000 fatalities estimated by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights[16] in an announcement published that same year. The large gap between these two estimates is a good example of the general miasma of uncertainty that impedes researchers from accurately determining the perpetrators or factions responsible for violence and killings in Syria, even when the killings themselves are verified as factual.[17]

In Iraq, where perpetrators of extreme violence are considerably easier to identify, somewhere between 36,584 and 38,426 civilians (not soldiers) were killed by ISIS between 2013 and 2018, according to the civilian-led Iraqi Body Count[18] (IBC) project. The IBC indexes data from sourced reports of actual, documented deaths, and because deaths not attributable to any known actor are considerably less common in Iraq relative to Syria (particularly during the period examined), this figure is likely not an exaggeration. Yet due to "gaps in recording and reporting" the IBC acknowledges that even its highest totals "may be missing many civilian deaths from violence."

Caption: Verified counts of ISIS-associated deaths recorded in Iraq between 2013 and 2017, queried using IBC database. Results reflect bare-minimum fatalities confirmed by actual death reports and should be interpreted as underestimates, given that unidentified-perpetrator deaths, misidentified-perpetrator deaths, ISIS-caused deaths of unrecovered missing persons, and later deaths in other jurisdictions caused by injuries or psychological trauma inflicted by ISIS (e.g. suicides) are left out and effectively unknowable.

But looking at reports and analysis on Iraq post-ISIS (a nonsensical phrase that is regretfully too convenient to avoid) reveals that gaps in data such as this are nothing new. If we turn away from the death toll attributed to the group and consider instead the harm wrought upon the Iraqi economy - something that intuitively seems more quantifiable and objective - we will find gaps that are very much the same as the ones described above. For example, the gold-standard for reports and publications on the post-ISIS Iraqi economy was established by World Bank researchers in a report entitled 'Iraq: Reconstruction and Investment.' Upon its publication in 2018, this report (published in two parts; part 1,[19] and part 2[20]) was unmatched in quality and scope, and due to the slow pace of economic recovery in Iraq (most prominently detectable in ethnic or religious minority regions of the country) it is perhaps unfortunately still fairly accurate today. Yet even this stellar audit of the post-catastrophe Iraqi economy does not tell all there is to know. The report does not include in-depth data on how different religious minorities or communities have been affected by ISIS; such differences are mentioned, but quantitatively speaking they are essentially obscured or excluded. Nowhere, it seems, can

we find perfectly accurate and fully comprehensive information on what happened, or what is happening, to Iraqi Christians in relation to ISIS.

But this is no sign of sloppiness or incompetence by the report's authors. As a general rule, **the true costs of violent conflicts are exceedingly difficult to quantify,** especially when that conflict is unresolved and continues like the ISIS-Iraq conflict is today. We cannot know, therefore, everything we wish to know about the true extent of the devastation inflicted upon Iraq by ISIS. Yet as professor Oksana Martsyniak-Dorosh's work reference previously demonstrates, we can at once not know *everything*, and still surmise *something* that is true and important. The way to do this, if we follow her approach, is to stop obsessing about the *quantities* of innocent civilians killed, or the precise *dollar value* of the furniture, heirlooms, and personal property destroyed in homes burned down by ISIS, and instead to start from accepted facts and work deductively to reach our conclusions.

Why Iraq's Christians are a special case

Christianity in Iraq is thought to date back almost 2000 years to the Apostle Thomas, a famous proselyte who Christians believe to have departed from Palestine and traveled to Mesopotamia, then India, to preach the Gospel. The Mar Thomas church in Mosul, Iraq, is constructed on what some Christians assert is the original site[21] of the apostle's former residence in the city, where he lived. Around the time of World War II, roughly 12% of Iraq identified with a Christian confession; by the time of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the proportion of Iraqis identifying as Christian more than halved, falling to just under 6% according to the[22] Catholic Near East Welfare Association. According to Open Doors, more than 80%[23] of Iraq's Christian population has fled or emigrated since 2003.

Caption: Mar Thomas Church, Mosul, Iraq

Importantly, Iraqi Christians neither the sole nor perhaps even the main target for ISIS violence in Iraq, nor were they ever before. Certainly, it is true to say that through its

territorial conquests, destruction of property, genocidal massacres, institutionalized kidnapping (in addition to slavery and rape), and also forced conversion, among many other cruelly creative forms of violence, IS carved a bloody path through Iraq that devastated the entire country. None were untouched, whether physically, mentally, or otherwise - by its atrocities. Again, this is a true statement for Iraq as a whole, but importantly it cannot be assumed to be correct for any given civilian living in ISIS-occupied territory within Iraq, either at the height of the group's power or now. The reason for this is that depending on one's ethnicity, and religion, the many atrocities enlisted in the gruesome repertoire of ISIS's modus operandi might be applicable, or not applicable, and what evidence we have indicates that ISIS was if nothing else remarkably consistent in their adherence to such codes of conduct during warfare.

رعايا الصليب من أتباع الكنيسة المصرية المحاربة
The people of the cross, the followers of the hostile Egyptian Church

Caption: Still from ISIS propaganda video released by Al-Hayat Media Center depicting the mass-murder of the '21 Martyrs of Libya' (official terminology for the victims in Coptic hagiography). Murder victims encompass 20 Coptic Christian migrant workers kidnapped while returning to Egypt by bus, and an unidentified African migrant kidnapped by ISIS while attempting to find passage to Italy, who voluntarily elected to join the Copts after spending time with them in captivity (later beatified as St. Matthew in the Coptic Church)

Perhaps the best-known example of such codified murderousness comes not from Iraq, but from Libya. In February of 2015, the Islamic State released video footage through the affiliated Al-Hayat Media Center of their decapitation of 21 Coptic Christians on a beach in Libya, all but one of whom were migrant workers returning home to their families in Egypt. It is well-known that the victims - who are referred to by Coptic Christians as the 21 Martyrs of Libya were offered the opportunity to convert to Islam in exchange for freedom and safety, but chose not to do so, electing to die as Christians instead. What is less well-known is that the bus from which the 21 Martyrs were kidnapped seated a large number of Sunni Muslim passengers as well, all of whom were left unmolested by ISIS after their

departure from the scene. Thus the Sunni passengers were able to return home and sleep in their beds, even as their former riding companions were abducted, tortured, and coerced in an attempt to force their religious conversion.

There is categorically nothing positive to be said about the morality of ISIS, or of the ISIS militants who committed these heinous atrocities. However, there is much that can be said about the fact that the long list of terroristic acts constituting the ISIS playbook was not inflicted upon all civilians who fell under ISIS control, but only some, and only on the basis of religious or ethnic affiliation (and in some cases, both).

The city of Mosul, which has been mentioned previously, was taken by ISIS in July 2014. Christians living in the city were given the opportunity[24] to convert to Islam, flee, or else suffer execution. Sunni Muslims in Mosul, by contrast, suffered no such imposition. When ISIS began to regulate the burgeoning slave trade its attacks on civilian population centers and kidnapping had created in 2014, it published concretized pricing guidelines for sexual slaves based on age; Yazidi and Christian girls or women were included in the guidelines,[25] while Sunni Muslims, being ineligible for enslavement under Islamic law, were not.
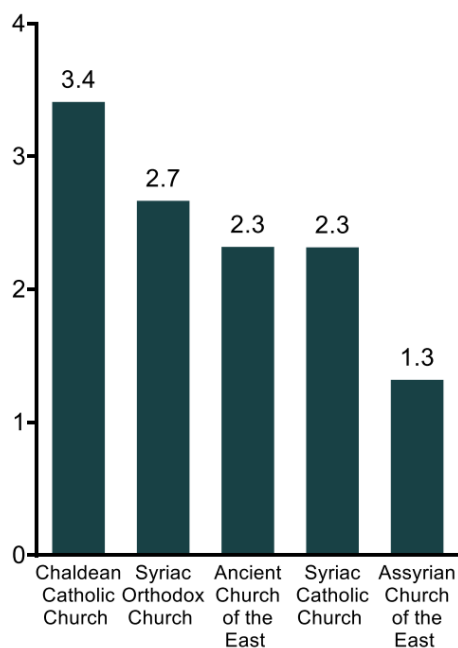
It would be wrong to surmise that Sunni Muslims were entirely safe and content under the bloody boot of ISIS authority; mass killings of dissidents by the terrorist group were also a regular affair. Incidents such as the mass execution of the Albu Nimr tribe[26] in Iraq's Anbar province, a devout Sunni tribal clade, were by no means uncommon. In this specific case, a staggering 150 men and boys belonging to a single extended clan which had opposed ISIS were gathered together, lined up, and executed, one by one. The method of execution used (point-blank headshots delivered from a glock-19 with a limited magazine capacity, necessitating repetitive reloads) was time-intensive, and the entire incident reportedly lasted almost an hour from the first execution before the last victim was finally murdered.

Yet despite many documented cases of ISIS attacks on Sunni Muslim communities and civilians, there is self-evidently a pattern we can observe in regards to the type of person ISIS prefers to kill or victimize, and the self-imposed behavioral limitations ISIS adheres to in cases where such victimization is agreed to be the course of action. Iraqi Shi'ites, for instance, were also treated as legitimate targets - something gruesomely demonstrated by the 2014 Camp Speicher Massacre, when approximately 1700[27] young male air force recruits were executed en-masse on suspicion of adhering to the Shi'ite faith (unsurprisingly, many of the victims were not even Shi'ite at all). But even then, we do not find evidence of the most egregious ISIS abuses, such as sexual slavery, being applied to Shi'ite Muslims. The codified rules of engagement for, and the definitions of mercy toward Christian Iraqis in the ideology and behavior of Islamic State operatives (at risk of repetition, both in past **and** in present) self-evidently predisposes members of this group to both types and degrees of violence, endangerment, and abuse that are simply not comparable to the far lighter threats and risks faced by the overwhelming majority of their fellow Iraqi citizens of other religions.

The impact of migration

Another crucial difference in the subjective experience of the ISIS catastrophe for Christians involves migration. As mentioned before, over 80%[28] of Iraq's Christians have fled the country since 2003. Emigration trends among Christians show exponential increase from 2014 onwards, when ISIS became a serious existential threat to the survival of Christians in the region. For Iraqi Christians, more than 80% of whom are Catholics[29] in communion with the Roman Church, ease of assimilation into countries such as the United States, Australia, or to a lesser extent European nations where Christianity is the historically dominant cultural and religious force on societies, is perceived to be very high.

Average number of immediate family members overseas

Caption: bar graph from 2020 ACN report[30] "Life After ISIS: New Challenges to Christianity in Iraq." Iraqi Christians of denominations belonging to the Roman Catholic communion, who constitute an overwhelming majority in the country, are shown to have higher numbers of immediate family members than those of other denominations, a key predictor of the desire to emigrate

Immigration and emigration are complex phenomena driven by both push and pull factors, and the presence or intensity of these factors are not equally distributed between different ethnic and religious groups that make up the Iraqi mosaic. To investigate the push and pull dynamics that influence outward migration trends for Iraqi nationals, I consulted a number of references discussing these factors in governmental and NGO reports, academic journals, and credible media outlets, excluding items considered insufficiently credible or relevant upon the basis of careful review; a full list of these sources can be found in Appendix 1.5.

Push-type factors of immigration can be condensed into four key types: economic concerns, political stability concerns, discrimination and equality concerns, and then security concerns, all of which add up to the total objective threat that drives individuals to emigrate. In general, the factors pushing Christians and Yazidis to migrate (both intra- and internationally) are essentially indistinguishable; for all extents and purposes, both

groups can be considered equally threatened by push-type factors in the post-ISIS milieu. As a Sunni Muslim extremist group, ISIS was considered to be the highest threat to those two ethnic/religious communities, but to Iraqi Shi'ite Muslims, as well as to Iraqi Kurds who are themselves Sunni Muslims also, both subjective perceptions of threat or risk, as well as verified reports and records supporting such perceptions, were also found to be considerably higher relative to Iraqi Sunni Muslim populations. It is worth noting that despite the presence of ISIS members and supporters of Kurdish backgrounds (a well-known case being convicted terrorist Mulla Krekar,[31] who is currently serving a 12-year prison sentence in Italy) the organization as a whole has exhibited a pattern of hostility and aggression toward Kurds of all religious affiliations in both Iraq and Syria that may justify or explain the elevated perceptions of threat among Iraq's Kurdish population.

Pull-type factors of immigration can also be aggregated into four main types: the social and economic opportunities in the target country, the presence of familial or faith-based support networks upon arrival, the perceived likelihood of suffering from discrimination after emigrating, and the burden or difficulty of emigration, financially and administratively. Surveys, interviews, and other forms of research data indicate that Iraqis tend to view the social and economic benefits of emigrating to Western countries more or less equally across the board. The same sources reveal that the difficulty of habituating to a new life in a Western country is perceived in starkly different terms by Christians in comparison to Muslims and Yazidis; for Muslims, support networks and relatives may be able to provide assistance in a destination country upon arrival, whereas for Yazidis, such networks are generally nonexistent. Yazidi refugees in Armenia for instance have begun returning to Iraq in large numbers since the liberation of population centers like Sinjar from ISIS control, a decision which is described by UNHCR officials[32] as "motivated in part by difficulties they faced integrating in Armenia." In short, it is not either push or pull factors alone that makes the Christian position unique; rather, it is the combination of both.

(1) **In most areas, the population has reached an inflection point due to emigration.**
 – Although, until recently, the population of these locations was increasing, with the return of families from Erbil, Dohuk, and elsewhere, there are now more families leaving than arriving.
 > 57% of Christians have considered emigration; of these, 55% expect to leave by 2024.
 > Given these plans, the Christian population in former ISIS-occupied areas may be as little as 23,000 in 2024 – losing 80% of its population since its peak of 102,000 in 2014.
 – Although emigration is a legitimate choice, it worsens the situation for Christians who remain by reducing the critical mass of remaining Christians. As in the past, empty Christian homes are often occupied, sometimes illegally, by other groups, effecting a demographic displacement. With demographic displacement, Christian leaders and militias are likely to be replaced by Iranian-backed leaders and militias, who provide a less hospitable environment for Christians.

Caption: findings of ACN report show that most Iraqi Christians residing in KRG territory have considered emigration, most of whom plan to leave by 2024. This will result in an 80% loss in the Christian population over a single decade between 2014 and 2024 if plans are carried out.
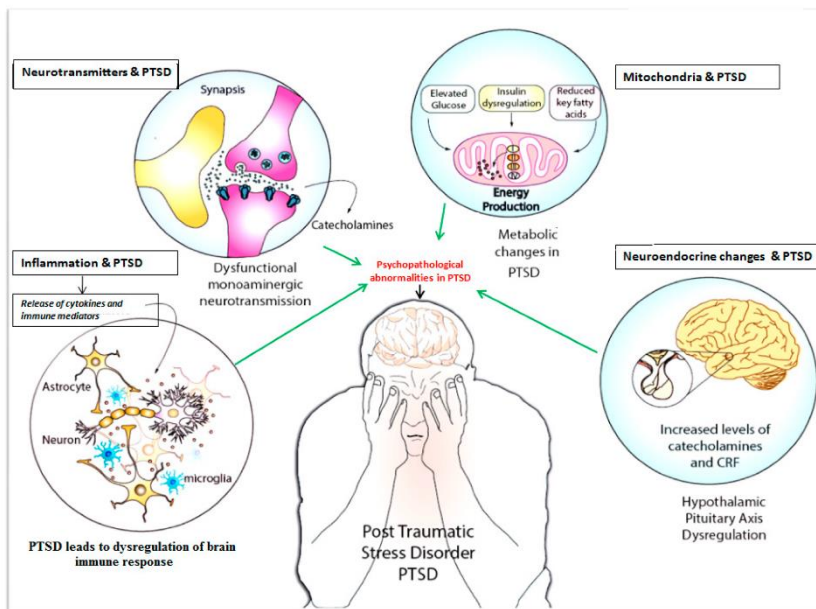
The virtual evaporation of Christians from Iraq due to emigration pressures has further endangered the dwindling communities left behind. Whether unwilling or unable to resort to migration as a solution to the threats endangering the collective survival[33] of Christians in the country, those who continue to stay are challenged by the lack of human capital

and employment due to the mass exodus of entrepreneurs and business-owners, the demographic imbalance resulting from the disproportionate numbers of young people who leave in comparison to elders, both weakening the self-sufficiency of resident communities in a number of ways. Finally, Christian emigration complicates the ongoing peace efforts involving all groups in Iraq. Christian survivors of ISIS genocide who leave Iraq are less able to assist in identifying perpetrators or bringing them to justice. Most cannot participate in initiatives like the UNDP's Community-based Reconciliation and Reintegration program,[34] which take place mostly on the ground. The role of ISIS in forcing Christians to emigrate or flee from Iraq, in eradicating the social trust and political stability that would be needed for Christians to return, has complimented the other forms of violence suffered by Christians and in doing so has created a crisis for the 3 to 400,000 members of the community still there that is profoundly psychological in nature.

Collective trauma as a public health hazard

The science and psychology of trauma

Trauma, both conceptually and as a psychological state, is perhaps less understood now than at any other time in the history of modern psychological science. Even Western media outlets such as Vox[35] have been forced to admit that the term has become little more than a catchphrase of the current era - an assertion supported by Google Trends data[36] showing that the term doubled in use between 2004 and 2022). Regretfully, this dilutes the gravity and understanding of what is in reality a profoundly harmful and abnormal psychological state.

Caption: depiction of neurophysiological effects of PTSD, from Aliev et al. (2020):[37] "*Neurophysiology and Psychopathology Underlying PTSD and Recent Insights into the PTSD Therapies—A Comprehensive Review,*" Journal of Clinical Medicine

So what is trauma? To answer this question, we can start by establishing some basic facts about the phenomenology of human experience. In the words of Hirsh et al. (2012):[38] "...it is important to remember that the environment is not experienced directly. Subjective experience is based on partial, and pragmatically driven representations of the

environment." Sensory perception modalities such as sight and touch do not form the whole of our experience, but feed into what in cognitive neuroscience is called a "mental map" of reality. Such "maps" are made up of our social relationships, our memories of events or geographical spaces, the frameworks that regulate our thought and language, and most importantly in the context of trauma, our expectations for what is possible and what is not.

Trauma, in psychological terms, can best be described as an encounter with environmental circumstances so extreme and outside the boundaries of what is and can be expected that a sudden, violent, and shocking disruption to the mental map of the individual is involuntarily experienced. This entire process triggers neurophysiological changes empirically related to those produced in sufferers of PTSD, such as increased noradrenergic and anterior cingulate cortex activity, as well as an increase in adrenal gland secretion of the stress hormone cortisol whose neurotoxicity at high doses can directly harm the brain. A truly traumatic experience is therefore "an aversive event powerful enough to undermine the traumatized individual's fundamental assumptions about the world and him or herself". It is a moment in time when the world stops making sense. The impact of such disruption to sense-making is described by Jordan Peterson in *Maps of Meaning* as "simultaneously unforgettable, because of its emotional intensity, and incomprehensible, because of its complexity."[39]

According to the current edition of the Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders[40] (DSM-5), PTSD is a mental disorder which is diagnosed by assessment of symptoms in relation to certain criteria,[41] all of which involve exposure to a traumatic or intensely stressful event. It is a severe, chronic, and sometimes irreparable psychological illness, which is scientifically proven[42] to exert deleterious effects upon the brain, the immune system, the vital organs, cognitive abilities, one's social relationships (i.e. friends, family members, co-workers) as well as on sleep, metabolism, and more. The difference between trauma and PTSD is complex, as PTSD can develop in some individuals exposed to a traumatic event, and not in others; while some risk factors have been identified, there is no scientific consensus as to what exactly determines whether an individual will or will not develop PTSD after experiencing trauma. Yet the difference is also essentially trivial, as PTSD itself merely represents an unambiguously pathological outcome from exposure to traumatic experiences or events, not all possible outcomes of such exposure, none of which are beneficial. If an entire population is exposed to the same traumatic events at the same time, as is the case in genocide, PTSD remains useful as a diagnostic tool. On the other hand, one cannot assume that survivors who do not qualify for PTSD diagnosis are unaffected by the impact of said exposure to trauma.

> "In Erbil, fatigue began to appear on me both physically and morally, as I hardly spent time with my family, meeting them for only a few minutes at night ... The news during this period about the liberation of Baghdeda was poor, and seeing it became a dream for each of us; **many Christians died in Erbil because of trauma**. We were hopeless and tired."
>
> Baghdeda resident

Caption: The aftermath of the flight of Christians from Baghdeda village to Kurdish capital Erbil within Iraq, described by a survivor (ACN)

The trauma of the individual is the trauma of the community

Concrete data on the exposure and rates of trauma among Christian survivors of ISIS genocide is exceptionally poor. Most studies conducted on trauma in the region are conducted on the Yazidi minority, who as a population are fewer in number relative to Christians, and prior to ISIS lived in a small number of tightly-knit communities in towns and villages where they constituted a large majority of the population - almost half in Sinjar alone. These demographic characteristics are known to have greatly elevated the burden of trauma among the Yazidi population, as acts of violence against members of intensely networked communities directly affect more members than in communities which are dispersed within broader populations. Research from 2021 published in the International Journal of Social Psychiatry reveals that 79% of Yazidis[43] can be diagnostically confirmed as suffering from PTSD, but no comparable figures exist for Iraqi Christians. With no concrete data to rely upon, we can only speculate as to the true prevalence or degree of PTSD among Christian survivors of ISIS genocide in Iraq, or indeed among survivors that later emigrated to safer destinations.

Knowing how severe the impact of trauma and PTSD can be presents a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the potential damage inflicted by trauma to minds, bodies, and lives of victims invokes empathy and compassion to most of us. On the other hand, such knowledge forces us to confront the scientific incoherence of assuming that victims suffering from these symptoms can be helped in the same way as anyone else, or assuming that genocide survivors would be amenable to convalescence if afforded simple inputs like material aid and social support.

A fundamental yet unfortunate reality of trauma is that it leaves its victims less capable. Similar to other debilitating psychological conditions like major depressive disorder, traumatized survivors of severely extreme life-threatening events are in many cases no longer existing as the versions of themselves they were previously. The weight of the blows inflicted upon the psyche, compounded by the concomitant neurophysiological impacts of such blows, can be so devastating to survivors that the very possibility of normal life becomes a blurry and distal reality even long after the causative event has transpired. PTSD itself is highly persistent over time; a 2013 study published in *Conflict and Health* found that over 25% of Rwandan genocide survivors diagnostically qualified as having PTSD despite nearly two decades of distance from the events that took place in

1994. As mentioned previously, this is only a subset of the impact, as PTSD criteria are highly specific and diagnoses do not capture the sum total of a genocide's psychological consequences for survivor populations.
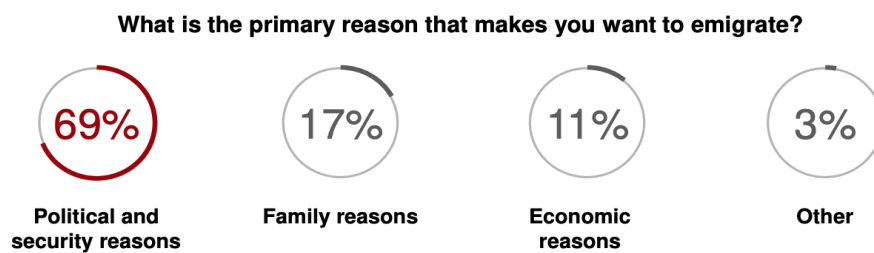
It would be one thing if humans were solitary creatures, with each individual entirely isolated from the suffering of others, but this is not the case. Pathologies a single individual may suffer from, such as alcoholism, will necessarily feed back into their structured social relationships, such as the family, which often leads to downstream effects. The trauma of an individual is in a real sense the trauma of the community.

Can Christians in Iraq recover? ISIS trauma and present-day security concerns

The hopes and future of Christian communities in Iraq

"Iraq without Christians would no longer be Iraq, because Christians, along with other believers, contribute strongly to the country's specific identity as a place where co-existence, tolerance and mutual acceptance have flourished ever since the first centuries."

Security, followed by family reasons, is the main driver of emigration

What is the primary reason that makes you want to emigrate?

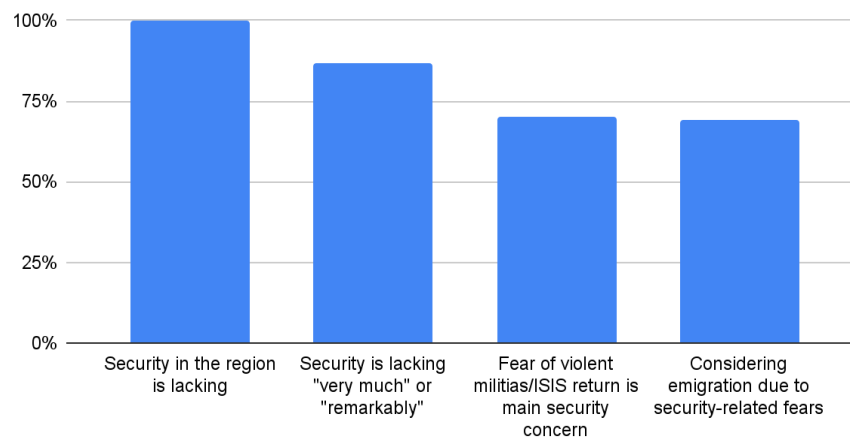| 69%	17%	11%	3%
Political and security reasons	**Family reasons**	**Economic reasons**	**Other**

Capture: Driving factors associated with the desire to emigrate among Iraqi Christians (ACN)

These words, spoken by the Roman Pope Francis II in 2022,[44] essentially summarize the situation Iraq is in with respect to its Christian minorities after the ISIS catastrophe in the 2010s. If current trends persist, then the two-millennia history of Christians in Iraq is effectively finished. If that outcome is to be averted, the Iraqi government, in conjunction with foreign aid donors and NGOs active in the region, must address the factors behind population loss. The impact of ISIS on Iraqi Christians, and the trauma this produced, is a key presence amidst those factors.

The notion that recent events have led to a collapse in trust, and an explosion in fear and anxiety related to existential security concerns, among Iraqi Christians is essentially beyond debate. That such factors drive Christian emigration and population loss is also universally understood. The role played in such social phenomena by trauma is not quantifiable, yet at the same time we can surmise much from the evidence regarding Christian emigration behaviors and motivations.

The main factor associated with the desire to emigrate among Iraqi Christian respondents in ACN survey data is, by a very large margin, concerns regarding the matter of security. The contextual background behind this concern is self-evident and needs no explanation, but addressing it constitutes a puzzle that Iraq has thus far been unable to solve.

Security concerns among Iraqi Christians in Nineveh Governorate, 2020 (ACN data)

Caption: bar chart representing the percentage of Christian respondents asked to agree or disagree with statements listed below in survey research (ACN)

In page 90 of the World Bank's report on the post-ISIS Iraqi economy, WB researchers acknowledge the need to move "beyond physical reconstruction of economic and social assets to address challenges associated with the breakdown of trust and the need to advance critical reforms to promote reconciliation and a new social contract between different geographic, ethnic, religious, cultural and social entities." Generally speaking, this is very likely correct. The catastrophe that ISIS was, and that it still is in the minds of many, cannot be understated. Clearly, trauma too plays a role in the memories and perceptions of that catastrophe among Iraqi nationals, of all faiths and ethnic backgrounds. If Iraq is to move forward, both psychologically and economically, then it must progress on both fronts at once, restoring trust and rebuilding homes at the same time. Nearly all data published in recent years on the status of trust or tolerance between ethnic and religious communities in Iraq is considerably dismal. Yet a singular study[45] that appeared in *Science* in 2020 is a contradiction to this trend that deserves notice. Author Salma Mousa, an Iraqi scientist, conducted a trial where Iraqi Christians amateur football players displaced by ISIS were randomly assigned to either an all-Christian team, or an all-Muslim team. She describes her results as follows: „*The intervention improved behaviors toward Muslim peers: Christians with Muslim teammates were more likely to vote for a Muslim (not on their team) to receive a sportsmanship award, register for a mixed team next season, and train with Muslims 6 months after the intervention. The intervention did not substantially affect behaviors in other social contexts, such as patronizing a restaurant in Muslim-dominated Mosul or attending a mixed social event, nor did it yield consistent effects on intergroup*

attitudes. Although contact can build tolerant behaviors toward peers within an intervention, building broader social cohesion outside of it is more challenging."

Although there are unfortunately no clear answers or firm expectations that can be given in relation to the crisis of mental health, security, and emigration that afflicts Iraq's Christian minority, and may indeed drive them to effective extinction. Yet studies such as this are a cause for tentative optimism, as they reveal how even after the ISIS catastrophe, Iraqi Christians are still capable of trusting/befriending (and being trusted/befriended by) their Muslim counterparts. Though no solutions to the issues discussed are provided in the present study, it is the author's hope that many will soon be found.

Endnotes

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