Elites and emulators: The evolution of Iraqi Kurdish asylum migration to Europe

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Abstract

Research on migration's internal dynamics has focused on labour migration and drawn heavily on cumulative causation theory. It is often believed that pioneer labour migrants of middling socioeconomic selectivity facilitate the migration of others in their networks by reducing the costs and risks of migration through practical assistance. Expanding migrant networks can allow for labour migration to grow although macrostructural conditions change. For asylum migration in the context of armed conflict, the mechanisms whereby migration grows may very well differ. For one thing, pioneer asylum migrants in such contexts are often social elites. What is the relationship between the movement of these elites and that of subsequent asylum migrants? This article traces the evolution of Iraqi Kurdish asylum migration to Europe from its inception by elite pioneer migrants to its continuation by non-elites, during four decades of altered contextual conditions. The analysis is based on 106 semi-structured interviews with Iraqi Kurdish migrants. An evolving interplay between exogenous and endogenous dynamics is observed, and so are commonalities with the social processes that underpin labour migration. The basic principles of cumulative causation seem to be operating, yet there is little to indicate that established migrants functioned as 'bridgeheads' for newcomers. The empirical analysis feeds into a concluding conceptual discussion in which I argue that, compared to labour migration, asylum migration from conflict-affected areas may be relatively less driven by the interpersonal networks that reduce costs and risks, and relatively more driven by what the article coins 'emulation', the observational learning of migration.

Keywords: asylum, conflict, cumulative causation, emulation, Iraqi Kurdistan, history

1. Introduction

This paper starts from two observations. First, research on migration's internal dynamics has drawn heavily on cumulative causation theory and applied it mostly to labour

migration. Second, asylum migration, save for a few exceptions, has not been similarly scrutinised.

Cumulative causation, designed to explain the self-perpetuating momentum of labour migration, was catapulted onto the frontiers of migration theory by Massey (1990). Massey et al. (1998) then published a study evaluating the fundamental propositions of this theoretical approach, among others, to major migration systems worldwide. Yet, there was a theoretical omission in their seminal book. Reviewing it for *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Van Hear (1999: 430–1) noted that 'forced migration and refugee movements do not feature strongly in the text' and saw this as evidence of the 'deep, inexplicable and frustrating divide between the nebulous subject areas "migration studies" and "refugee (or forced migration) studies"'.

Scholars of refugee and forced migration studies have requited by paying little attention to cumulative causation. Since Van Hear's 1999 review, not a single article of the more than 430 published in the pre-eminent journal has specifically examined cumulative causation. Urgent humanitarian policy considerations tend to eclipse theoretical ambition and historical depth in refugee and forced migration studies (Black 2001; Marfleet 2007; Fussell 2012). Cumulative causation theory can add theoretical substance to our understanding of asylum migration in the context of armed conflict and sensitise us to its social dynamics and path dependency. It is rarely useful to attribute such migration entirely to a single structural *force majeure* such as 'war' (Lindley 2010).

This article traces the historical evolution of Iraqi Kurdish asylum migration to Europe since 1974. It deliberately focuses on social dynamics and specifically examines the relationship between the movement of the pioneer migrants who initiated this migration system and the movement of subsequent migrants. The objective is not to test cumulative causation theory, but rather to use it to explore, empirically and conceptually, mid-range social mechanisms whereby asylum migration may gain an inner momentum.

What follows is an outline of the literature on cumulative causation. After an overview of the empirical case and a note on methods comes the main empirical discussion. It is structured into three historical periods of differing contextual conditions.

The analysis reveals some sociological commonalities between labour migration and asylum migration. Still, the elite nature of the Iraqi Kurdish pioneer asylum migrants, typical of those who initiate new asylum flows, also points to a possible difference in the evolution of migration. Research on elites finds that they 'are often societal frontrunners and usually the loci of dynamics and change, [in part] because they are emulated' (Salverda and Abbink 2013: 1). As I theorise in the conclusion, asylum migration in the wake of elites may be distinctly *emulative*.

2. Cumulative causation: conceptual origins and empirical applications

First coined by Myrdal in 1957 to explain economic underdevelopment, cumulative causation was revised by Massey (1990) to become a cornerstone in migration theory. It is built on the premise that once migration is initiated, its drivers change. Migration can increase

although conditions for the initial movement of pioneer migrants may differ from those of its perpetuators (Massey et al. 1993).

Cumulative causation was once an umbrella concept. It covered income and human capital distribution, land ownership, agricultural organisation, culture, the social meaning of work and the structure of production—all of which feed into each other. For instance, the relative deprivation of households without a migrant member and an emergent culture of migration in which departure is normalised can produce combined effects that continue to drive migration until its rationale erodes or the recruitment pool dries up.

For better or worse, the literature on cumulative causation has emphasised social capital mechanisms and network effects at the expense of other mechanisms. Yet the overall postulate remains: the causation of migration is cumulative 'in that each act of migration alters the social context within which subsequent migration decisions are made, typically in ways that make additional movement more likely' (Massey et al. 1993: 451). Beyond threshold levels, migration becomes progressively less socioeconomically selective, more voluminous and difficult for destination states to control. As summed up by Fussell and Massey (2004: 152):

> The primary mechanism underlying cumulative causation is the accumulation of social capital, by which members of a community gain migration-related knowledge and resources through family members and friends who have already travelled. . . . Social networks lower the costs associated with migration by providing aspiring migrants with information and assistance. . . .

Critics have pointed out weaknesses in this network-centric approach. De Haas (2010) found indirect and migration-undermining feedback mechanisms to be understudied. Bakewell, De Haas, and Kubal (2012) noted that not all pioneer migrants want to help others migrate. While consensus exists that migrant networks often have considerable explanatory power, 'there is often far too little discussion about the nature of the networks involved or explanation of how they come to affect migration aspirations and behaviour' (Bakewell and Jolivet 2016).

How exactly pioneers facilitate migration for others remains opaque, even puzzling, given the social cleavages between pioneers and subsequent migrants (Lindstrom and Ramírez 2010). Following the logic of cumulative causation and modelled on the case of Mexican–US labour migration, the supposition is that pioneers have enough wealth to absorb their trips' costs and risks though are not so affluent that out-migration is unattractive. Importantly, they are assumed to be of middling socio-economic status, distinguished by their risk tolerance and ability to migrate unaided (Bakewell, De Haas and Kubal 2012). Pioneer *asylum* migrants, by contrast, tend to come from the ranks of social elites (Van Hear 2006). If migration systems are path-dependent, this difference in system genesis is likely consequential.

Elites, in Nadel's (1956) understanding, are defined by their imitability. Alongside power and resources, imitability distinguishes them from non-elites. This distinction is lost in much of the network analysis of cumulative causation. As noted by Curran et al. (2005: 228), quantitative studies tend to measure migrant networks as 'simple counts of other people who have already migrated from a common social unit'. Drawing out the implication, Garip (2008: 612) observed that 'no migration data to date allow direct measurement

of flows of information or assistance resources through social networks'. Her call was for future research to specify if the perpetuation of migration is *imitative* through a contagion effect, *assisted* through information and assistance within migrant networks, or both.

Whether migration is imitative, assisted, or both, is a particularly vexing question in contexts of armed conflict. Silva and Massey (2014: 163) hypothesise that the social capital mechanisms which drive cumulative causation could actually be more important during war, 'functioning not only to increase the potential rewards of emigration but more critically overcoming the risks of staying'. Yet wars can exacerbate tensions, disrupt networks and erode trust.[1] Without presuming elite pioneers in such settings would assist newcomers across social cleavages, the out-migration of an imitable reference group at a time of information uncertainty and risk could also, theoretically, catalyse the observational learning of migration. My empirical discussion explores that theoretical possibility, following a brief note on methods.

3. Method

This qualitative study is based primarily on 106 in-depth semi-structured interviews with Iraqi Kurdish migrants. Though its initial focus was on return migration, the relevance of cumulative causation theory emerged during data-gathering. Interviews were conducted with legally resident and adult emigrants, mostly asylees, in the UK (19) and Norway (15); and with adult returnees in Iraqi Kurdistan back from the UK (37) and Norway (35). A total of seven focus group discussions were conducted in all three locations, including one with non-migrants in Iraqi Kurdistan. Additional contextual information was elicited from 10 key informant interviews in Iraqi Kurdistan—including high-level officials in the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and organisations working with migrants such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and various NGOs—as well as six return visitors normally resident in the UK and Norway. Casual encounters with non-migrants and returnees from other countries also provided analytical context. Recorded interviews were transcribed. Transcriptions and interview notes were coded and analysed using NVivo software, and sorted by historical periods and temporal generalisations (e.g. 'in the early 1970s, no one talked about Europe' or 'those who left in the 1990s were . . .').

Social divides between cohorts were sometimes expressed in pejorative labelling, especially of third-wavers by pioneers and second-wavers. This raises issues of voice, power and representation. Descriptions of third-wavers as 'troublemakers' with 'no degrees' who 'have bad values' are analytically valuable though also represent cultural otherization, and are accordingly contextualised and triangulated with historical sources and relevant literature.

The data came from three four-month fieldwork sessions during the period 2011–13 in two major destination states for Iraqi Kurds and in their origin country. Norway and the UK were selected as host states for being among the top five destination countries of Iraqis in Europe at the time of fieldwork. Similarities in narratives and differences in interviewee attributes across migrants and returnees prevented cross-country comparison, thus leading to the decision to pool data. Interviews were loosely semi-structured around key themes, including migration decision-making and transnational practices.

Interviewing returnees is not a conventional way to study the sending context of asylum migration. If return migrants are atypical migrants, taking them as a sample selection could bias the data. That said, interviewing returnees has advantages in terms of access to data. Asylum migrants interviewed by Northern researchers in Northern locations may feel a need to uphold a coherent asylum narrative adjusted to legal-bureaucratic imperatives (Eastmond 2007). Once returned, migrants are outside host-state bureaucracy. Return migrants may also have unique insight into how local perspectives on migration change over time. Retrospective questions about migration decision-making and historical periods are nonetheless limited by interviewees' recall, in the present case up to decades later, and answers are likely shaped by current circumstances.

For this study, recruitment took place through a combination of snowball sampling (referrals limited to five) and personal and organisational networks. The aim was to ensure diversity—namely, in gender, residence, socioeconomic status and age. Another dimension of diversity was type of return: deported or 'removed' (13); so-called voluntary return (14); and autonomous return (45). The categories refer to, respectively, migrants returned forcibly by authorities; migrants who took up incentivised return in a governmental return programme; and migrants who returned independently.

Local interpreters were used for some of the interviews in Iraqi Kurdistan's three regional capitals: Erbil (Hawler), Sulaymaniyah and Duhok. They also facilitated recruitment. A few interviews took place in more rural settings. Almost 90 per cent of the returnee interviewees were men (as were roughly two thirds of interviewees in Norway and the UK). Recruiting female interviewees was not impossible, but more laborious and time-consuming than recruiting male interviewees. Patriarchal social structures accounted for the comparatively easy access I had, as a male researcher, to male interviewees in this empirical setting.

The bias towards male experiences has problematic implications. Given that around half the world's refugees and other international migrants are female (UN General Assembly 2016), the data is unlikely to reflect the actual sex distribution of Iraqi Kurdish asylum migration to Europe since 1974. More data on women's experiences would have strengthened the analysis, not least by illuminating the gendered impacts of historical transformations and power asymmetries operating on the specific migrant practices discussed, such as transnational marriages, remittances and return visits (Mahler and Pessar 2006). In short, I acknowledge my research's sample selection limitations and androcentrism, as well as recall bias.

This study periodises contemporary Iraqi Kurdish asylum migration to Europe into three cohorts. The interviewees comprised 20 in the 1974–1991 cohort, whom I refer to as 'elite pioneers'; 36 in the 1992–1998 cohort, referred to as 'second-wavers'; and 50 in the 1999–2014 cohort, referred to as 'third-wavers'. These periods were defined on the basis of historical analysis combined with individual migration biographies and how migrants described the continuities and disruptions of migration over time.

4. Iraqi Kurdish asylum migration to Europe

Iraqi Kurdish asylum migration to Europe has evolved under unstable conditions. Elite pioneers, second-wavers and third-wavers left during macrostructurally distinct periods.

Table 1. Stylized comparison of the three waves of migration, based on interview data

	Elite pioneers	Second-wavers	Third-wavers
Time period	1974-1991	1992-1998	1999-2014
Socioeconomic status	High	Mixed	Low
Prospects for asylum	Positive	Positive	Negative
Prospects for wealth relative to non-migrants	Positive	Positive	Negative
Likelihood of deportation	Low	Low	High
Major driver of migration	Persecution	Insecurity and deprivation	Culture of migration

Migration was initiated by persecuted military and political elites who fled the risk of staying. A complex of exogenous and endogenous forces caused migration to be perpetuated by second-wavers, while endogenous forces dominated for the third-wavers. By periodising and historicising Iraqi Kurdish migration as such, I not only engage with the theory of cumulative causation, but also build on Kurdish studies in which migration is central (e.g. Sheikhmous 1989; Hassanpour and Mojab 2005; Eliassi 2013; Alinia et al. 2014).

Table 1 displays each cohort's distinctive features and historical context.

The historically grounded analysis hence covers three distinct contexts of out-migration: in migrant selectivity; distinct contexts of reception; divergent migration outcomes; and variability in the nature and degree of 'force'. Theoretically, it indicates an overall empirical complementarity with cumulative causation.

4.1 The initiation of migration by elite pioneers (1974–91)

Interview data suggests that the pioneer migrants who left Iraqi Kurdistan between 1974 and 1991 were political and military elites fleeing persecution. Iraq during this period was among the twentieth century's most brutal dictatorships.

The Kurdish region had witnessed conflict since 1961, when the Kurdish nationalist guerrilla warfare against Iraq's central government began in the country's Arab-dominated south (Van Bruinessen 1992: 27). Violence culminated in the mid-1970s after the regime's defeat of a Kurdish rebellion. This led to the first large-scale contemporary flight from Iraqi Kurdistan in 1974–1975, when an estimated 250,000 Kurdish refugees went to Iran (Van Bruinessen 1992: 31) and some 100,000 crossed the border into Turkey (Bengio 2012: 130). Europe was not a main destination. Very few political and military elites moved Westward via Iran and Turkey, mostly as UNHCR quota refugees (King 2008). In the words of one pioneer interviewee:

> In 1974 it was only the very political Kurdish families who left, because they were in immediate danger. People went to various countries through the UN. There weren't really any economic migrants in the 1970s, and there were so few of us that we knew most of the families.

A small number of migrants bypassed UNHCR procedures and sought asylum in Europe, sometimes travelling with false passports. As described by another first-waver, they tended to be well connected within a political party.

> We, and a lot of people who left in the 1980s, were from rebel families, called *Peshmerga* families. [...] I don't think we paid much because we were from one of the political parties and we were heavily involved in the organisation and the military side of the conflict against Saddam. We had a lot of support. [...] Many went with fake passports, and for members of the political parties, the fake passports were cheaper.

Migration to Europe remained an elite phenomenon during the extreme violence that followed. With the Kurds temporarily defeated in 1975, the government engineered demographics to ensure Arab dominance in oil-rich areas. This led to the forcible relocation of over 200,000 ethnic Kurds, replaced with ethnic Arabs during the period 1975–79. 'Arabisation' was also linked to the Anfal campaign of 1988 and the same year's gassing of Halabja, killing an estimated 50,000 to 100,000 rural Kurds (Hiltermann 2007: 135). This genocidal violence occurred at a time of relative regional isolation (Hiltermann 2007). By 1989, some 80 per cent of all Kurdish villages were destroyed (Tripp 2010: 236).

Seeking asylum in Europe was generally prohibitively expensive. One interviewee reported human smuggling through Europe to cost between 11,000 and 12,000 US dollars, then equivalent to the local price of a centrally located luxury house. Very few had a household member with prior residence experience in Europe, for example, through the Iraqi scholarship programmes begun in 1958 (Sheikhmous 1989). Those who nevertheless made it to Europe seemed to have enjoyed a relatively hospitable reception, although European countries began tightening external border controls and introducing sanctions against human smugglers during the late 1980s (Hatton 2009).

Another characteristic of pioneer migration was its perceived irreversibility at the time. The Baghdad regime under Saddam Hussein's leadership ruled the most developed Arab nation at the time, with oil wealth and US backing. Its repressive state apparatus rendered emigration difficult and return unthinkable. As one interviewee explained:

> Generally speaking, few people expected to return because this was after the genocidal Anfal programme [in 1988], and thousands of people disappeared, and villages and infrastructure were destroyed. No one anticipated the Gulf War and Saddam was backed by Europe and the US. The time from 1987 till 1989 was the lowest point for Kurdistan.

Fear instilled by the central government's genocidal violence resulted in the 1991 mass exodus to neighbouring countries. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said the agency had never seen such numbers—almost 1.5 million—fleeing their country over a matter of days (Hiltermann 2007: 225). The short-lived exodus put the issue on the international agenda and prompted Western coalition powers to impose a no-fly zone over most of Iraqi Kurdistan. Iraqi troops withdrew, paving the way for mass return from Iran and Turkey and the establishment of Iraqi Kurdistan's semi-autonomous Kurdish Regional Government in 1992.

4.2 The perpetuation of migration by second-wavers (1992–1998)

Asylum migration to Europe grew dramatically during the 1990s as second-wavers from mixed socioeconomic backgrounds followed the trail blazed by elite pioneers. Interviewees stressed alterations in the macrostructural and social context of migration during this new era for Iraqi Kurdistan.

From 1992 to 1995, the number of yearly 'Iraqi' asylum applications in Europe ranged between 10,000 and 20,000 (UNHCR 2007). As general living conditions started improving in Iraqi Kurdistan in 1997 and 1998 (Leezenberg 2005), the number surpassed 40,000 (UNHCR 2007). UN officials asserted that the majority of 'Iraqi' asylum seekers in Europe were in fact Iraqi Kurdish, and that they constituted the largest population of asylum seekers in the world (King 2005). The Council of Europe expressed alarm in 1998 over a 'significant increase in the number of ethnic Kurds, mostly of Iraqi nationality . . . as illegal migrants and asylum-seekers' (Vermot-Mangold 1998).

That migration grows is not in itself evidence of cumulative causation if underlying mechanisms cannot plausibly be identified. One underlying mechanism that seems to have plausibly operated for the second-wavers relates to income distribution (Massey et al. 1993). 'Relative deprivation' drives migration when international migration decisions are influenced not just by absolute income considerations, but also by relative ones (Stark and Taylor 1989). When migrant-sending households receive remittances it increases their incomes as well as the community-level income inequality. Relatively deprived households are induced to migrate through a feedback loop that is subsumable within the cumulative causation framework (Massey et al. 1993).

An economic crisis hit Iraqi Kurdistan during the 1990s. After the withdrawal of Iraqi troops in 1991, Saddam cut off all salaries to Kurdish employees and gradually imposed a blockade on the Kurdish region to paralyse its economy and fighting spirit (McDowall 2009: 378). By October 1992, the price of kerosene in Iraqi Kurdistan was 200 times that in July 1990 and rice was eighty times more expensive (McDowall 2009: 382).

Exacerbating Saddam's blockade on the Kurds, the UN imposed one of its own on all of Iraq. Described as the most devastating multilateral sanctions regime in contemporary history (Al-Ali 2008: 185), the blockade had disastrous effects on Iraqi Kurdistan (Von Sponeck 2006; Heshmati 2010; Natali 2010). Alongside the double set of sanctions, other factors that exacerbated the crisis included rivalry and armed conflict between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK); the Turkish Kurdish Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK)'s use of Iraqi Kurdish territory in its insurgency against Turkish incumbents; and efforts by regional and international powers to co-opt, suppress or control the region (McDowall 2009: 387).

Pioneers and second-wavers in Europe thereby possessed extraordinary wealth vis-à-vis Iraqi Kurdistan's population overall. As the number of migrants boomed during the 1990s, their vital remittances reached a growing number of households. Interview data suggests that remittances often felt like a lifeline for families left behind. As one interviewee explained:

> During the 1990s, the situation was so hard [that] some sold their furniture to buy bread. At that time, it was impossible [for anyone] to just work abroad and save up money for oneself while people needed it desperately in Kurdistan.

The local economy also offered spectacular value for foreign currency, which interviewees who left during this period frequently referenced. 'During the 1990s, if you had a hundred dollars you could feed a family for weeks', was so commonly uttered during interviews that the words became formulaic. Remittances were also reportedly regularly invested in building impressive houses, thereby upping the social visibility of migration. Against this background it seems reasonable to presume that remittances affected the income distribution somewhat and, at least to some extent, exacerbated community-level income inequality.

Remittances were not the only thing to demonstrate the relative wealth offered in Europe. The region had been 'hermetically sealed off' throughout the preceding decade (Hiltermann 2007: 85), but after 1991 came the dramatic influx of diplomats, intelligence personnel, foreign military, businessmen, NGO staff and even tourists (Von Sponeck 2006: 217). Another demographic to suddenly appear and spur global awareness comprised pioneer migrants newly able to return for visits. None of the interviewees had heard of migrants returning even temporarily prior to 1991, for fear of the Iraqi regime and its sanctions. Migrant transnationalism was kept at a minimum until that year but subsequently offered unprecedented international exposure to a population so long isolated and immobilised by a totalitarian regime. In the words of an interviewee: 'Until the 1990s, people were not allowed to travel. So [after 1991] they thought everything from abroad was great.'

Several interviewees recalled the decade's high demand for information about Europe during their visits and homecoming rituals. One interviewee said, only half in jest, that during the 1990s, when her family in the UK returned to Iraqi Kurdistan for a month, they would spend the first two weeks greeting locals who came by to say hello and the second two weeks bidding them farewell. Another interviewee was so frustrated by having to spend time with strangers wanting to hear about Europe on his return visits that he preferred to stay abroad. Although pioneer migrants were insulated from the larger segments of society through their elite status, homecoming rituals invoked weak ties that at least partly appear to have included non-elites. King (2008: 213) seems to imply this when she notes that members of chiefly families were met at the border by hundreds of well-wishers eager to hear about Europe.

Network effects can also give rise to a 'culture of migration', for lack of a better term. Massey et al. (1993: 452–3) state that a culture of migration emerges when: 'At the community level, migration becomes deeply ingrained into the repertoire of people's behaviours, and values associated with migration become part of the community's values.' This appears to have happened very rapidly in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The practice of transnational marriages, previously unheard of, offers an illustrative example of cultural shifts that manifest as network effects. Since the adult diaspora in Europe at the time was small and few women in it were marriageable, migrant men returned briefly for arranged marriages and brought their wives to Europe. One interviewee claimed to be among the first Iraqi Kurds to marry a migrant living in Europe.

> For Kurdish women in 1992, it was considered odd to marry a man who came from Europe. Being in Europe, he is unknown [back in Iraqi Kurdistan]. What does he do? Who is he? Even if he is a relative, he is unknown after 15 years in Europe. Three years later, in 1995, it was normal. They were supposed to marry like that.

Another interviewee reiterated this, saying: 'Those [men] in Europe could line up women and pick and choose whomever they wanted for a wife.' Economically and security-wise, transnational marriages provided sending families with an increasingly popular strategic connection to Europe.

Theoretically, network structures and processes are also indicators of major social and cultural transformations in Iraqi Kurdistan. While transnational marriages, similar to remittances and homecoming rituals, manifest in migrant networks as first-order effects, they also operate more indirectly as second-order contextual feedback mechanisms, causing alterations in the social context of migration (De Haas 2010). 'The crux is that such migration-engendered contextual changes constitute feedback mechanisms which have their own, reciprocal effects on the occurrence of subsequent migration' (De Haas 2010: 1591).

The emergent culture of migration did not operate in isolation of macrostructural conditions. Although security had improved from the preceding period (King 2008), instability and armed internal conflict prevailed. 'Where the KDP was in power you couldn't come from the PUK. Where the PUK was in power you couldn't come from the KDP', said an interviewee, referring to the internecine warfare of the two major political parties battling for hegemony. A history of conflict and uncertainty made risk expectable, yet unpredictable in its specificities.

> No one was safe. You could wake up in the morning and not know whether [Kurdistan had been invaded by] the Ba'ath regime, Iran or Turkey. During the 1990s, it was entirely chaotic to live in a country that had no future. It couldn't call itself a country. It wasn't part of another country. There was no security, no economic support, and increasing unemployment. So people didn't have a choice but to flee.

While violence and deprivation encouraged migration, a flourishing human smuggling industry enabled it. A typical smuggling route traversed Turkey, Greece, the Balkans and Italy before reaching main destinations such as the Netherlands, the UK, Germany, Sweden and Norway. Almost all the second-wave interviewees cited using smugglers. They themselves rarely had a clear idea of where to go, letting the smuggler decide their final destination. The destination was 'Europe', rather than locations with established co-migrants. Even if the gates to Europe narrowed as border controls intensified (Hatton 2009), the practice of forcibly deporting rejected asylum seekers remained a 'singularly rare occurrence' across Europe during the 1990s (Gibney and Hansen 2003: 4). Pioneer migrants already established at the time saw those who arrived during the 1990s as coming from vastly different backgrounds. As one pioneer interviewee in the UK put it:

> Initially, the community here in London was very clearly top quality. . . . But during the 1990s, it dropped down significantly. They were not keeping any culture – that's moralistic – what I mean is they were less educated. . . . We, the old generation, tended to not communicate with this new generation.

A pioneer in Norway described a similar inter-wave dynamic.

> The Kurdish community used to be very good. But after 1996 or 1997, a lot of different Kurds came. . . . You had to be careful. You couldn't say 'hi' to them. . . . They came for other reasons than we [did].

Without delving too deeply into discursive constructions of social difference, observations of a decline in newcomers' socioeconomic status resonate with the literature. Gran (2008: 25) states that only those who left 'initially' after 1991 were from 'educated urban middle classes', implying a subsequent drop in selectivity. Wahlbeck (2001: 81) notes how at the turn of the millennium, new Kurdish migrants in Europe 'seem to have come from quite a different background than those [highly educated and English-speaking] Kurds who had lived in Europe for some time'. McDowall (2009: 392) describes those who left during the 1990s in general as 'mainly the better qualified within the population'.

4.3 The perpetuation of migration by third-wavers (1999–2014)

The third period of Iraqi Kurdish asylum migration continued during an era of prosperity and relative stability. Migrants kept applying for asylum despite high rejection rates. While this illustrates the academic and policy challenge in distinguishing between 'forced' and 'voluntary' migration (Black 2001; Erdal and Oeppen 2017), it is not, as I will elaborate, necessarily paradoxical.

Formidable economic progress followed the cessation of political violence in 1998, and was catalysed by the American-led invasion of Iraq, toppling Saddam's Ba'athist regime. Based on Kurdish Regional Government statistics, the nominal GDP grew from 2,420 billion Iraqi dinars in 2004 to 28,320 billion Iraqi dinars in 2011 (Kurdistan Regional Government 2011; Kulaksiz 2015). Prior to the new combined economic, humanitarian and security crisis hitting Iraqi Kurdistan in 2014, the region enjoyed a GDP growth of 8 per cent (Kulaksiz 2015). An influx of labour migrants from East Asia was drawn to this booming economy.

Economic growth in Kurdistan did not, however, benefit third-wavers seeking asylum in Europe. Not only did they miss out on it, but the value of foreign currency dropped and remittances lost their significance. As one interviewee in Europe noted: 'Before, people used to send money back. I don't remember when I sent money back the last time. But before, there was war, [there was] unemployment'. Another interviewee stopped remitting because 'people are sending money from Kurdistan now to unemployed people in Europe', she said. 'They're getting rich in Kurdistan.'

In Europe, conditions for asylum seekers were worsening. Asylum policies had become increasingly restrictive during the 1990s (Van Hear 2006). The total recognition rate for asylum seekers of any nationality in 18 European destination states fell from approximately a third in 1997–2001 to a quarter in 2002–6 (Hatton 2009).

For third-wavers from what came to be known as 'the Other Iraq', the chance of getting asylum in Europe was slim. One interviewee said friends in Europe told him before he left that 'there was no way to get asylum in [Norway, Sweden or Germany] because [the authorities there] know that Saddam is gone and they know the situation is not dangerous in Kurdistan'. Most states ceased offering asylum to Iraqi Kurds after internal conflict ended via the Washington Agreement in 1998 (King 2005). Deportation from the EU started a few years later (Fandrich 2013: 15). A suddenly restrictive approach towards Iraqi Kurds in 1999 was described by Norway's minister of justice as 'a powerful message to those wishing to exploit the asylum institution' (Eraker 2006, unpaginated; my translation).

According to UNHCR annual reports from 1999 until 2013, Iraq was the highest-ranking origin country for asylum seekers in industrialised countries.[2] Although the Kurdish percentage remains unknown, migration to Europe had become so common by 2005 that an estimated 22 per cent of the Kurdish population had a close relative (defined as daughter, son, parent, sibling or spouse of any household member) abroad, usually in Europe (COSIT 2005: 56). 'Iraqis' received protection in roughly 50 per cent of the cases in EU member states between 2003 and June 2013 (Fandrich 2013: 7), but Iraqi Kurds were often rejected. By 2013, EU member states had ordered over 95,000 Iraqis to leave their territories; only 30 per cent were registered to return, voluntarily or forcibly (Fandrich 2013: 16). In an interview, the IOM headquarters in Erbil stated that those who returned from Europe through its return programmes during the 2000s were mostly rejected asylum seekers and mostly Kurds, as evidenced by usage of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah as ports of entry.[3]

Why, then, did asylum migration continue? Sustained asylum migration from a region of newfound prosperity and relative stability is not necessarily paradoxical. For instance, it could be seen as typical of a wider trend whereby early phases of economic development in poor countries promote out-migration, consistent with cumulative causation (Massey 1999). Such a 'migration hump' is not well researched in the context of asylum migration, however, and one study of the determinants of asylum migration to Western Europe found no support for it (Neumayer 2005).

Alternatively, sustained asylum migration absent of previous structural pressures could be viewed as driven by migration-facilitating network effects, the flow of assistance and information through expanding migrant networks. Yet such effects did not frequently come up in interviews. Few third-wave interviewees who applied for asylum explained their decision to migrate to a particular location in Europe with reference to networks. Studies of other national groups of asylum seekers have turned up a similar phenomenon (Koser 1997; Collyer 2005). It is also possible as theorised by Collyer (2005: 706) that the restrictive turn in European asylum policy

> has effectively devalued the social capital of new migrants by increasing the burden that they impose on social networks. The rationale that social capital lowers the cost of migration does not apply if social networks can no longer be relied upon for support.

If the rationale of migration eroded, the culture of migration, traceable to the historical examples of pioneers and second-wavers, did not. The culture-of-migration argument does not presume a 'rational' calculation of costs and risks among migrants and migrant-sending households. One interviewee suggested that migration had become normative.

> It was normal for any man to emigrate in 2000. Some just followed those who had gone before. . . . So the future was uncertain and, at the same time, so many people had left the country, and there was a desire to be one of them, not to miss out on opportunity.

Opportunity had been amply demonstrated by pioneers and, to some extent, second-wavers. Imaginations of their material success and vastly enriched migrant-sending households had been disseminated within and beyond migrant networks. This happened in conjunction with ever-greater global connectivity overall (Hassanpour and Mojab 2005:

219). Some migrants thus started to return, notably around the mid-2000s, gravitating towards the newfound sense of security and liberal investment climate of a booming Iraqi Kurdistan (Paasche 2016). One interviewee described how their material success inspired migration.

> Those who left during the 1990s got residence immediately. They got jobs. They got family reunification and everything. And those who sit here watch them and ask themselves 'Why are we not leaving?'

This rationale for mobility is relational. *Not* following the example of established migrants is seen as missing out. Another interviewee emphasised how collective imaginations of Europe derived from idealised imaginations of migrants' lives.

> I think one of the reasons why they think it's so good in Europe is that they look at the lives of those with asylum. When those people with asylum return, they may not tell them the real story. They talk about the positive side. They say that if you study in Europe, the government supports you. If you're unemployed, the government supports you. But they don't talk about what happens if you don't get asylum there—the money and time you lose.

Several returnees described the high social cost of returning empty-handed and expressed frustration with non-migrants' inflated expectations of life in Europe. One interviewee who re-migrated back to Europe recalled, '[Non-migrants] were clasping their heads with both hands [saying]: For God's sake, you've been in Europe for ten years. You don't have a car, you don't have a house?' Another interviewee struggled to stop prospective migrants headed for an idealised Europe, saying: 'Actually, people like me who're now back, we try to tell them, "Don't do it." [But] they believe it's paradise actually.'

There are empirical indications of a further drop in the socioeconomic status of third-wavers, consistent with cumulative causation theory. Key interviews with IOM officials in Iraqi Kurdistan and Norway corroborate interviews with pioneers and second-wavers on this point. As one second-waver recalled:

> The Kurdish community used to be much more tightly knit before. There used to be parties where Kurds in London just chipped in and rented a huge space to party, but that was mostly when all the refugees were political and generally came from middle-class backgrounds. When the new wave of younger, uneducated migrants came [around the turn of the millennium], there were too many problems at the open parties. ... Knife fights ... People were afraid for their children because of the troublemakers.

This sounds similar to an observation by a third-waver.

> Those Kurds who had already settled [before 2000–3] tended not to communicate with the new arrivals, with their bad values. There were fights, drugs. If someone offended some other guy's mother, there would be a knife fight. It was rubbish.

While pejorative labelling of this kind may reflect social-class bias, it also illustrates a perceived shift in migrants' socioeconomic characteristics. The same can be said of the following statement by the semi-independent KRG's equivalent to a foreign affairs

minister, Falah Mustafa Bakir. In an interview, he suggested that some socioeconomically disadvantaged third-wavers affected the international image of Iraqi Kurdistan.[4]

> Well, it's unfortunate that sometimes some of the people who see that kind of prosperity and lifestyle, they just want to go and see. They may not be the elite of this society . . . , but uneducated, no degree-holders. People who cannot make their living here, let alone going to a new environment. That is why we have some of those who left in the late 1990s or 2000s who really have created problems for us and affected our reputation. Some of them are in prisons for committing crimes, being involved in this or that.

One could counter that the KRG's neopatrimonial informality did little to provide even highly-skilled returnees from Europe with meritocratic opportunities (Paasche 2016), let alone create inclusive and equitable growth. The point, however, is that migratory behaviour had by now spread to those at the lower end of the socioeconomic hierarchy.[5]

5. Discussion and conclusion

In this historically grounded analysis of the evolution of Iraqi Kurdish asylum migration to Europe through nearly four decades, the basic principles of cumulative causation seem to be at work. Once started, Iraqi Kurdish asylum migration to Europe continued to grow across distinct historical periods, independently of the initial drivers of migration. What started with a few pioneers developed into mass migration.

Periodisation draws attention to continuity, change and temporal sequence. By implication, it also highlights the conceptual inadequacy of dichotomised understandings of 'forced' and 'voluntary' migration. Pioneers, second-wavers and third-wavers belong to the same legal-bureaucratic category of 'asylum seekers from Iraqi Kurdistan'. Differently located on the forced-voluntary continuum, they remain meaningfully studied within a unified analytical framework as actors in one evolving social system. This alone demonstrates the value of crossing the divide between migration studies and refugee/forced migration studies, but our conceptual discussion does not end there.

Expanding migrant networks and the assistance that flows through them are typically viewed as the primary mechanism underlying cumulative causation. The empirical data, though biased towards male experiences and far from conclusive, offers little empirical support for the migration-facilitating role of migrant networks except in cases of transnational marriages. While the lack of empirical support is no reason to dismiss the powerful explanatory effect of migrant networks in general, it is a good reason to pay attention to second-order contextual feedback mechanisms that are both empirically observable and less theorised in the literature.

Methodologically, open-ended questions may not have fully captured migration-facilitating network effects. Even returnee interviewees may have been unwilling to elaborate on network functions for fear of deviating from the pre-scripted role of an asylum seeker. However, if we 'want to explain how the migration of people at one time affects the subsequent migration of others from the same origin, our analysis will be limited if we focus only on people's social networks' (Bakewell and Jolivet 2016: 202). In this spirit, my theoretical interpretations now fan out into a conceptual discussion.

In the framework of cumulative causation, pioneers are believed to be of middling socioeconomic status. Migratory behaviour is seen to spread 'from the middle to the lower segments of the socioeconomic hierarchy' (Massey et al. 1993: 461). While *labour* migration is too risky for those at the top (Massey et al. 1994: 1497), the pioneers of *asylum* migration may be more threatened by the risk of staying. They may also belong to a different demographic.

Pioneer asylum migrants who flee the risk of staying are likely to draw from the ranks of social elites, defined loosely. The elite status of Iraqi Kurdish pioneer asylum migrants is not untypical. Elites' wealth, organisational capacity and symbolic value render them disproportionately exposed to targeted political and criminal violence at historical junctures. While wartime violence differs in nature, objectives and intensity across cases, regime change tends to leave military and political elites at particular risk (Dogan 2003: 13). The Iraqi Kurdish pioneers fled an incumbent government after defeat. In other cases it is the ruling elites of a defeated government that flee, as exemplified, for instance, by the so-called Golden Exiles in post-revolution Cuba after 1959.

Disproportionately targeted, elites are, moreover, exceptionally mobile. As illustrated by the Iraqi Kurdish pioneers, elites generally differ from other migrants in that they are able to migrate as pioneers unaided by network effects to new and far-flung destinations. Most asylum seekers follow beaten paths to neighbouring countries (Van Hear 2006).

If pioneer asylum migrants are social elites and not of middling socioeconomic status, this will plausibly affect the pathways along which migration diffuses. Class divisions run deep in countries where conflicts tend to cluster and from which asylum seekers tend to originate. Here, elites are not 'inevitably' tied to non-elites through interpersonal bonds based on family, kinship or community, as early work by Massey et al. (1994: 1499) suggested for Mexican labour migrants. Rather, elites form highly exclusive cliques to which non-elites lack access.

While information and assistance resources may flow less readily from elite asylum pioneers to newcomers, such resources may also be less crucial. Asylum migrants, in liberal destination states at least, access welfare services. Newly arrived labour migrants often depend initially on established migrants for housing and food in ways that asylum migrants in such destinations do not.

The typical elite status of pioneer asylum migrants hence has important theoretical implications. Based on this case study, I propose that elite pioneers can blaze a trail by setting an example that inspires *emulation*. This is not necessarily distinct from network effects broadly construed as any form of socially influenced decisions and actions, but it is distinct from pioneers' practical bridgehead function, conventionally understood as progressively lowering migration's costs and risks through direct information and assistance. Unlike this network effect, emulation only explains the desire and not the ability to migrate.

Migration can be emulated through at least two causal pathways. Firstly, there is the elites' departure. Locals are likely to perceive elites as well-informed. Amidst conflict and uncertainty, their departure—apart from having moral, political and military impacts on those left behind—becomes a powerful informational signal. This can produce a 'herding effect' (Epstein 2008), whereby locals aspire towards similar movement, to similar destinations, based on the assumption that elite pioneers have acted on superior information.

Secondly, elites' resources make them more likely to enjoy positive migration outcomes. These are highly visible, 'broadcasted' to locals also outside of migrant networks (Bakewell

and Jolivet 2016) and can feed into relative deprivation and a culture of migration, with the result being that 'others seek to emulate their migratory behavior' (Kandel and Massey 2002: 983). This second pathway is connected to the first, since locals' perception of positive migration outcomes may feed into the initial assumption, correct or not, that elites acted on superior information when they left.

The field of migration studies is already packed with jargon. If 'emulative migration' is a useful addition it is because it helps distinguish between migration as observationally learned and migration as mediated through practical network assistance. Emulation is complementary, not contradictory, to the traditional understanding of network effects. The partly overlapping effects of networks and emulation, acting both inside and outside networks, are equifinal in that they can both lead to cumulative causation.

Emulation implies that one cannot merely *count* migrants from a common social unit to understand take-off levels of migration; one has to *weigh* them as well. Class divisions could plausibly both stunt migrant networks and catalyse the observational learning of migration outside them, within and across migration cohorts. Further research is needed to understand the social dynamics set in motion by elite pioneer migrants and to explore the possibility that asylum migration and labour migration gain inner momentum through differing causal pathways.

Notes

1. For a review of studies of social networks in wartime migration, see Harpviken (2009).
2. I exclude the splintering ex-Yugoslavia from this calculation.
3. Interview conducted by author in Erbil on 8 January 2013.
4. Interview conducted by author in Erbil on 8 January 2013.
5. It is not my intention to suggest that this somehow validated the restrictive asylum policy vis-à-vis 'undesirable' Iraqi Kurdish migrants. For reflections on how border security responses and the closure of legal pathways into Europe have promoted irregular entry routes, see Andersson (2016).

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