

The Iraqi civil registration system and the test of political upheaval

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Abstract

An in-depth situation analysis was carried out on the Iraqi civil registration system in 2011, years after the end of the military operation of 2003. The study was done using a combination of methods, including interviews with key role players in the Iraqi civil registration system, observation, study of documents, triangulation, and gap analysis. The study found the civil registration system in Iraq to be largely intact and functional, in spite of the wars experienced in Iraq over the past three decades. Given that civil registration systems generally get destroyed through wars, the paper discusses the reasons for the resilience in the Iraqi civil registration system and draws lessons from them.

Keywords: Iraq, civil registration system, war.

Résumé

Le système d'enregistrement des déclarations d'état civil d'Irak a fait l'objet d'une analyse de situation en profondeur en 2011, des années après la fin des opérations militaires de 2003. L'étude a été faite au moyen d'une combinaison de méthodes, incluant des interviews avec les acteurs clés du système d'enregistrement des déclarations d'état civil d'Irak, l'étude de documents, la validation et l'analyse de l'écart. L'étude a permis de constater que le système d'enregistrement en Irak était essentiellement intact et fonctionnel malgré les guerres qui ont sévi dans le pays au cours des trente dernières années. Compte tenu du fait que les systèmes d'enregistrement de déclarations d'état civil sont habituellement détruits dans le cas de guerres, l'article examine les raisons de la résilience du système irakien et en tire des leçons.

Mots-clés : Irak, système d'enregistrement des déclarations d'état civil, guerre.

Introduction

Wars and civil strife generally affect all spheres of government, including the civil registration systems used for registering births, deaths, marriages, and divorces. The disruption wrought by the wars can set back the civil registration systems by several years, if not decades. In a study carried out by Unicef on the effect of wars on birth registration, the following observation was made:

When war results in the collapse of the state system and the failure of its functions and institutions, civil registration systems also fail, and birth records may be destroyed. Prolonged armed conflict may permanently paralyse the civil registration system and leave an institutional vacuum (Unicef Innocenti Research Centre 2007).

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As the civil registration system forms the cornerstone for obtaining identity documents and for establishing citizenship, the disruption of such a system poses a serious threat to post-conflict national stability. When a country is afflicted by war and political instability that cause people lose their identity documents, a functional civil registration office helps to provide them with copies of the original certificates. But when those civil registration offices get destroyed in the course of the instability, the options for providing citizens with copies of their identity documents become extremely limited. This further aggravates tensions pertaining to claims of citizenship. Against this background, the present article takes a look at the civil registration/vital statistics (CR/VS) system in Iraq in light of the wars and civil strife that occurred there during the 2000s. The study is based on a UNFPA-sponsored assessment mission carried out in Iraq in April 2011. The general methodology used in the assessment mission comprised of series of interviews with key role players in the Iraqi civil registration system, observation of the CR/VS system, study of relevant documents, triangulation, and gap analysis. The report prepared by the authors forms the basis for this paper (Bah 2011). The paper is not aimed at providing estimates of war-related deaths in Iraq. Rather, the paper focuses on the Iraqi CR/VS system in general, and takes a special look at the system in light of the destabilizing events experienced in Iraq during the 2000s. The findings of the study could be helpful to other countries in the process of reforming or redeveloping their CR/VS systems.

The paper starts by providing an in-depth description of how the Iraqi CR/VS system works. This is followed by a qualitative description of the CR/VS system during the events of 2003. The findings are then discussed and some conclusions are reached.

How the Iraqi CR/VS system works

The current Iraqi system of government is a federal one, comprising of 18 governorates (*muhafazat*) and one region, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), as shown in Figure 1. Under this system, Bagdad is both the capital of the federated Iraq as well as a governorate. For the registration of births and deaths, the system adopted in Iraq is a hospital-based one that starts from the subdistrict (*nahiya*) to the district (*qada'a*), to the governorate, and finally to the center in Baghdad. Even though the system is hospital-based, it caters to births and deaths occurring outside hospitals. For births occurring at home, the registered midwives have an obligation to report the events.

Each health centre (government as well as private) is obliged to send monthly statistics on the total number of vital events to the Statistics section of the Ministry of Health; in response, the Statistics section sends the required number of registration books. Each book has serial numbers and includes 25 forms.

The hospital prepares for birth registration ahead of the birth. When the mother is admitted for delivery, she is advised to bring along her ID document and that of the father. After she delivers the baby, the registration is done, in most cases, while she is still in the hospital. She shows the ID documents and gives the name of the child. The Iraqi culture allows for the child's name to be given at birth, even if a ceremony is done later. The registrar enters the details of the parents and of the child in the birth certificate. From the parents' ID document, the *sijil* (family record) number, *sahifa* (family page) number, and *daaira* (local civil registration office) are copied onto the birth certificate. This establishes an administrative link between the parents and the child. This information is used later by the Civil Registration Office. The registrar enters the information in quadruplicate, and each form has a precise role, as shown in Figure 2. A chart depicting the paper and data flow in the Iraqi CR/VS system is shown in Figure 3.



Figure 1. Present-day map of Iraq.

Source: <http://www.smarttraveller.gov.au/zw-cgi/view/Advice/Iraq?template=~map>.

One of the copies is given to the informant or the parent (the 'green copy'). Usually, the parent would then receive the birth certificate, in most cases, immediately, before leaving the hospital. The last copy (the 'blue copy') stays with the health centre or with the body issuing the certificate. When the book containing this blue copy is closed (free of all unused copies), they are put in batches and stored in the archives of the hospital. The form used for the production of vital statistics is the 'yellow copy.' The completed yellow copies are sent in batches to the Statistics section of the hospital. Separate programs in FoxPro are used to capture births, deaths, and stillbirths. For each of these three, each month's data is stored separately in a folder. Quality checks are done and the monthly data are copied onto CDs. The CDs together with the yellow forms are sent to the national vital statistics

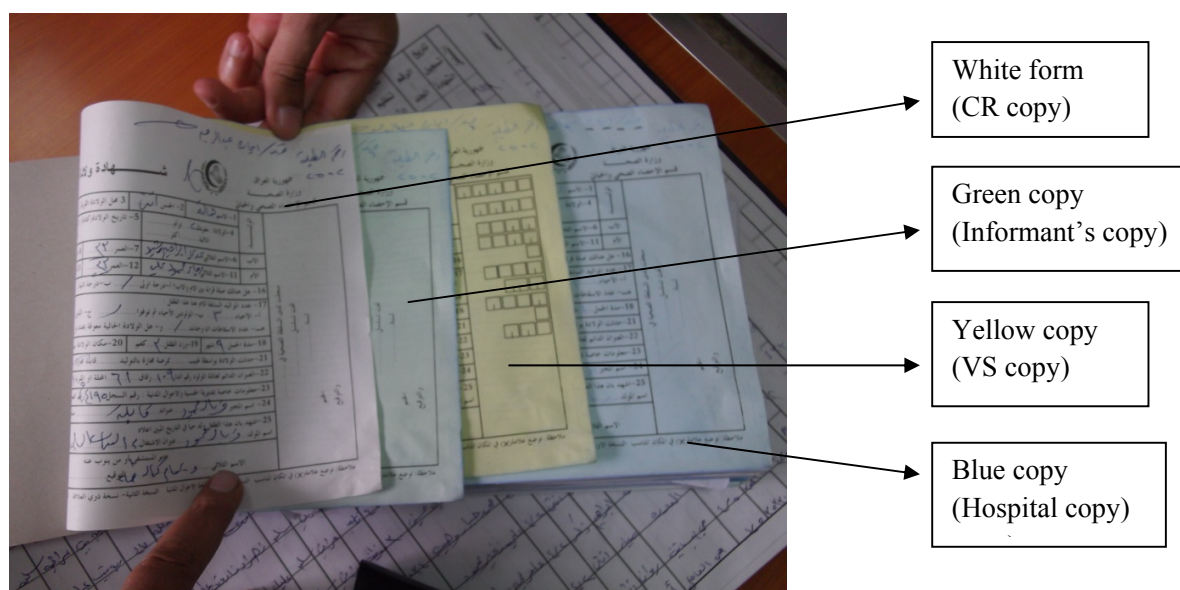


Figure 2. The four copies made of births and registration forms.

section of the Ministry of Health. Other copies of the CDs are kept in the same health directorate. Follow-up is done with delinquent governorates, and outstanding forms that were not captured are subsequently captured. The yellow forms are then kept in archives at the Statistics section of the same hospitals where the certificates were issued from. Data are then transported to MS Excel, merged, and analyzed, and the results formatted into standard tables and used for the publication of monthly and annual reports.

The main form used in the civil registration process is the ‘white copy.’ After completion, this form is sent by both government and private hospitals, directly to the local bureau. Each bureau is responsible for a geographic area. For births, the bureau also receives forms from certified midwives and declarations from non-certified midwives. At the bureau, they enter the following information (for deaths), manually into the register: serial number, name, sex, age, father’s name, mother’s name, religion, date of death, address, cause of death, district, any notes. They have other registers, such as births registers and abortion registers. After entering the details in the register, the forms are sent to the Statistics Directorate, and from there they are forwarded to the Civil Registration Office at the Iraqi Ministry of the Interior.

The CR office is responsible for updating all vital events (births, deaths, marriages, and divorces). They operate under the same laws used for the VS system, namely, Amendment Law 65 of 1972. In addition, there is Decree 42 of 1995 that allows for changes to be made to names and birth dates.

Once the CR office receives the forms, they are sorted and dispatched to the *daa’ira* (local civil registration office) that is recorded on the birth certificate. At the local directorate, they enter the following information manually into the register: serial number, name, title, father’s name, mother’s name, sex, relationship to head of household, occupation, literacy, religion, date of birth, place of birth, and date of registration. The information is put into the proper family page, identified by the three pieces of abovementioned information: the *sijil* (family record) number, *sahifa* (family page) number, and the *daaira* (local civil registration office). All vital events occurring to any member of the family are entered into this ‘family page.’ This is done until the child gets married and estab-

lishes his own family, in which case a new 'family page' is started for him. Through this innovative system, it can take as little as five minutes to locate anyone's records. From this ID system, three pieces of ID are produced: the civil registration ID, nationality ID, and residence ID (location of house). The retention period for the documents in the local offices is 20 years. As of April 2011, there are 275 civil registration directorates in Iraq, including 30 in the Kurdistan Regional Government (Bah 2011).

The information for each event is sequentially entered into the register until the register is full (each register has room for 200 families). This register is then sent to the head office for scanning. Once the information has been scanned, the register is then sent back to the local office for archiving, and a request is then sent to the next office to send their registers for scanning. In this way, scanning is done for the offices by turn, so that by the time it is the turn of the first office, completed books will be available for scanning. They are generally up to date with their scanning and do not have any backlogs to clear. The civil registration system can thus best be described as a 'family-based manual population register' (FBMPR). Every vital event (birth, death, marriage, and divorce) is recorded in this FBMPR and linked to the family. As it is not electronic, the updating is not instantaneous but is done after a lag of time. The time taken varies, depending on the route taken from the registration of the event to the time the certificate arrives at the *daaira* for recording into the family register. For the deceased, their record is still kept open, but a note is added to it (Arabic letter *mim*) to indicate that they are deceased. The file is not closed, as details of other members of the family are added to it from time to time.

At the head office, separate archives exist for records from 1934 to 1947. These archives are stored in secure rooms with archival techniques used to preserve the documents. For 1948 to 1957, the information has been scanned and stored on CDs. From 1957 to the time of writing (2011), the scanned images are stored on external hard drives of 2 Terabytes capacity. There is one external hard drive for each of the 13 governorates. There are backups up till 1978, but because of staff shortage problems, there are no backups after 1978.

Finally, there is a monthly meeting for the managers of the CR offices in Baghdad. The Director General of Civil Registration makes one visit per year to each of the offices outside Baghdad.

Effect of the military operation of 2003 on the CR/VS system

During the military operation of 2003, personnel in the civil registration offices in Baghdad went out of their way to protect the files, considered as symbols of Iraqi identity. During this period, officers took several initiatives to safeguard the civil registration system. Officers took up guns and stood on guard at the offices. Some officers took files home for safekeeping, and other files were kept hidden in rural estates. At the end of the fighting when things became safer, the files were returned back to the department.

Through these efforts, the civil registration archives in Baghdad were protected from destruction. Subsequently, based on these archives, those who lost their IDs have had them replaced. The civil registration offices in the governorates that were burnt down have been given copies from the archives. On the vital statistics level, some offices were looted, with some infrastructure destroyed, and some healthcare personnel were lost. Both the loss of personnel and the destruction of infrastructure negatively affected the registration of vital events during this period and up to about 2007. From 2007 onwards, the vital statistics system has slowly recovered. It is believed that by 2011, the recording of vital events has returned back to its normal level.

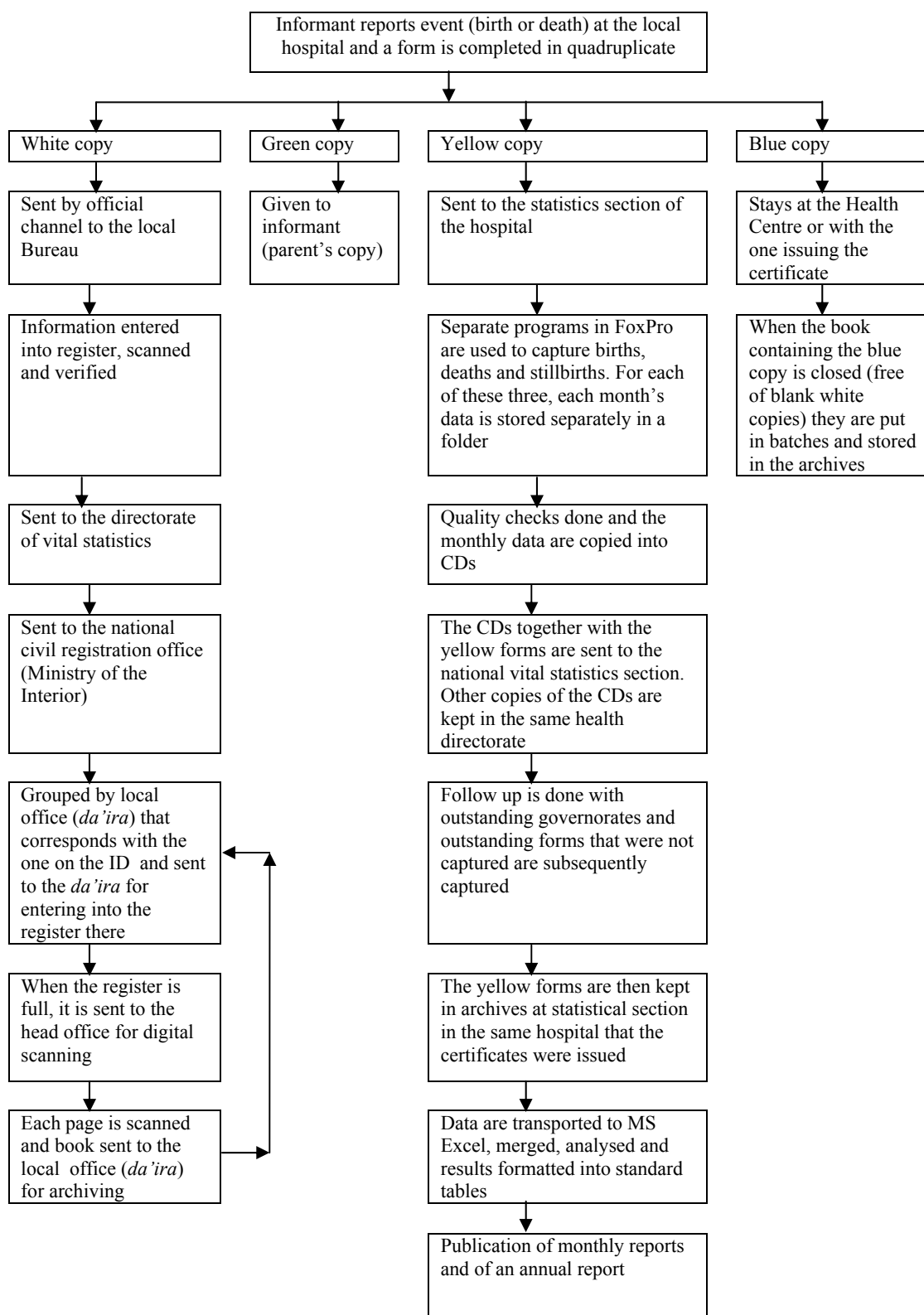


Figure 3. Chart showing the paper and data flow in the Iraqi CR/VS system.

Discussion

According to the classification system proposed by the United Nations (2002), the CR/VS model adopted in Iraq is that of a centralized system with dual agencies. The CR component reports to the Ministry of the Interior, while the VS component reports to the Ministry of Health. The Iraqi system, however, has several unique features. The first is that there is separation between the CR and VS routes in CR/VS system. This allows multiple copies of the births and deaths forms to go through different routes, allowing for parallel processing of documents through the CR and the VS components of the CR/VS system. This ensures the timely processing of vital statistics, independent of the civil registration system. In other systems, the vital statistics can only be processed after the forms have completed their routes through the CR system. This was the case in South Africa in the 1990s, before the revision of the system (Bah 2009). The separation of routes allows for the computerization of the two components to proceed at different paces. There is a much higher level of computerization in the VS component than in the CR one. For example, in the VS component, a data capture program (in Visual FoxPro) was already developed in-house at the department of health, several years previously. Its on-screen form contains the relevant fields from the birth or death certificate. For many of the variables, there are pull-down menus to facilitate data capture.

The second is that copies of the same form are stored in multiple sites. This makes it easy to obtain copies of the form if it gets lost. At the same time, it also makes it difficult to forge documents. The third unique feature is that the family is put at the core of the registration system, rather than the individual. These last two features assure the permanency and continuity of the system that allows it to withstand the disturbance of wars. Since the 1980s, Iraq has experienced three wars. The first war, from 1980 to 1988, was the war with Iran; the second one, from 1990 to 1991, was the war with Kuwait; and the third one, in 2003, was the military operation involving American and allied forces. With the sectarian violence that quickly followed the 2003 military operation, this third war is still not yet fully resolved (as of 2012), even though it has scaled down considerably. In spite of all these wars, the CR/VS system in Iraq has remained largely intact and retained its functionality. This central thesis is partially corroborated by the results of a study done in 2006 by Burnham and colleagues on the mortality in Iraq after the 2003 invasion (Burnham et al. 2006). The data showed that of the 545 deaths reported in the study, death certificates were produced for 501 of them (91.9 per cent). Breakdown of these data according to pre- and post-invasion periods showed that death certificates were available for 92.2 per cent of the 77 pre-invasion deaths and 91.7 per cent of the 469 post-invasion deaths (Kane 2007). A z-test for difference in proportions is not statistically significant at the 5-per cent significance level ($p=0.877$). In other words, the war did not significantly affect the registration process.

While the Iraqi CR/VS system works, the CR component is largely administrated manually, and such systems inevitably have to get computerized in order to meet the demands of society, and to keep up the pace with the global move towards adoption of e-government systems. There are many routes for computerizing the CR/VS systems. The question is on deciding the best route for the Iraqi CR/VS system. Clearly, the best route is one that can preserve the positive aspects of the CR/VS systems and yet achieve the computerization of the system in the shortest time, with the lowest cost. In order to guard against pitfalls, it would be necessary to learn from best practices, as described by the United Nations (1998) and from the experiences of similar countries which are in the process of, or have completed, computerizing their CR/VS systems. The general problem in CR/VS system is that no country's system exactly resembles another, only partial resemblances exist. The Iraqi CR/VS

system has some common features with the Turkish system (family registration) and with the Kuwaiti system (multiple copies of births and deaths notification forms). In Turkey, the family registration system has been in place since the 1920s. In that system, the “place of registration is the same for all family members and refers to the place of origin of the family” (Bozbeyoglu 2011: 69). This information has been retained over the years during the computerization of the Turkish registration system. The paper-based family files were computerized over the period 1999–2002, and they are connected to the identification systems through the ID number. By 2007, the electronic ID was being piloted (Bozbeyoglu 2011). While Kuwait does not have the family registration system, it has the system of completion of multiple copies notification forms. Five copies of births and deaths forms are completed, as explained below:

The first copy of the form is sent directly to the Central Registration Office that issues the birth (or death) certificate. The second copy is sent to the Authority for Civil Information which adds the birth to the population, and issues a civil identification card [...] The third copy is sent to the Division for Vital and Health Statistics, which compiles, tabulates, and publishes the vital registration data. The fourth copy is given to the relative of a newborn or the deceased, who are required to take this copy to the Central Registration Department for the issuance of a certificate. A fifth copy is kept in the hospital or clinic (Shah et al. 1992: 2).

Kuwait had national ID documents since 1988, and by 2009 it had moved on to smart ID cards. Borrowing from the experiences of Turkey and Kuwait, Iraq could make a successful modernisation of its CR/VS system, while yet building on its unique foundations.

Conclusion

The CR/VS system in post-conflict Iraq has all the ingredients of a functional system. It has legislation in place, and its structures and the paper-flow route are well defined. It has legislation governing the CR/VS system going back about 40 years. Standard forms are available, and there are rules about their completion for different categories of informants. There are penalties for failure to complete the registration process within a given period. When the registration process is complete, certificates are issued just after the events or within a few days. The official copy of the form has a clear official route that it follows. It ends up being entered into a register that is indexed and archived. Even though the registration is manual, the retrieval is easy because of the unique indexing method used. This system has stayed largely intact, in spite of the three wars that Iraq experienced over the past three decades. This stands in contrast to the situation in other post-conflict countries. For example, a 2012 review of the civil registration system in Kosovo made the following observation:

Since the end of the war in Kosovo, civil status registration has been based on a complicated legal foundation. From 1999, a plethora of regulations, laws, and administrative instructions has been approved and issued in different time periods. As a result, the civil registration system has not been consolidated, and this has resulted in the failure of coordination at the offices in charge of civil registration in terms of a uniform application of registration procedures (Civil Rights Program Kosovo 2012: 5).

In conclusion, there are several take-home messages for other developing countries struggling with re-developing their CR/VS systems. First is the realization that an investment in the CR/VS system is an investment in safeguarding nationality. Second is that the parallel processing in the VS and CR routes simplifies the CR/VS system. Third is that multiple systems of backup (storage) should be in place so that any loss in civil registration documents could be replaced using the backup. Fourth,

for a CR/VS system to be acceptable and permanent, opportunities should be explored for customising existing CR/VS systems to suit local conditions and culture. Last, computerization of CR/VS system is best done in phases, in a well-planned manner.

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