Article

Fragile Solace: Navigating toward Wellbeing in ISIS-Occupied Mosul in 2014–2017

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Abstract: Populations in conflict contexts often live for extended periods of time in displacement or under occupation. Both have profound consequences for navigating daily wellbeing. Drawing on narrative interviews (n = 8) with participants who lived through the ISIS (Islamic State) occupation of Mosul in 2014–2017, we seek to highlight narratives of wellbeing- and illbeing-emerging from their experiences. Our case study suggests that multiple persistent threats forced a renegotiation of ways to sustain key elements of wellbeing. Our findings suggest that intentionally propagated distrust led to reduced interaction, while insecurity and fear diminished personal freedoms, causing recurring shocks requiring constant adaptation. Decreasing the size of the core social unit helped families manage risks and resources when facing existential threats, while the diversification of interpersonal and communal relations created space for moments of normalcy. Choices made in order to stay safe and sane under such exceptional circumstances include complex relational choices, such as breaking familial ties with loved ones. Our research expands on the positive and negative impacts of relations on wellbeing and deepens our understanding of how wellbeing is navigated in contexts of forced departure—environments from which people often flee to seek refuge elsewhere.

Keywords: relational wellbeing; displacement; conflict; trust; ISIS; Mosul

1. Introduction

"You are looking at it as a big deal, but when it is a daily thing, it becomes normal. I discovered that with ISIS... Normal, but not really normal." —Fatima

In 2014, the fall of the Iraqi city of Mosul to ISIS (Islamic State group) operatives, and the subsequent retreat of the Iraqi military from the second-largest city in Iraq, shocked the international community. The far greater and more immediate shock, however, was inflicted on the inhabitants of Mosul city who found themselves under hostile occupation. Some fled, fearing discriminatory violence; most were forced to adapt to a new normal.

Three years later, the Battle for Mosul was fought and the city recaptured. East Mosul was taken swiftly; West Mosul, separated from its eastern half by a river that formed a strong defensive barrier, was held longer by ISIS, facing heavy air strikes and extensive urban warfare. During the several months of intense fighting over one million people fled Mosul city to safety—or, rather, the absence of open conflict.

The effects of displacement and war have been documented extensively. Displaced families face limited access to basic services, feelings of physical and financial insecurity, high levels of emotional stress, and absence of support networks, which collectively lead to a profoundly compromised sense of stability and personal safety (Ajdukovic and Dean 1998; Kett 2005; Reed et al. 2012). Warfare often entails systematic violence against civilian populations, including torture, executions, sexual abuse, arbitrary detention, and cultural repression (Pedersen 2002). ISIS engaged extensively in all of these. Whether experienced

first-hand or vicariously, exposure carries severely heightened risk of harm to mental health and disruptions to wellbeing (Miller and Rasmussen 2010).

Previous research on the Mosul case has predominantly focused on the impact of the ISIS occupation on the economy, security, health, politics, and infrastructure (cf. Saeed et al. 2022; Michlig et al. 2019; Jäger et al. 2019). In contrast, we seek to understand the lived experience of everyday life and wellbeing. In particular, we ask how relations—and their restrictions—were associated with wellbeing under extraordinarily hostile conditions, and how the nature of relationships, both positive and negative, shaped this lived reality. In our study, we explore the journeys of people who lived in Mosul under ISIS occupation by means of a qualitative case study (Flyvbjerg 2006), utilizing semi-structured interviews analyzed with narrative techniques (Sonday et al. 2020). Our participants were male and female Iraqi citizens. Most were originally from Mosul city, and all had previously worked with international organizations providing post-ISIS humanitarian assistance.

Experience shapes narratives; narratives shape realities. In seeking to understand others' experiences we can learn to appreciate, and empathize with, realities that differ from ours. The narratives in this article are analyzed against the backdrop of *relational wellbeing:* conceptions of wellbeing as relational processes that are realized in the interplay of different material, subjective, and relational dimensions in people's lives (White 2017). While broad consensus exists regarding the integral role of relations to wellbeing, the specifics of *how* they might be related remains debated (White and Pettit 2007). Similarly, and to the best of our knowledge, there is very limited research into how elements of wellbeing interact under extreme duress, especially in contexts of displacement. Our research contributes to bridging this gap by answering the questions: what narratives of wellbeing and illbeing emerge from the experiences of people who lived in ISIS-occupied Mosul, and what is the role of relationships in these narratives?

2. Contextualization

2.1. Mosul under Siege

Several social and societal aspects of contemporary politics in Iraq and the occupation of Mosul are inextricably linked to the lived experience of Mosul inhabitants. What Tripp (2010) calls *ethno-religious dynamics* of the preceding decades, alongside strict *normative rules* ISIS imposed through Islamic pretext, carry substantial relevance for this study.

Iraqi socio-political dynamics are, to a significant extent, deeply entwined with ethnic and religious affiliation. Tripp (2010) notes the centuries of tensions between the Islamic Sunni and Shia factions. However, under Saddam Hussein's rule, the perception was that a Sunni minority ruled the Shia majority and other factions. This created an unspoken alliance between the mostly Sunni Kurds and the Shia, indicating that the divide was not religious but in fact political, continuing a long trend of such alliances (Al-Sahlawi and Noreng 2013). Makiya (1998) expands on these trends, highlighting the radicalizing effect of systematic policies of discrimination combined with the absolute control of the regime. The 2003 US invasion led to further social and political destabilization with a devastating impact on ethnic dynamics. Discriminatory policies, social marginalization, strengthening of militia rule, and intense political violence—largely against Sunni Arabs—exacerbated ethno-religious and sectarian divides across Iraqi society. This had critical reverberations in ISIS-controlled Mosul. Owing to a Sunni majority and the presence of disenfranchised ex-Saddamist Ba'ath military officers, a number of people joined insurgencies, including ISIS (Abdulrazaq and Stansfield 2016). This amplified distrust and perpetuated a cycle of marginalization, damaging familial, community, and cross-religious relations.

As part of their occupation, ISIS attempted to redefine social norms governing daily life. ISIS' key strategic objective was control of territory and resources, which included the acknowledgment of their right of governance. In practice, this entailed strict social rules based on extremist interpretations of the Qur'an (Michlig et al. 2019—see Table 1 below). These included movement restrictions, such as armed checkpoints and forced curfews. Electronic communications and entertainment items were confiscated. Dress codes were

enforced, women were required to wear concealing clothing, and grooming was expected for men. Unfailing adherence to daily prayer calls and visits to mosques were mandatory. Fear became a defining feature of life, and it deepened social, ethnic, and other divides.

Table 1. Infractions and punishments under ISIS in Mosul (Michlig et al. 2019).

Infraction	Punishment
Inappropriate clothing	ID seizure, fine, torture
Consuming smuggled goods	Fine, torture, flogging
Smuggling	Execution
Possession of SIM card	Torture, imprisonment, execution
Disputing ISIS law or policy	Flogging, removal of credentials, ID seizure
Unaccompanied woman	ID seizure
Male and female co-workers alone	Flogging, execution, forced marriage
Military experience/career	Imprisonment, execution
Leaving Mosul	Forcible return, fine, ID seizure, execution

There is limited research into how these historical processes impacted on people's wellbeing. However, as Shoeb et al. (2007) note in their research on trauma in Iraq between 1979 and 2005, during and immediately after Saddam's regime: the suffering experienced by the Iraqi was personal—experienced by individuals—*and* communal, diffused between groups of people. People did not feel alone in crises. However, Iraq's socio-political landscape underwent significant changes in the post-Saddam era. After 2003, interactions were often limited not by external rules, but by social issues such as trust and ethnic or religious affiliation. This manifested as interactive soft boundaries based on who was seen as safe. During their rule, ISIS then introduced non-negotiable punitive hard limits on interaction. ISIS norms of acceptable conduct were narrow and included harsh sanctions for non-compliance, which limited ways for people to engage in and nurture relations. The effect of both types of social fragmentation on wellbeing was profound, as noted in later sections.

2.2. Wellbeing under Duress

The hostility and complexity of circumstances raise difficult questions on how to best approach feeling well. In our prior discussions with research participants, as well as with other residents of Mosul, the issue of relationships was clearly raised as one of the most powerful impacts of the ISIS occupation. Further, there is a large subfield of Islamic studies in the Middle East and North Africa suggesting that regional Islam, in its cultural form, is a communal concept (al Faruqi 2005; Zubaida 1988). Islam and its communal roots are closely linked to the idea of the *Umma* (nation) in governance, an approach used by ISIS to gain acceptance in Mosul. Relations were thus a natural starting point for inquiry into wellbeing in Mosul, both from individual and broader political/communal perspectives.

The attributes of wellbeing are as debated and in flux as the concept itself. Atkinson (2013, p. 142) emphasizes a need to shift discourse toward 'social, material and spatially situated relationships' in re-centering of focus on relationality, with relationships having contextual and absolute, instead of primarily instrumental, value. Scholars including Gergen (2009) and White (2017) have similarly called for approaches to relationships that transcend individualism and collectivism, and instead enter a *relational* sphere premised on relationships preceding individuals. We draw from these notions in our research.

Parallel to the role of relations, we acknowledge the pivotal role of environment and circumstance in the processes of individual and collective wellbeing, which we see as core emergent attributes in the interplay of personal, societal, and environmental processes. In particular, the sense of community is seen as a central form of relational expression (White 2015). White (2017) as well as Atkinson et al. (2020) both perceive community as an inter-subjective shared experience; a collective form of social reciprocity that forms the very core of relationality. Studies across geographies and demographics (e.g., Elliott et al.

2014; Lai et al. 2021) indicate a positive correlation between the sense of community and wellbeing. Conversely, studies (cf. Lorenc et al. 2012; Pearson and Breetzke 2014) link fear of crime—regardless of actual risk or incidence rates—with substantial decreases in social interaction and quality of life, and with loneliness as well as diminished capacity to cope with stress (Baranyi et al. 2021). Social, physical, and political environments play distinct roles in shaping opportunities for wellbeing to emerge, especially in situations where they constitute significant limitations for such opportunities.

This impact of environmental factors on the sense of community helps illuminate why the previously noted socio-historical factors carried such an impact on wellbeing in Mosul. In exploring the effects of war Pedersen (2002, p. 181) observes that a key consequence of war is the 'devastation of the social and cultural fabric—the people's history and life trajectories, their identity and value systems'. Communities and relations often suffer irrevocable damage from families and communities being torn apart by displacement, ethno-religious tensions, and loss of life. Cheung et al. (2020) report that, with the Syrian war, damage done to social relations may have been so extensive as to practically nullify their role in supporting wellbeing. The compromise of such central aspects of life is debilitating, especially where the foundations of trust are fundamentally damaged.

The fragmentation of the social fabric noted by Pedersen (2002) is critical to wellbeing under duress. Gergen (2009) rhetorically asks whether religions could bridge divides and nourish the sense of community with ethnically and culturally diverse groups. Indeed, in the conflict contexts where we have worked, religion has nurtured a sense of community and comfort among diverse populations in distress. Conversely, ISIS' extremist *modus operandi* entails the opposite with the targeted destruction of Iraqi cultural capital and the widespread, systematic disintegration of different feelings of community (Cunliffe and Curini 2018). In ISIS-occupied parts of Iraq, the fear of violent retribution was key in the diminishment of social circles and the breakdown of community cohesion. ISIS policies of targeted sectarian violence had a strong, lasting effect on both intra- and intercommunity cohesion which deteriorated under the strain of fear, suspicion, and distrust (Jäger et al. 2019). However, as our findings below indicate, even ISIS' existential threats to familial and communal integrity in Iraq could not eradicate the centrality of relations to wellbeing.

3. Research Design

This paper draws on a case study (Flyvbjerg 2006; Ruddin 2006) conducted in Iraq in 2022. In line with the case study design, our aim was to understand the concrete, context-dependent experiences of selected participants via continued proximity to their studied reality and through continuous feedback over time (Flyvbjerg 2006). This meant that, aside from our research interviews, we engaged in frequent informal discussions with participants and other people in Mosul. The participants (n = 8; five males, three females), aged 30–65, with most in their thirties, were Iraqi citizens and former colleagues who lived in Mosul from 2014–2018. They were selected based on comfort levels in discussing ISIS.

The case study participant setup was atypical, primarily due to the sensitive nature of the topic. We interviewed former colleagues without recording devices. This was the only possible setup given sensitivities around ISIS and the required foundation of trust. In an Iraq where ISIS no longer controls territory but remains a constant threat, even perceived affiliation with ISIS carries harsh social, legal, and extrajudicial consequences; trust and confidentiality between researchers and participants was a paramount consideration.

Mosul was a familiar environment for both of us: we had both worked in Mosul and its surrounding areas between 2019–2022, Allaw as a program officer for the International Organization for Migration and Nummenmaa as a humanitarian project manager for the Norwegian Refugee Council. Our positionalities within this research field were shaped by familiarity with the environment, varying degrees of status as outsiders, and trust built through working with participants (Pustulka et al. 2019). Relations between researchers and participants are, as White (2017) observes, fundamentally constitutive of subjectivity

within relational ontology; they contain unique and mutable emergent properties, which Ellis (2007) sees as processes where researcher and friendship roles weave, expand and deepen together. Participants' trust, as well as their experience and contextual knowledge of Mosul, were considered a research value-add.

Our semi-structured interviews (Galletta 2013) consisted of six open-ended questions on experiences of changes in interactions, feelings of safety and comfort, and sources of wellbeing. These took place in person or on video calls. Half of the participants were interviewed individually and half in pairs per their preference. The first two interviews were piloted in Arabic, spoken fluently by the second author. These interviews provided critical information on language and framing. Later, interviews were held in English. Participants either spoke English fluently or had access to live translation via another participant. The possibility of meanings lost in translation is acknowledged as a limitation.

The interviews were analyzed using methods of narrative analysis (cf. Heikkinen et al. 2012; Riessman 1993; Sonday et al. 2020). Preliminary codes were assigned to the texts, and these were structured into initial themes as a first means of organizing data and thoughts. The analysis then focused on identifying *storylines*, or segments of interviews forming cohesive units, in parallel with participant consultation on themes and stories carrying personal meaning. This phase focused on connecting themes with storylines, identifying a 'plurality of small narratives, local and personal in nature' (Huttunen et al. 2002), drawing not only on single interviews but the combination of many, complemented by our knowledge drawn from several years of working together in Iraqi communities. Three broader narratives emerged from the storylines and themes.

Our research design had three main limitations. The first entailed interviewing participants with existing relationships with the researchers. Taylor (2011) views 'insider' friendships as partly problematic due to presumed privileges of 'insider knowledge' and epistemological issues with knowledge distortion. However, transparency vis-à-vis both participants and communication on sources of knowledge helps mitigate such challenges (Sonday et al. 2020). The second limitation was with language. All participants spoke Arabic natively. We observed in pilot interviews, for instance, that the Arabic concept of 'wellbeing' carries materialistic connotations, roughly equivalent to 'luxury' in English. Based on pilot interview outcomes, we reviewed the language used and clarified the concept of wellbeing. The third, perhaps most significant limitation of this study was the absence of recorded media and transcripts. With one exception, all research participants requested that no audio or video recordings, or automated transcripts, be produced. Non-consent to recording is common when exploring sensitive subjects, and in working with participants in vulnerable situations, even when they want their voices heard (Cheah et al. 2019; Rutakumwa et al. 2020). As media recordings were not an option, verbatim notes were taken during interviews with an average of seven pages—approximately 6000 words—of text produced per interview.

4. Research Findings

Our research question pertained to narratives of wellbeing and illbeing, and the roles of relationships in these narratives. In light of the extraordinary circumstances, the thematic dominance of exceptional crisis and fear was not unexpected; these themes were not part of our questions but were issues participants clearly wanted to cover. However, participants also identified meaningful elements of wellbeing in moments of connectedness and communal solidarity, touching on several motifs of relationality in the process.

Three central, connected narratives emerged from our analysis process. In resonance with Pedersen's (2002) notions on the intentional, systematic unraveling of the social fabric, narratives of *fear in acute crises* were felt to define the boundaries of social life. These crises contributed to the *shattering of the normal*, a narrative of a recurring cycle of shocks and adaptations. Both of the above narratives fed into a final narrative of *relational integrity*, with reflections on threats and hope vis-à-vis family and community.

At the beginning of each sub-section below, we use composite narratives constructed from multiple interviews to highlight stories important to participants. Italicized quotes denote material quoted directly from our interviews. All instances of indirect references to participants' thoughts, as expressed in interviews, are specifically noted in each case.

4.1. Fear in Acute Crises

The first narrative revolves around the damage triggered by fear and social distrust after the US invasion in 2003 and, in particular, during the rise of ISIS influence in Iraq. The previously largely economic issues under Saddam, felt by participants to be complex but manageable, gave way to a new 'normal' after 2003—and especially after 2014. Fear, especially during acute crises, undermined access to sources of wellbeing via 1. *erosion of trust*, 2. *loss of safety*, and 3. *restricted interactions*, illustrated below as a composite narrative.

> 'With the US invasion, there was this anti-US insurgence. **The Iraqi military saw all of us Moslawi [people from Mosul] as threats**. **Insurgents always melt into community** so military forces do massive search campaigns. Troops come into houses, kicking doors, screaming. Before ISIS came, people were frustrated with the military's violations. People felt they don't have a government and **they are ruled by these, let's say, beasts**. Stories of people killed or kidnapped were part of our conversations. The difficult years were 2008 to 2017; **we lived in fear**. Many kidnappings, car bombs, street fights. Fear of the unknown was very stressful. Safety was a critical thing and the **only safe place was family**.
>
> During ISIS, the main things that started to change were principles, traditions, and customs. **We started to lose trust in each other**. People were reporting each other to ISIS; that included people's assets as they attracted ISIS. Muslim families were forced to report minorities to ISIS out of fear; it created mistrust. **Interactions were cautious.** Sometimes the threat is a 'source', sometimes a big mouth. **You keep things secret**. You don't talk around the neighborhood. People closed in, not interacting outside of their circle of trust.
>
> In 2015, we tried to go out of Mosul but were stopped at the first checkpoint of ISIS. I feel now everyone would say, 'I would leave'. **I wanted to protect myself and my family**. Yeah, because the stress we have is, like, not bearable. The fear of what will happen... you have zero control. Just waiting for your destination. **I spent months without going outside**, only for urgent issues. If women's eyes were visible, they were whipped. I forgot my friends' faces. They were beheading people if they found songs on phones. People coped by dropping forbidden habits: shisha, cards, cigarettes. **That negatively affected interactions**. You'd discharge your anger by swearing at ISIS [laughs] amongst family.'

The storyline of *erosion of trust* touches upon how the inability to trust one another eroded the very foundation of wellbeing. Participants described this as elements of suspicion and wariness feeding into a narrative of fear: trust no-one, and never volunteer information. The stakes of errors of judgment increased drastically as minor penalties gave way to public beatings and summary executions. The 'circle of trust' noted above dwindled, and even members of families and tribes faced suspicion as potential 'sources', or covert informants. Relations between religious and ethnic communities deteriorated to outright hostilities, leading to sectarian violence—trauma already experienced by other parts of Iraqi society during earlier historical periods of repression (Shoeb et al. 2007). *"We have friends in Sinjar, but during the period of ISIS presence in Ninewa, these people started to hate people living in Mosul"*, commented Fatima, highlighting the lasting harm to Sunni-Yezidi relationships caused by ISIS' ideological genocide of the Yezidi religious minority.

The second storyline describes how the *loss of safety* detracted from a sense of wellbeing. Personal insecurity augmented the narrative of fear with the threat of mortal peril; it injected into the narrative an abject realism of life that could end at any given moment for a number of arbitrary reasons. *"The thing is, you try to learn but the stress just prevents you. Sometimes I*

tried to learn [European language], but what I learned is that we're all going to die", Fatima noted and laughed, recalling her inability to focus on things that she knew would improve her wellbeing. Crises of personal safety dominated Moslawi discourse, obscured visions of the future, and impaired daily function. In contrast, many of the participants' moments of feeling well were shared in tones laced with humor and self-irony. Further to mere personal delight in comedy, humor has been found to be a common tool for grief management, development of bonds in post-traumatic situations, and shielding feelings that might lead to challenging emotions (Lefcourt 2001; Tedeschi et al. 2018).

The third, *restricted interactions* storyline features accounts of a subjugated Moslawi people, and how these restrictions limited access to sources of wellbeing. All participants shared stories of dealing with military raids, mass detention, movement restrictions, and extortion—before ISIS ever occupied Mosul. By the end of 2014, participants noted that all previous restrictions had been tightened and wholly new types of limitations introduced, including intentional control over fashion, arts, communication, social habits, and religion. Multiple crises of fear coalesce in these stories: fears of personal danger, misplaced trust, harm to loved ones, and loss of stability. However, within the storyline, there also runs a commanding counter-narrative of survival and resistance, often in creative forms: "*I once hid my SIM card in a tomato so they could not find it*", Maryam recalls. Personal risks were taken in pursuit of moments of normalcy, such as smoking cigarettes or playing cards. When asked how these items were accessed, Ali smiles: "*People would take out the car airbag . . . that way they managed to smuggle things.*"

Participants commented on ISIS' ruthlessness in its efforts to break down resistance. This has also been noted in previous research (Cunliffe and Curini 2018) with implications for trust, an instrumental resource for a sense of belonging and feeling well (Atkinson et al. 2020). Threads of distrust were woven into all narratives, highlighting the shock of loss of trust and connection in family and community. However, beside this distrust flowed strands of trust and hope: relationships that were considered to be 'safe' were cherished and mutually nurtured, regardless of familial affiliation. As Ali recalled: "*If we have a small shop you can work with us, if you need money we can loan money for you. This is part of what I remember about how families and friends stayed together to be somehow away from ISIS.*" Where crises of distrust fed into the fear, a sense of community provided rare sanctuary from the outside fragility and offered momentary solace from violence in feelings of connectedness.

4.2. The Shattering of the Normal

The second of the central narratives is characterized by recurring cyclical interplay between the constitution of normalcy, exceptional personal shocks, and forced adaptation. Three distinct storylines related to a decline in the resources needed to maintain wellbeing were identified: 1. *nostalgia*, 2. *shocks and adaptation*, and 3. *ISIS as a unique phenomenon*.

'Life before 2003 was stable with tough but respectable living conditions. The society was not conservative, there was no sectarianism; **it was a normal life**. Before 2003, **safety was the main reason for happiness and wellbeing.** We were only thinking of house needs and how to feed families. Many people say Saddam times were better. I remember my father having to pay this much money [spreads hands] just to buy flour [laughs]. **After 2003 we gained many things but lost safety**. Social visits nearly stopped, religious ceremonies stopped. Death news used to be strange, but after that, it was normal news. Death was easier than PMF [armed militia] and ISIS detention or torture.

There is nothing normal in Iraq. **Iraqi people have the skills to adapt to any situation, from 1980 to today**. With ISIS there were a lot of shocks. We tried to adapt, but there were always more shocks. The first was that Mosul has fallen to ISIS. You wake up in the morning, you see people hiding their faces in scarves, they have guns, and they are controlling the city. **Moslawi people adapted** to the situation; there was no other option. **Our life stopped in 2014 and resumed in**

2017. These were a long three years. . . not knowing if we'd pass the time of war or not, if we'd be dead or not. You look at it as a big deal, but **when it's a daily thing, it becomes normal**. I discovered that with ISIS.

In the first days, the best days of ISIS, **people felt comfort as ISIS showed support for Sunni people who were suffering**. ISIS showed their smartness because they broke all the rules of the security forces. Then ISIS started forcing people to follow their rules. At that time people started thinking about leaving Mosul, some were considering leaving Iraq. Many thought they understood the situation: **'we know these people [ISIS], we know what they're capable of, we can negotiate'.** I think this also applied to people who saw ISIS as similar to others and chose to stay. **But ISIS was a bit different**. **In fact, it was totally different**. It never happened before. ISIS showed they have zero negotiation.'

The storyline of *nostalgia* emerges from the turbulent socio-political history of Iraq. An Iraqi citizen born in the mid-1980s has experienced approximately twelve different violent time periods to date, from the Iraq–Iran war to the recent conflicts with ISIS. Within this tumultuous time period, two turning points connecting all experiences could be identified: the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the ISIS military occupation of Mosul in 2014. The narrative of normalcy surfaces regularly in stories about life and wellbeing in Mosul, and often pertains to the time period before the US invasion in 2003. Saddam Hussein's reign was undeniably characterized by discriminatory violence, economic challenges, and corruption (Tripp 2010). However, with a chaotic post-US invasion of Iraq and life under ISIS as points of comparison, participants voiced appreciation for pre-2003 stability. Life under Saddam's rule was often perceived as if balanced on a scale: corrupt but safe; oppressive but stable; restrictive but free. Conversely, after the invasion, this normalcy was felt to have been shattered and replaced by a new normal of 'non-normalcy'. This longing for authoritarian stability follows global trends (Chang et al. 2007; Sanghoon 2022) with nostalgia seen as a buffer resource for wellbeing in times of uncertainty (Hepper et al. 2021). The past, with all its issues, represents a time when wellbeing felt anchored to a sense of normalcy. With this anchor gone, the foundations of wellbeing had to shift.

In striking contrast to earlier reflections of normalcy as stability, the second storyline of *shocks and adaptation* highlights the fleeting and vulnerable nature of the normal in Iraq. Crises faced by the Iraqi people caused systemic shocks, forcing continuous adaptation. Rutter's (1987) seminal work encourages viewing resilience as a 'process of negotiation'—ways of adapting to difficult events not only within the external world, but also ourselves. The storyline colors the broader narrative with nuances of resilience and lack of agency: the Moslawi, a strong people, forced to adapt to extreme external shocks. This paradoxical duality of strength and powerlessness cuts across narratives, and as with the first storyline of normalcy, it emphasizes sensations of time as part of wellbeing: if time feels suspended, or when the sole function of time is to move toward any resolution, seeking experiences of wellbeing feels immensely complicated on all fronts. Participants' accounts support recent decades' research findings on the physiological changes impacted by trauma often inducing a permanent state of hyper-alertness, interfering with the sense of time and the ability to feel well—or, in many cases, to feel anything (Van der Kolk 2006). It is worth noting that we opted not to delve into the oft-instrumentalized relationship between resilience and wellbeing, which is explored by, for instance, Krause and Sharples (2020); rather, we focus specifically on the experiential nature of relational wellbeing.

The final strand of the narrative of normalcy is perhaps a surprising one: the *unique nature of the ISIS threat*. For a people who had faced a dozen conflicts in only three decades, what novelty could yet another militant faction possibly introduce? Yet against the odds ISIS was, in fact, perceived as different, and also an escalation to previous threats. "*ISIS is like a new level [laughs]. If you know what was reached before and thought that was a tough level, then you find another level that made this look like a piece of cake*", laughed Abdullah. Ali shared further on their unusual cruelty: "*It's not a normal culling, a bullet in the head and that's*

it. They are artists in the way of violence. There were people on the radio before communications were cut: 'ISIS is dirty, and when the day comes when Mosul is freed, we will clean the streets with shampoo'. They managed to capture the person and drowned him in shampoo."

The narrative of non-normalcy is, at heart, one of incomprehension of ISIS' lack of empathy and the general population's inability to connect with ISIS. The breaking of social norms related to perceived rules of violence contributed to the feeling of unprecedented disruption of normalcy, and made this particular shock all the more difficult to adapt to. Importantly, ISIS' perceived inhumanity also produced a strong countercurrent of empathy and caring, and led to a diversification of social circles usually afforded familial protection—although only after initial contraction, as noted in the final sub-section.

4.3. Relational Integrity

Where the first two narratives framed boundaries and limitations of social interaction in occupied Mosul, and the resulting restrictions in accessing wellbeing-related resources, the final narrative of connectedness portrays ways in which the integrity of relationships becomes a source of hope, safety, and comfort. The narrative encompasses the storylines of 1. *the cusp of crisis*, 2. *narrowed social core*, and 3. *communities in change*.

> 'Between 2008 and 2014, many armed groups tried to convince us to stay. **They said they could protect us. That was all lies**. After the beginning, no one was allowed to leave. My friends had a chance to leave, but family convinced them to stay, and some died. That really affected me. It reminded me of my plans to leave Mosul, but we thought, 'mm, nothing will happen'. First thing, **we did a family gathering and tried to decide what the right thing to do is**. Many families fled to Syria and other areas. We all stayed. For a lot of people, including my father, no-one will stay if any other crisis happens. I wish we'd left.

> For many people who are like me, family is your life. You are safe, OK, **but I don't want to be safe if my family gets hurt**. That's the bond I told you about. The priority was for ourselves and family, supporting them with any resources to make sure they continue. **Interaction was hugely impacted and remained only within core family. Family was the only source of happiness**. ISIS revealed the strength within families. We did our best to somehow try to keep the family as one. **If it's a high-strength link between family members, they managed to stay together**. Many ended up having no control of their children; those children ended up ISIS members.

> People started having higher interaction with communities. Community is mainly family, close neighbors, people you know well—friends. We didn't have big networks of friends. They were in the same neighborhoods, same schools. **The social structures are very strong** even though wars and curfews eroded these bonds. Especially **neighborhood relations became much stronger**. The girls in Mosul had ambitions to learn new things to prove they are strong, and that they can help the community. **I discovered that there are three or four girls in the same street where I live. We started meeting every week or two weeks, talking about any things that we made, sharing ideas for handicrafts, what new skills we should develop, exchanging novels between us**.'

The cusp of crisis is an exceptional storyline in that it describes a single all-important moment in time: the transitional instant when families recognized the gravity of the ISIS threat, and had to make a collective decision to stay or leave. Recollections of this storyline were laden with unusual solemnity and melancholy undercurrents of speculative thought—how would our life have been if we had, in fact, left? Ali shared a passing thought: "*[Thinking about a colleague's family and their decision] reminds me about how they suffered, and about my family situations when we had the chance also to leave the city, but at the last moment we decided to stay. . . At that time, it was understood by people as the best option [. . .] that's why somehow I was touched.*" This moment bears strong significance beyond its function as

an evacuation decision gate. The shared experience created a community of people who intimately understood the conflicting rationales behind others' decisions. In a tangible way, the moment remains a source of collective empathy for Moslawi communities. Empathy is considered a significant predictor of helping behavior and reconciliatory attitudes (Klimecki 2019). Strengthening such attitudes has implications for the long-term process of healing from ISIS trauma and building communal wellbeing together.

Protectiveness features heavily in most storylines, and it is the defining feature of the *narrowed social core* storyline. With the deepening of many simultaneous crises—such as issues with income, availability of medicines, lack of education, and personal safety—the protection of existing social units began to feel increasingly complex. Resources grew thin and trust eroded as the occupation persisted. As a novel phenomenon, in addition to family safety, the integrity of the social unit was now also threatened in unforeseen ways. Rather than risk complete failure, families opted to reduce the size of the core social unit to control the level of risk as well as to conserve emotional and material resources. While the phenomenon of ISIS was new and the type of threat unanticipated, Iraqi families had utilized this approach to risk management before: in the 1970s, the brutality of the regime forced a similar contraction of familial relations and the social core (Makiya 1998).

Under the emotional shadows of ISIS' occupation, the *communities in change* storyline offers a rare moment of respite; a proverbial light within an apparently unending tunnel silhouetted with violence. Indeed, it was specifically the existential threat to relationships, and the subsequent contracting of the social core, that forced a reorganization of protected social constellations. Participants described a smaller but more diverse range of relations now protected. Circumstantial limitations of fear drove the strengthening of non-familial ties with trusted neighbors and friends. This was particularly true for women, whose lives were confined by the need for proximity, and whose communities were heavily re-shaped by virtue of necessity. Due to traditions of wanting to keep women safe, families applied additional internal limitations to female members. In the short term, this caused stress and anxiety; in the long term, women feared these discriminatory practices might isolate them further via a denial of rights and legitimacy of participation (cf. Parry and Aymerich 2019).

One striking aspect of narratives of community in this study is that they contain some of the only notions of hope expressed by participants. *"One of the ways to keep hope alive was other family members and friends who were out of Mosul and somehow kept communications up. They kept asking: 'tell us about your life'. The hope is still there, with someone who cares about you, out of these borders"*, Ali reflected quietly. Feelings of connectedness and caring helped create a momentary sense of normalcy, in part by offering a warm and empathetic contrast to ISIS' cold cruelty and perceived inhumanity. They also effectively combated the venom of distrust, slowing its course through the veins of Moslawi society.

5. Discussion

In our research, we approached wellbeing as a state of comfort and safety grounded in a nexus of connectedness, inter-relational identities, and collective interests. We sought to uncover narratives of wellbeing and illbeing as well as the role played by relationships in these narratives. Our study suggests that multiple persistent threats forced a renegotiation of ways to sustain key elements of wellbeing. The findings indicate that intentionally propagated distrust led to reduced interaction, while insecurity and fear diminished personal freedoms, causing recurring shocks requiring constant adaptation. Decreasing the size of the core social unit—family, relatives, and friends—helped families manage risks and resources, when faced with existential threats, while the diversification of interpersonal and communal relations as well as compassion for others' experiences, were noted as vital resources. Rare moments of hope were often derived from connectedness, which was felt to be integral to both individual and collective survival. In ISIS-occupied Mosul, relationships played a pivotal role in both the breakdown and buildup of wellbeing.

Participants frequently noted that the importance of family in Iraq is paramount, and the safety it provides is unparalleled. Tripp (2010, p. 19) refers to these structures as "crucial instruments of power." The impact of externally insecure circumstances on wellbeing was amplified by the assault on familiar and tribal means of providing this safety. ISIS coerced, threatened, bribed, and integrated tribal influences into their own hierarchies (Hassan 2014). ISIS' insulation from traditional social structures allowed it to render ineffective such powerful customary protective mechanisms as tribal affiliations, leading to the loss of one of the most fundamental sources of safety in the Middle East. Participants observed that their inability to assess threats and to exploit extenuating negotiation tactics forged a fear of the unknown, contributed to loss of feelings of control and the inability to adapt to shocks, and resulted in wide non-access to mechanisms of protecting wellbeing.

The storylines illustrate participants' feelings of ISIS as a unique threat due to their moral absolutism, unusual cruelty, unpredictability, and the façade of rigid Islamic purity. ISIS was unreadable, non-negotiable, and seemingly heartless. The result of being faced with a lethal unknown was a set of perplexing and, at times, contradictory juxtapositions. Previous violence had been widespread but chiefly impersonal, while now, ISIS' presence in Mosul offered human faces for violence—but ones that appeared to be oddly inhumane. The consequent inability to empathize with ISIS, or to understand loved ones who decided to join them, helps explain dissolved relationships and their impact on wellbeing.

The importance of relationality is paramount to wellbeing across all narratives. Many ISIS-related phenomena are seen as a consequence of the absence of connection between people as well as communities. Conversely, relationships—whether family or close friends—were felt to be sources of hope and peace of mind in times of extreme stress and fear. Participants associated this sense of connectedness with being able to keep each other and themselves safe through different crises of fear, shield and support each other in adapting to the shatterings of normalcy, and maintain resilience of community spirit when faced with existential threats to family integrity. Feeling connected with friends and family, and occasionally swearing at ISIS, represented rare moments of happiness and togetherness.

Amid life in occupied Mosul, relationships were an important part of the process of generating meaning in a time of hardship (Gergen 2009). Part of this meaning was felt to come from a sense of belonging, life built around the physical space of the home. Meaning manifested both in terms of material belongings and the relationship people developed with their homes. In both practical and theoretical terms, the home embodies a sense of stability and routine (Cloutier et al. 2019) and helps establish private, inviolable-feeling spaces (Atkinson 2013) that anchor wellbeing in everyday life. Indeed, viewing spaces and routines as integral parts of not only material, but also subjective wellbeing, sheds light on the importance of social habits and customs in Mosul. White and Jha (2020) note, in their example of a Zambian man and the import he places on economic security, that 'having enough' often carries deeper intentions than simply material wealth: it entails conceptions and intent of having enough to care, and to share. It was in shared moments of smoking shisha, playing cards, knitting, exchanging novels, and talking with friends and family in safe spaces that they felt they could both offer and receive affection and care. Such experiences were intimately connected to material and emotional sharing (White 2015), echoing notions of wellbeing arising from the shared enterprise of communal living (Atkinson et al. 2020). These fragile moments of solace were rare and precious.

As a small-scale qualitative study, this research is not generalizable, nor does it reflect the experiences of all social groups. Further research is needed, for instance, on the impact of occupation on women's wellbeing. Curiously, despite deep-set social inequalities, it is likely that women were able to more effectively capitalize on support networks under ISIS. Kawachi (2001) notes that women are better able to maintain, mobilize, and mutually engage emotionally intimate relationships and social support in distress, while Dietrich and Carter (2017) observe an increase in women's decision-making power in families with displacement and death. Similarly, this study had limited scope to explore the effects of

normalization of violence on children's relationships and wellbeing. Given children's status as a particularly vulnerable group in conflicts, it would be good to better understand how they navigate positive and negative aspects of relations and wellbeing amid violence.

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