



The Turkmen Reality in Iraq

Introduction

The Iraqi Turkmen are a minority of just under 3 million, predominantly present in the Iraqi provinces of Mosul, Erbil, Kirkuk, Salahaddin and Diyala, Baghdad and Wasit. They represent the third largest ethnic group in Iraq (13% of the population).

Kirkuk is considered by the Turkmen as their capital city. This area, within the 'Turkmen' region of Iraq, produces nearly 70% of the Iraqi petroleum and 2.2% of the world's.

They are primarily politically represented by The Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITF). This organization includes all Turkmen parties and movements such as the INTP (Iraqi National Turkmen Party)¹; the Turkmeneli Party (TP); the Adalet party (AP); the Islamic Movement of Iraqi Turkmens (IMIT); and the Independents Movement. It also includes the Turkmen Nationalist Movement (TNM), the Turkmen Wafa Movement, and the Islamic Union of Iraqi Turkmens (IUIT).

Historical Background

Originating from Central Asia, the Turkmen are descendants of the Oghuz tribes. The decline of their influence first began after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

Throughout the 1920's both Turkmen and Kurd minorities resisted British authority and the Hejazi Hashemite monarchy, and as a result the cultural rights of Turkmen communities were gradually eroded. In the 1930s a rapid demographic change produced ethnic tension, and Turkmen communities began to feel the effects of marginalisation. Violence continued to escalate until 1959, when communist and separatist militias massacred Turkmen leaders along with hundreds of Turkmens in the city of Kirkuk. Tensions were later exacerbated even further with the establishment of Ba'ath Party rule in 1968. The 1970s were in fact characterised by other breaches of Turkmen human rights such as the 'Arabisation of Kirkuk' in 1971, and by their discrimination through employment opportunities, unfair dismissals, deliberate measures to worsen their living conditions, forced displacement and deportation, and interference with their right of ownership.²

After seizing power in 1979, Saddam Hussein's regime instigated a campaign of intensive "Arabisation", systematically expelling the Turkmen, instead promoting the resettlement of the Arab population. This period of persecution effectively destroyed Turkmen civil society, forcing many of its political institutions underground or into exile abroad.

Unfortunately, despite the regime change in Iraq in 2003, the Turkmen tragedy continues. Many Iraqi Turkmen communities believe that their historical presence and influence has remained marginalised during the process of reconstructing the Iraqi state, and that more has to be done to correct the past injustices they have suffered.



¹ Led and founded by Dr. Muzaffer Arslan, who also represents the Iraqi Turkmen in UNPO.

² And also suppression and intensive assimilation policies, forced cultural erosion that ranged from political persecution and exile, to terror, massacres and ethnic cleansing. (Large numbers of Turkmen intellectuals were accused of political activities and disappeared after their arrest during the Baathist regime; nothing has been heard of them since.)

Social and Economic Issues

The confiscation of land ('Land Grabbing') was one of the major features of the assimilation policies of the Ba'ath regime.

The village of Beshir, situated South West of Kirkuk city, presents a perfect case study of the consequences of such policies. The inhabitants of Beshir were landowners and farmers, whose ancestors had settled in the area several centuries ago. During the Ottoman rule, Beshir's inhabitants officially registered their lands in their names, and were issued official land property certificates, which they renewed in 1921.

In the early 1980s, after the start of the Iraq-Iran war, Iraqi security forces arrested and executed hundreds of intellectuals from the village, accusing them of being activists in the outlawed Islamic Da'wa Party. In 1986, while the young men of Beshir were fighting in the war against Iran, their families were given 48 hours to pack their personal effects and leave their homes.

Houses were razed to the ground and agricultural lands were confiscated, to be later given to Arabs brought by the Ba'ath regime. Each Arab family was given 10.000 Iraqi Dinars in cash as an incentive to build their house on Turkmen lands, while the Turkmen families received no compensation.

Meanwhile the former regime had arabised the name of the village calling it "*Al-Bashir*" instead of Beshir.

In 2003 when the U.S. military occupied northern Iraq, they did not take control of the area around Beshir and the Arabs which had been installed there by the previous regime remained in the village. The original Turkmen inhabitants of Beshir started to return, demanding their lands. However, the property dispute remained unsettled. Nearly a decade has passed since this 'agreement' and the Arabs still refuse to leave Beshir. The original Turkmen families of Beshir who were victims of deportation, in 2005 handed their complaints together with copies of their deeds to the Property Claims Commission in order to retrieve their confiscated lands and be compensated for the destruction of their houses and for their loss of earnings since 1986, but the Iraqi authorities have not yet responded.

In the Kerkuk province, 80% of the land was Turkmen-owned. In spite of property legislation demanding the return of seized lands, there are currently still 41,874 complaints registered with the local Property Claims Commission. Of these complaints, only 3,236 cases have been decided. Since 2005 therefore, approximately only 2.000 out of 45.000 files belonging to Turkmens have been processed. This fact alone stands as evidence of **discrimination against the Turkmens**.

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Security Challenges

It remains challenging to illustrate the extent to which the Turkmen community in Iraq has been exposed to ethnic cleansing for decades without having been attended to by the international community. Permanently fears of explosive power struggles lurk, particularly over the control of the 'powder-keg' city of Kirkuk. These only serve to further place the minority in a precarious position.

The Tal Afer district of Iraq was attacked twice by helicopters, tanks and tens of thousands of soldiers in 2004 and, a year later, in 2005, 1,350 were left dead and 2,650 were wounded. In December 2007, a suicide bombing in Kirkuk shook its residents and stoked security fears, killing at least 55, and injuring another 120. On 17 December 2012, the bodies of two abducted teachers were found near the Humera village (which is located 35km south of Kirkuk) both carrying signs of torture and bullets. The death of these two individuals generated deep reactions among the Turkmen, as in the view of many the two teachers were killed for sectarian reasons and only for being Turkmen. In January 2013, a crowded tent full of Turkmen mourners in Tuz Khurmato was transformed into a mass killing ground by a suicide bombing with genocidal intent, that left at least 35 people dead and 117 wounded.

Due to a media emphasis on the Iraqi Kurdish minority, Western perspectives of realities in Northern Iraq have become slightly distorted. As an example, human rights violations against the Kurds have often been highlighted, while violations committed against other communities in the region have largely been ignored.

On 14 March 2013, the European Parliament adopted a Resolution (welcomed by the UNPO) on the plight of minority groups in Iraq, and specifically the Iraqi Turkmen. The resolution states that the European Parliament condemns the recent attacks on the Turkmen community and affirms that 'despite the reference in the Constitution



to the rights of Turkmen and other minorities, these minorities continue to be plagued by ethnic sectarian violence and discrimination’.

On 18 June 2013, Lady Catherine Ashton also issued a statement encouraging the address of political and governance issues in Iraq through dialogue.

On 25 November 2013, the United Nations Security Council made a statement on the violence in Iraq, stressing the need to bring those responsible for the violence to justice and calling on Governments to cooperate with Iraqi authorities to hold the perpetrators to account. This is a welcome step to put an end to this conflict, but clearly much more remains to be done.

Human Rights Concerns

Perhaps one of the most noteworthy aspects characterising Iraq constitutionally is the fact that, to date, it possesses no comprehensive minority rights or anti-discrimination law at the level of ordinary legislation. What is furthermore notable about the international standards is that Iraq is not a signatory to the ILO Convention, No. 169 on the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples in independent countries.

The unfortunate consequences of this lack of implementations are evident in the UNAMI report on Human Rights concerns of January to June 2012, which documents a countless number of violations in regards to the Turkmen minority, including the afore mentioned imminent threat to civilians’ security, arising from frequent terrorist attacks.

Other noteworthy bearings include the mistreatment of Turkmen detainees in Iraqi prisons, the unregulated enforcement of capital punishment, several recorded incidents of children victimised by human rights abuses, and the recurrent disappearances and suspected executions of Turkmen intellectuals and health practitioners.³

Additionally, the poor living conditions of the Turkmen population in heavily neglected areas (such as the district of Talafar) - due to an absence or lack of government’s provisions in terms of resources - the challenges faced by the barely surviving Turkmen education in local schools, and the frequent bombing of religious sites (in the last 12 years over 65 churches were destroyed in the region) remain constant sources of a growing preoccupation.

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UNPO Activities

Raising awareness of issues vital to the welfare of Iraqi communities has been one of the organisation’s main concerns. Activities directed at improving UNPO’s members’ political and humanitarian situations have been conducted through advocacy, campaigning, and the holding of events within a number of other political institutions. These include the organisation of two conferences, held respectively in 2007 and 2008 at the European Parliament on the human rights situation of Iraqi Turkmen, specifically in the area of Kirkuk. In 2013, UNPO also launched two urgent appeals towards the protection of the Iraqi Turkmen minority, the first to the European Parliament, and the latter to several Special Rapporteurs in Geneva and the Independent Expert on Minority Issues in Iraq. This resulted in the passing of a European Parliament Resolution on the plight of the Turkmen.

UNPO has further carried out an Election Observation Mission in the Nineveh Plain in Iraq in 2009 in collaboration with ACE (Assyrian Council of Europe) and published a report entitled “The Last Generation: The Situation of Assyrians in Northern Iraq”, which was the result of a Fact Finding Mission organised in collaboration with ACE and the Finnish Assyrian Association in 2011. A second Election Observation of Presidential and Parliamentary Elections was also carried out in the Kurdistan region of Iraq in 2009.

In 2013, UNPO actively participated in several events commemorating the 25th Anniversary of the Halabja Massacre, including a conference.

³ There is evidence that at least 46 Turkmen health practitioners in the province of Kirkuk alone were threatened, kidnapped or killed since April 2003. The accounted number of missing persons in Iraq (which includes Turkmen) between 2003 and 2010 hovers around 137,520. 14 mass graves were recently discovered in the Kerkuk Region.