The Turkmen Reality in Iraq

Introduction

The Iraqi Turkmen are an ethnic group 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 component in Iraq: 9% of the population according to the 1957 census, considered to be the last reliable census that permitted the minority to register. In subsequent censuses the Turkmen nationality was removed and the Turkmen have been forced to register either as Arabs or as Kurds.

Kirkuk is considered by the Turkmen as their capital city and main cultural centre. This area, within the ‘Turkmen’ region of Iraq, produces nearly 70% of the Iraqi and 2.2% of the world’s petroleum. Nonetheless, there is a big Turkmen community also in Baghdad.

The Iraqi Turkmen are primarily politically represented by the Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITF). This organization comprises all Turkmen parties and movements such as the INTP (Iraqi National Turkmen Party); 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, which settled in the area more than 1400 years ago. The decline of their influence first began after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire.

Throughout the 1920s both the Turkmen and Kurds resisted British authority and the Hejazi Hashemite monarchy, while in the 1930s a rapid demographic change produced ethnic tension, leading to a marginalization of the Turkmen communities. 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.¹

After seizing power in 1979, Saddam Hussein’s regime instigated a campaign of further intensive “Arabisation”, systematically expelling the Turkmen and promoting the resettlement of the Arab population. This period of persecution effectively destroyed the 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 continued. 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. Furthermore, under the US rule in the early 2000s, a very large Kurdish community was settled in the Turkmen city of Kirkuk by Kurdish leaders, to reduce once again the demographic relevance of the Turkmen. More in general, the ongoing pressure by Kurdish and Arab authorities to move the Turkmen community to different areas has not stopped. Political and intellectual leaders of the community are being targeted and the Turkmen are not allowed to have their own self-defence forces.

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, is 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. Under 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, however, 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 belongings and leave their homes.

Houses were razed to the ground and agricultural lands were confiscated and later given to Arabs transferred there 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 for their loss.

Meanwhile, the former regime had arabised the name of the village calling it “Al-Bashir” instead of Beshir.

¹And 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.)
In 2003, when the US 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. Full of hope, the original Turkmen inhabitants of Beshir started to return, demanding their lands back. However, most property disputes were to remain unsettled. Nearly a decade has passed since this ‘agreement’ and the Arabs still refuse to leave Beshir. In 2005, the original Turkmen families of Beshir who were victims of deportation, 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 and have put all sort of obstacles to make it as difficult as possible.

In the Kirkuk province, 80% of the land was Turkmen-owned. In spite of property legislation demanding the return of seized lands, there are currently over 40,000 complaints registered with the local Property Claims Commission, of which only a small part has been decided. This fact alone stands as evidence of discrimination against the Turkmen.

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 any international media attention. Permanent 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 120. On 17 December 2012, the bodies of two abducted teachers were found near the Humera village (35km south of Kirkuk) 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 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. In November 2013, the administration of Kirkuk Province, in cooperation with its Security Forces, used violent methods to repress the Turkalan villagers’ protests against the illegal appropriation of a great part of their agricultural land for the installation of a sewage project. The Iraqi government illegally confiscated 332 acres of the village, despite the objection of the land owners who had obtained a Court decision to halt the project. As a consequence of the events, 5 young villagers were arrested. In an attempt to boycott the coverage of the incidents during the protests, Special Forces confiscated television cameras and mobile phones containing footage of the event.

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 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, EU HR/VP 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.

Human Rights Concerns

Perhaps one of the most noteworthy aspects characterising Iraq’s legislation is that, despite the significant diversity of its population, to date it possesses no comprehensive minority rights or anti-discrimination law. What is furthermore notable about the international standards is that Iraq is not a signatory to the ILO Convention 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 aforementioned imminent threat to civilian 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.²

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.

On 1 November 2014, the newly-formed Iraqi Parliament rejected a bill proposal that would have recognised certain rights to the Turkmen. Despite the aforementioned EP Resolution and many other human rights institutions’ calls on Iraqi and Kurdish authorities to guarantee the safety of Iraqi Turkmen, no action has so far been taken.

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² 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 Turkmens) between 2003 and 2010 hovers around 137,520. 14 mass graves were recently discovered in the Kirkuk Region.

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Recent developments following the advance of the ‘Islamic State’

However, in addition to all the pre-existing problems of minorities in Iraq, the advance of the so called ‘Islamic State’ put the Turkmen, as well as most other ethnic and religious communities, under immediate threat. Since June 2014, many Turkmen villages have been attacked and occupied by the IS. According to current estimates approximately 350,000 Turkmen, over 10% of the whole community, had to leave their homes and belongings in Tel Afer, Beshir, Biravceli, Amerli, Kara Tepe and several other towns, while some have been tortured or killed. The community lamented that neither the Iraqi army nor the Peshmerga helped them when their towns were attacked. In particular Amerli, a medium-sized Turkmen town, was held under siege by the IS from mid-June to late-August 2014. The inhabitants were left without water or electricity, while temperatures were exceeding 50 degrees Celsius. Still, the siege of Amerli was not sufficiently covered by international media and the European Parliament resolution of 16 July 2014 on the situation in Iraq made no reference to the Turkmen. Only through a combined effort by the Kurdish peshmerga and Iraqi government forces, supported by US air strikes, at the end of August, was the town freed. On this occasion, the inhabitants of the town also received humanitarian aid supplies, mainly through European and Australian air drops.

Several thousand Turkmen now live in appalling conditions in transit camps in Kurdistan or in schools and mosques in Kirkuk and many other cities in the south of the country. Despite their tragic situation, these Turkmen IDPs have not received any help from the Iraqi State and only survive thanks to the help of fellow Turkmen and of Turkish and Turkmen NGOs. The arrival of winter is exposing all the IDPs living in camps to a great risk, as a large part of them are not equipped for cold weather. The c the most vulnerable groups, including pregnant women, children and elderly people, are facing a particularly dire situation.

Furthermore, many of the Turkmen who did not escape were attacked in their villages. There are numerous reports of kidnapping and killing of men, women and children, but also of rapes of women, including pregnant women and very young girls, Naked bodies were hung in several occasions to street-lights or electric poles, where they remained for up to three weeks. In the Diyala province, Turkmen cities like Kara Tepe are constantly exposed to attacks by mortars and sniper shoots, as the IS controls villages just outside.

In addition to targeting the Turkmen people, the IS has also attempted to destroy Turkmen culture, by attacking and demolishing religious and cultural sites. The statue of a Turkmen poet and writer and the shrines of other local personalities were destroyed, while a library was set on fire.

The Iraqi Turkmen recently signed and presented at the European Parliament a Common ‘Declaration of the Turkmen, Chaldean-Syriac-Assyrian and Ezidi Kurdish people of Iraq’, in which they explained their situation in detail and listed the conditions that they believe need to be soon met for their community to be able to survive the current situation.

The IS is enacting a plan to change the demographics of Iraq, by displacing or physically eliminating Turkmen and other minorities. While the actions of the IS have gained much attention in international media, regrettably the situation of the Turkmen is remains largely forgotten.
About UNPO

The UNPO is an international, nonviolent, and democratic membership organization established in 1991. Its members are indigenous peoples, minorities, and territories who have joined to protect and promote their human rights through nonviolent solutions.