



Intervention in an exchange of views regarding the situation of religious minorities in Iraq

Delegation of the European Parliament for Relation with Iraq

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Andrew Swan
Program Manager
Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO)

Thank you Madam Vice-Chair.

Firstly, allow me to thank in his absence Mr. Struan Stevenson, and the Delegation for making time in their programme of work to highlight and discuss the situation of Iraq's religious minorities – this is an issue which affects not only hundreds of thousands of people but also the direction and destiny of Iraq itself. The situation of minorities in Iraq has a far wider impact, one that extends to the refugees in Iraq's neighbours and to the diasporas living as far away as Australia or the United States.

With representatives of the Assyria Council of Europe, Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community, and Open Doors International present here today, I wish to focus on the broader context facing religious minorities in Iraq and to highlight some of the ongoing discrimination that limits their participation in the life of the country and to raise some of the internal discussions currently taking place. I do this as a representative of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) – an organisation that has been working with minority communities within Iraq since 1991 when Iraqi Kurds, Turkmen, and Assyrians made the decision to join the organisation. Over the past twenty years their respective situations have been transformed as stability was cemented within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq but terrorism came to plague cities such as Mosul, Kirkuk, and Baghdad.

The attack on the Our Lady of Salvation Church on 31 October 2010 reflected the insecurity that remains within Iraqi cities and the ongoing targeting of religious minorities. It also demonstrated that Iraq's needs leadership. That a government may be formed in the coming weeks is very welcome but many within Iraq's religious minorities believe that worse lies ahead for them. The picture may in fact not be so bleak, but as this meeting acknowledges, that assault represented an attack against all Iraq's religious minorities but these are crimes that have been occurring for years - often at a very low intensity but with the aim nevertheless of driving religious minorities such as the Assyrians, Mandaean, Shabak, and Yezidi from the country. On 22 November, as last week's resolution noted, a further two Christians had been killed whilst at their place of work in Mosul. But the Mandaean Human Rights Group lists assassinations, forced conversions, rape, and kidnapping that extends to twenty three pages of names. Turkmen organisations can similarly point to numerous instances of intimidation, limits to their freedom of expression, marginalisation from positions of authority, and the ongoing repercussions of Ba'athist assimilation policies. Moreover, these are crimes reported by many minority rights groups – not just Mandaean.

Typically highly educated and multilingual, Iraq's minorities represent one of the country's key assets and most have little desire to leave Iraq. The experience outside Iraq is seldom positive – the thousands of Mandaean currently living in limbo in refugee camps in Syria are a potent reminder of this fact. Similarly, once granted refuge many communities struggle to maintain their identity. For communities such as the Mandaean - that admit no converts - their dispersal around the globe by refugee agencies can achieve by kindness what terrorists in Iraq are seeking to achieve by violence. Within Iraq we see efforts at both dividing minority communities, with distinctions being made between Assyrians and Chaldeans, at the same time as attempts are made to assimilate others, such as Yezidi and Kurdish communities.



But whilst Iraq's minority communities face efforts to expunge them from Iraq, so they have also become an integral part of the political gameplay in both the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Baghdad. In 2009 the UNPO, together with the Assyria Council of Europe, travelled to the Nineveh Province and observed the Provincial Elections taking place at that time. The mission revealed tremendous enthusiasm and the growing involvement of minority communities in the electoral process. But it was also the only international observation in the area, this in spite of the difficulties minority communities and internally displaced persons (IDPs) had faced in voting during the 2005 elections. The October 2010 attack and subsequent bombings have also changed the direction and pitch of debate in many quarters. Whereas the focus once dwelt on discussing where power should flow from within Iraq's federal structure, now more fundamental questions are being raised about community security provisions and alternative autonomy models.

Change is under way within the structures that currently exist however. In Baghdad the Council of Representatives is also showing the initiative with minority leaders and deputies establishing for the first time a minority caucus. This caucus includes all minority political parties from the Assyrians to the Kurds and is supported by a thirty-five member civil society alliance. The only other comparable example of this initiative lies with the Congressional Black Caucus in the United States. This process, being facilitated by the Institute for International Law and Human Rights (IILHR) represents a landmark for Iraqi democracy – to succeed however it requires recognition, support and encouragement from within Iraq and outside. For arguably the first time and in a sign of Iraq's maturing democracy, the country's religious and ethnic minorities are assessing and presenting common positions as part of a practical agenda that is in response to the challenges that face them and Iraq as a whole.

This has come about after many years of dialogue and discussion. From personal experience in Northern Iraq, I know that the work done by actors such as No Peace Without Justice (NPWJ) have been crucial to drafting recommendations for action – ranging from revising the national school curricula to reflect and respect Iraq's cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity to ensuring formal discussions recognise the existence of Iraq's minorities. I would say that at the moment there are enough recommendations – what is needed now is the action necessary to discuss, implement and monitor them. On a positive note, this has already been taken up by the minority caucus in the Iraqi Council of Representatives, and as an aside, the conference that produced such recommendations was truly significant for the minority representatives it was able to bring together under one roof – something that was remarked upon by those present and which is another positive sign we must not allow to be forgotten.

At the moment I believe there is a real desire from Iraq's minority communities to cement what has been achieved and to progress. The European Parliament has within its walls a wealth of expertise from twenty-seven states that have their own experience in the rights of minorities – and their own solutions. Each offers a case study for Iraq – not to be slavishly followed but to be examined and judged in its merits. At the same time, there is a need for greater and deeper understanding of the dynamics at play between and within Iraq's communities. This meeting is recognition of that fact, and I hope that the insights we can make and share today will serve as a foundation for the more in-depth discussions that I believe are needed.

In conclusion, what we are witnessing is a search for political solutions to the current situation facing Iraq's minorities – this search must be shown to yield results. Iraq's minorities cannot be placed in the position where the psychological calculation to fight or flight is laid before them, because in both instances Iraq will lose. The international community, and in particular the European Parliament and the European Union, must demonstrate its commitment to supporting peaceful and inclusive solutions aimed at bringing security and stability to Iraq's religious minorities. Similarly, the Iraqi Government must show that it is willing to consider and implement the recommendations placed before it by those who speak for the country's religious communities. We are now in a position where there are recommendations on the table, there is a caucus in Baghdad that is representative of minority communities, and we have an Iraqi government that is slowly coalescing. The October attacks tragically reminded us that a lasting political solution is needed without delay - let us hope that from this meeting we can support such a solution.

Thank you.



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The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) is an international, nonviolent, and democratic membership organisation. Its members are indigenous peoples, minorities, and unrecognised or occupied territories who have joined together to protect and promote their human and cultural rights, to preserve their environments, and to find nonviolent solutions to conflicts which affect them.

Founded in 1991 at the Peace Palace in The Hague, UNPO is unique as an international organisation in that it is built entirely by its Members. Through this strong connection to those suffering the consequences of the exclusion the organisation seeks to address, UNPO has since grown into a prominent and respected international forum.

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