MEMBER PROFILE

IRAQI TURKMEN

Iraqi National Turkmen Party
Population: around 3 million  
Language: Turkish  
Capital: Kerkuk

OVERVIEW
The Iraqi Turkmen are a community of around 3 million, predominantly present in the Iraqi provinces of Mosul, Erbil, Kerkuk, Salahaddin and Diya, Baghdad and Wasit. They represent the third largest ethnic group in Iraq (13% of the population) and, since 29 July 2012, they are officially recognized by the Iraqi Parliament as one of the three main ethnic components of the country’s population. Kerkuk is considered by the Turkmen as their capital city. This area, within the ‘Turkmeneli’ region of Iraq, produces nearly 20% of the Iraqi and 2.2% of the world’s petroleum. The Turkmen region has large natural resources such as oil, gas and Sulphur. In addition, there is an abundant production of wheat and cotton. However, the national Government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) constantly fight for the control of the oil-rich city, which has harboured for centuries a diverse population including Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen and Christians. The Turkmens are distinct in language and culture from both their neighbours, the Arabs and Kurds. Yet, the Turkmen are continuously denied political rights and systematically face attempts to assimilate them in the Kurdish or Arab identity.

UNPO REPRESENTATION
The Iraqi Turkmens are represented in the UNPO by Dr. Muzaffer Arslan, founder of the Iraqi National Turkmen Party (INTP).

The Turkmen community includes the following political organizations:
- Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITF): an umbrella organizations of several parties: INTP, Turkmeneli Party (TP), Adalet part (AP), Islamic Movement of Iraqi Turkmens (IMIT) and the Independents Movement;
- Turkmen Nationalist Movement (TNM);
- Turkmen Wafa Movement;
- Islamic Union of Iraqi Turkmens (UT).

Non-political Turkmen organizations are: Turkmeneli Cooperation and Cultural Foundation (TCCF) in Turkey, Turkmen Brotherhood Center (TBC) in Iraq and Iraqi Turks Culture and Solidarity Association in Turkey.

On 7 October 1997, Turkmen organizations arranged a ”Turkmen Assembly” in Erbil, northern Iraq. The assembly gathered most of the Turkmen organizations, and determined the cultural, educational, information and social policies for the Turkmen people. The groups who attended the assembly have adopted the “Declaration of Fundamental Principles”. A 30-member council was created from various Turkmen organizations. In order to maintain the identity of the Turkmens and to ensure social solidarity worldwide, several associations and foundations were established in Denmark, Sweden, Germany, the Netherlands, Turkey, Canada, the USA and Australia.
CURRENT ISSUES

On 17 March 2014, an official of the Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITF) was shot dead. In consequence of the killing, the head of the ITF called on the Iraqi government to offer protection to Turkmen lawmakers. According to him, the attacks on ITF members had the aim to scare Iraqi Turkmens.

On 30 April 2014, legislative elections took place in Iraq. In the multi-ethnic province of Kirkuk, the election campaigns caused disputes, as Kirkuk is home to a number of different ethnicities, and as the elections would show 'who really owns this troubled province'. Due to the disputes, there were tensions between the political candidates and consequent physical violence between supporters. During the last general elections in 2010, the Iraqi Turkmen won two out of twelve seats, while the Iraqi Kurdish parties won six, and the Sunni Muslim Arabs four.

After the 2014 elections, the leader of the ITF, Arshad Al-Sahili, felt that the elections had run far from smoothly for the Iraqi Turkmen. He claimed that members of the community had to face severe impediments to get to the polling stations. According to Al-Sahili, the day before election-day there were severe explosions in Turkmen areas. The aim of these explosions was to intimidate Turkmens and to discourage them from voting. This resulted in a very low turnout at the election, as most people were afraid to leave their homes.

Furthermore, in 2014, after months of displacement, Iraqi Turkmen families returned to their destroyed homes. In the same year, the Iraqi Ministry of Immigration and Migrants recorded ten thousand internally displaced persons. This was a result of the tragic march of the Islamic State, which started its attacks on the northern province of Mosul earlier that year.

Iraqi Turkmens have had many issues as a result of the IS in 2014 (for more information see the timeline of events regularly updated by UNPO). In September 2014, Nahla Sallamah, an Iraqi Turkmen Member of Parliament, alleged that at least 350,000 Iraqi Turkmen refugees were facing starvation as consequence of the repeated IS offensives. Sallamah stated that the Turkmen refugees were in danger of starvation because the government failed to financially support them. The Iraqi Turkmens have been widely targeted by the IS, as they are one of the largest ethnic minority group in Iraq.

In February 2015, ISIS militants have kidnapped 450 Turkmen civilians in Iraq. Moreover, in the summer of 2014, ISIS militants have kidnapped hundreds of civilians. These include Turkmen and Yazidi girls, whose fate remains unknown.

However, there was also some positive news in 2014. In November, in fact, the Turkmen language has been declared as one of the official languages by the Parliament of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), in addition to Arabic and Kurdish. The law applies to all areas where the Turkmen population exceeds 20 per cent.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Turkmens are descendants of the Turkic tribes speaking Oghuz who began settling in Iraq about 1500 years ago. They played a significant role in the administration of Iraq and established 6 states: The Seljuks, Atabegs, Ilkhanids, Jalairids, Qara Qoyunlus and Aq
Qoyunlus. On 30 October 1918, at the end of First World War, the Mosul province was still within the borders of the Ottoman Empire. British troops occupied the territory after the cease-fire on 11 November 1918. Turkey refused to accept this act and demanded the return of the Mosul province. The Turkmens and Kurds resisted British authority by participating in the popular 1920 Iraqi revolution and they refused the British attempt to install the Hejazi Hashemite monarchy in 1921. The Turkmens were attacked on 4 May 1924 by the British army mercenaries (Levies) in Kerkuk, where many civilians were killed. Starting from 1925, the Constitution guaranteed to the Kurds and the Turkmens the right to use their own languages in schools and government offices and freedom of press in their own native languages. On 5 June 1926, Turkey, under British pressure, accepted the integration of Mosul into Iraq. In 1932, entering the League of Nations, the Iraqi government declared that it would respect all minority rights. However, already in 1933 the Iraqi government began to close Turkmens schools, and it sent activists into exile. On 14 July 1959, Communists and separatist militias massacred Turkmens leaders along with hundreds of Turkmens in Kerkuk, in an attempt to ethnically cleanse the city. A revised census of 1957 showed the Turkmens as representing 9% of the Iraqi population.

On 24 January 1970, the Baathist government granted some cultural rights to the Turkmens. In 1972, nonetheless, the same Baathist government prohibited studies in the Turkish language and restricted the Turkish media in Iraq to one weekly journal and one monthly magazine promoting Baath propaganda. The 1970s were characterised by other breaches of Turkmens human rights, such as the ‘Arabisation of Kerkuk’ in 1971, and by their discrimination in terms of employment opportunities, unfair dismissals, deliberate measures to exacerbate their living conditions, forced displacement and deportation and interference with right of ownership. After seizing power in 1979, Saddam Hussein’s regime instigated a campaign of intensive “Arabisation”, systematically expelling the Turkmens and instead promoting the resettlement of the Arab population. This period of persecution effectively destroyed the Turkmens civil society, forcing many of its political institutions underground or into exile abroad.

Unfortunately, despite the regime change in Iraq in 2003, the Turkmens tragedy continues. Many Iraqi Turkmen communities believe they were left at the margins of the process of reconstructing the Iraqi state after the deposition of Saddam Hussein and that the will of their community was ignored, despite their importance both in terms of demographics and in terms of history and connection to those lands.

SECURITY CHALLENGES

The Turkmen community in Iraq has been exposed to ethnic cleansing for decades. In 2004, the Tal Afer district of Iraq was attacked twice by helicopters, tanks, and tens of thousands of soldiers. In 2005, again in Tal Afer, 1,350 Turkmen were left dead, and 2,650 were wounded. In December 2007, a suicide bombing in Kerkuk 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, both carrying signs of torture and burnt alive, were found near the Humera village, located 35km south west of Kerkuk. 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 February 2013, therefore, UNPO and the Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITF) called the European Parliament to exercise pressure on the government of Iraq, to put security measures into place, to protect the Turkmen minority as a matter of urgency.

As a result, on 14 March 2013, the European Parliament adopted a Resolution on the plight of minority groups in Iraq, specifically focused on the Iraqi Turkmen. The resolution states that the European Parliament condemns the recent attacks (of January 2013) 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'.

The attacks in 2013 continued, and therefore, UNPO and the Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITF) urged the United Nations to intervene against the violent terrorist activities which continued to target the Turkmen and other ethnic communities in the northern region of Iraq.

**HUMAN RIGHTS CONCERNS**

One of the most noteworthy aspects of the Constitution of Iraq is probably the complete absence of any reference to minority rights. Similarly, there is no anti-discrimination law at the level of ordinary legislation. Furthermore, 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 lists and analyses a countless number of violations affecting the Turkmen community, including the 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 involving children suffering human rights abuses, and the recurrent disappearances and suspected executions of Turkmen intellectuals and health practitioners. Additionally, part of the Turkmen population lives in poor conditions in heavily neglected areas, the Turkmen education system in local school is facing serious threats and the frequency of the bombing of religious and civilian buildings is increasing.

Overall, the situation in the Turkmen region of Iraq, where the tragedy of the ISIS wave has summed up to the difficulties that the community was already facing due to the Iraqi Government’s policies, raises significant concerns.

**LAND GRABBING**

The confiscation of land (land grabbing’), was one of the major features of the assimilation policies of the Ba'ath regime. The village of Bashir (Besir in Turkish), situated South West of Kirkuk, presents a perfect case study of the consequences of such policies. The inhabitants of Bashir were landowners and farmers, whose ancestors had settled in the area several centuries ago. During the Ottoman rule, Bashir’s inhabitants officially registered their lands in their names, and were issued official land property certificates, which they renewed after the fall of the Ottoman Empire 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 of the outlawed Islamic Da’wa Party.