



## **IRAQ: The Situation of Ethnic and Religious Minorities**

### **Briefing paper**

D-IQ Meeting, European Parliament

20 June 2013

**Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization**

**Brussels**



## **Iraq's ethnic and religious composition**

One of the most distinctive aspects characterising the population of Iraq is its unique religious and ethnic diversity. Based on the World Bank's statistics, Iraq's population reaches approximately 33 million people, and is composed of a number of ethnic and religious minorities. This includes Christians, Kurds, Turkmens, Assyrians, and Yezidi's, among the range of minority groups in Iraq. According to Minority Rights Group International, approximately 96 per cent of the country is Muslim. The overwhelming majority is divided into a large Shi'a Arab majority, a Sunni Arab minority, and an ethnic Kurdish minority that is also overwhelmingly Sunni. An estimated 10 per cent of the population is composed of ethnic Shabaks, Turkmens, Faili Kurds, Palestinians, Roma, Christians, Sabian-Mandaeans, Yezidis and Baha'i's, with the majority being both Shi'a and Sunni adherents.

## **The legal framework for protection of minorities in Iraq**

The Iraqi Constitution recognises that 'Iraq is a country of multiple nationalities, religions, and sects' with two official languages: Arabic and Kurdish. It also makes provision for the protection of linguistic rights for the Turkmen and Syriac languages. Moreover, the Constitution enshrines the principle of non-discrimination and the equality of all Iraq's, and guarantees the administrative, political, cultural and educational rights of all the nationalities in Iraq. While these are robust provisions, in reality Iraqi minorities do not enjoy even the most basic human rights, as guaranteed by the Constitution.

## **Lack of political representation**

One of the most pressing issues facing minorities is the lack of political representation in Iraq's political system. The government does not provide political representation of the interests or concerns of minorities in the Iraqi state. Moreover, it fails to recognise or protect minorities, in respect of their indigenous or ethnic status. Rather, the government treats them as predominantly religious minorities. Consequently, a number of groups have been forced to identify as part of larger minority groups. For example, Faili Kurds and the Shabaks are forced to identify with a larger Kurdish majority from which they consider themselves distinct. In the case of the Yazidis, they were forced to identify as Arabs during Saddam Hussein's regime, and have subsequently faced intense levels of violence due to the politicisation of their identity.

Another group which has been forced to identify outside their group are Christian Armenians and Assyrians. In 2009, they faced significant threats to their security after winning a number of seats in the provincial elections. With regard to Baha'i's, many of them born in the last 30 years are prohibited from possessing a national ID card. As a result, they are not entitled to citizenship documents or a passport and are unable to leave the country, or register in schools.



## **Restrictions on the right to use minority languages**

Minorities in Iraq are also subject to severe linguistic restrictions which impact their right to freedom of expression. The Turkmen, for example, are prohibited from teaching their language in schools despite constitutional guarantees. In some cases, the denial of linguistic rights has had a detrimental effect on the survival of some minority languages. For example, Assyrian (or Aramaic) is officially listed by UNESCO as a “definitely endangered” language.

## **Religious discrimination**

Hand in hand with linguistic restrictions, minorities also face religious discrimination, bordering on persecution. Vicious attacks have frequently been directed towards Christian minorities. In 2010, reports emerged in Mosul of people being stopped in the streets, asked for their identity cards, and shot if they had a first or last name indicating Assyrian or Christian origin. Yazidis are another targeted group, who suffered the most devastating single attack on any group in Iraq in 2007, due to their trading of alcohol. On 14 May 2013, for example, 12 employees of an alcohol shop in Baghdad, 10 of whom were Yazidis, were killed by armed assailants amid increasing religious fundamentalism in the country. The Kaka'i and Baha'i's are also frequently victims of state propaganda. The former are often portrayed as devil worshippers in Iraq, whilst the latter are more often portrayed as apostates and heretics. A recurring incident is also the bombing of Turkmen and Armenian churches.

## **Forced displacement**

Another major issue these communities face is that of internal displacement. The confiscation of land or land grabbing was in fact one of the major features of the assimilation policies of the Ba'ath regime which continued up until 2008, despite the regime's fall. Today, although displacement levels have stabilised, internally displaced people remain without compensation and are often caught up in property disputes with inhabitants of the area or the Arab majority. The Iraqi Property Claims Commission has largely failed to address this problematic phenomenon, rendering the eventuality of conflict resolution highly unlikely. Aside from communities such as that of the Turkmen, which were caught in major land disputes, like in the case of the inhabitants of the village of Bashir in Northern Iraq, minorities such as the Palestinians or the Roma are continuously vexed by onerous registration requirements due to their inability to obtain long-term residency.

## **Lack of access to justice**

Minority communities and other vulnerable populations in Iraq report a continuing lack of meaningful mechanisms to protect them from targeted violence on behalf of the government; systemic discrimination in law and practice; practical limitations on



the exercise of political, civil, social, cultural, and economic rights; and challenges to access to and use of identity documents.

## **Lack of adequate security protection**

In light of the emergence of sectarian violence in Iraq, the situation for minorities remains distressing. Some of Iraq's religious and ethnic minorities remain at high risk for targeted violence. Communities living in the Disputed Internal Boundaries (DIBs) area in Nineveh, Kirkuk, and parts of Diyala and Salahaddin are at particular risk because religious and ethnic identity in these areas has become increasingly politicised. Despite notable security improvements and important steps to support and reintegrate some minority groups, investigations throughout 2012 and early 2013 by the Institute for International Law and Human Rights (IILHR), its partners and associates in Iraq, and abroad, and secondary research sourced from 2010 to early 2013, reveal the ongoing problem of frequent bombings, arbitrary arrest and detention, torture, intimidation, discrimination, displacement and ongoing marginalisation facing Iraq's cultural, religious and ethnic minorities.

## **Conclusion**

The human rights situation facing minorities in Iraq remains in dire straits on all levels: political, civic, and cultural. Iraq's ethnic and religious minorities, along with other vulnerable populations, continue to face threats of violence, religious discrimination, exclusion, and denial of their property rights. The consequences are far-reaching for Iraq's social cohesiveness, national unity, and ability to overcome sectarian violence. Despite the fact that some communities have seen an improvement in their general situation, the survival of Iraq's nationalities in terms of religious, linguistic and cultural identity remains in jeopardy.

As international emphasis shifts away from Iraq, towards other crisis areas in the Middle East and North Africa, it is important to emphasise that despite an overall decrease in violence and important progress in Iraq, most minorities and vulnerable groups continue to be targets of threats and violence based on religious and ethnic identity. As a result, members of minority communities continue to flee the country in order to find safety and protection outside the country.

## **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 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



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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 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Halabja Massacre, including a conference and a Kurdistan Regional Government-led visit to Erbil, Sulaymaniyah and Halabja. In addition, UNPO organised a conference to commemorate the genocide in Nieuwspoor, The Hague, and a photo exhibition of the genocide at the European Parliament on 26 March 2013.

Finally the organisation took part in the DROI (Subcommittee on Human Rights) Hearing, concerning the situation of minorities in Iraq at the European Parliament in 2011, and in 2012 hosted an event at the 21<sup>st</sup> Session of the UN Human Rights Council entitled "National and Religious Minorities in the Middle East". The most recent side event at the UNHRC took place on 6 June 2013, and focused on the "The Forgotten Nation: Turkmen in Iraq".

## About UNPO

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

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