Iraq - Kaka’i

Profile

Kaka’i, also known as Ahl-e Haqq or Yarsan, are estimated by community members to number between 110,000 and 200,000 in Iraq, mainly living south-east of Kirkuk and in the Ninewa plains near Daquq and Hamdaniya, with others also based in Diyala, Erbil and Sulaymaniyah. They are generally considered to be Kurdish in ethnicity, speaking a dialect known as Macho, although there are also some Arabic-speaking communities. They are followers of a syncretic religion, which dates to the fourteenth century in western Iran and contains elements of Zoroastrianism and Shi’a Islam. Nevertheless, their distinct practices and beliefs have resulted in some persecution. As a result, Kaka’i are secretive about their faith.

Historical Context

In the Ottoman era and continuing to the monarchial period, Kaka’i held influential positions in Iraq, and were wealthy landowners in Kirkuk province.

In the context of the Ba’ath regime’s conflict with the Kurds, some Kaka’i supported the Kurdish cause while others stayed neutral or even supported the government. As a result of the regime’s Arabization policies, many Kak’ais were forced off their lands and displaced to Sulaymaniyah, Erbil or southern Iraq. The government also destroyed Kaka’i villages along the Iranian border in order to create a security zone. Hundreds of Kaka’i living in Kirkuk were forcibly exiled to Iran, losing their nationality in the process.

Following the rise of ISIS in 2014, the Kaka’i religious identity made them, like other minorities, a clear target for the militant group. When ISIS began its advance in northern Iraq, most Kaka’i living in villages east of Mosul fled to Erbil. ISIS reportedly released statements threatening Kaka’i with death if they did not convert to Islam. Several villages were taken over by ISIS, and the militant group also destroyed Kaka’i shrines in al-Hamdaniya district on the
Ninewa plains. In response, the Kaka’i formed their own armed forces, and one 600-member contingent was incorporated into the Kurdish Peshmerga. In September 2016, ISIS targeted a Kaka’i village in Tuz Kharmatu district with a car bomb attack, killing at least six people.

**Current issues**

Divisions within the Kaka’i community over whether they are a sect of Islam, or an independent religious group, have prevented the group from cementing its role in political life. The 2005 Constitution does not mention the Kaka’i religion. Without official recognition, Kaka’i cannot register their religion on their identification cards and are recorded as Muslims. However, some Kaka’i prefer this option as it protects them from discrimination. Nevertheless, the community has made some gains in recent years. In 2015, the Kurdistan Regional Government’s Ministry of Endowment and Religious Affairs recognized the Kaka’i religion for the first time, and the minority now has a reserved seat on the Halabja provincial council.

Kaka’i continue to face discrimination on the basis of their poorly understood religious identity, and have been the targets of threats, kidnappings, assassinations and boycotts of their businesses. Kaka’i men are easily distinguishable due to their characteristic prominent moustaches, thereby rendering them more exposed to harassment and discrimination.

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