Profile

Roma, sometimes referred to as Kawliyah in Iraq, number between 50,000 and 200,000 and live primarily in isolated villages in southern Iraq, primarily in Al-Qadissiya governorate, as well as in the outskirts of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul. Though the majority of Roma are Shi’a or Sunni Muslims, they are targeted by Islamic militias because of their traditional occupations as entertainers.

Historical Context

The Roma are descendants of migrants from India who arrived in Iraq more than a thousand years ago. They are known for working as entertainers, musicians, and dancers. Under the Saddam Hussein regime, many Roma made a living by entertaining Ba’ath Party officials; some were reputed to have resorted to prostitution. The association of Roma with ‘immoral’ acts is a source of stigmatization for the entire community, even for those who do not engage in such practices.

After the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime, Roma were targeted by newly empowered Islamist militias. In 2004, the Mahdi Army, a Shi’a militia, attacked a Roma village, reducing it to rubble and displacing its residents. Hundreds of Roma families were also displaced from the Kamalia area of Baghdad, which was viewed by conservative elements as a notorious entertainment district. Reportedly, many Roma have since left Iraq to seek greater security in Jordan and the Gulf.

Current issues
Living conditions in the Roma villages in central and southern Iraq are extremely poor. There have been no efforts by the government to rebuild basic infrastructure damaged in attacks by militants. Many Roma live in windowless mud houses and do not have electricity, clean water, healthcare or even adequate food. They are also cut off from government social welfare programs, and many lack nationality documents.

Roma are also disproportionately unemployed compared to the national average, due to negative social perceptions of their community. Roma are ostracized from society at large and members of the community report that shopkeepers will not even sell goods to Roma customers. When they are able to find employment, it is often irregular or temporary. Roma women are often viewed as objects of sexual pleasure, which opens them to the risk of sexual assault. Prostitution is illegal in Iraq, meaning that women perceived to be engaged in such practices are likely to be treated poorly by security officials.

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