Profile

The Shabak are an ethnic and linguistic minority located in a handful of villages east of Mosul, in the Ninewa plains, and a small group in Mosul itself. Most Shabak consider themselves as a distinct ethnic group, neither Arab nor Kurdish. Their language, Shabaki, draws on Turkish, Persian, Kurdish and Arabic. Shabak have been in Iraq since 1502, and today are mainly farmers. Their community numbers approximately 250,000. About 70 per cent of the group identifies as Shi’a and the rest Sunni, although Shabak religious practice blends elements of Islam and local beliefs.

Historical context

According to some locals, the name Shabak is derived from Arabic *shabaka* (which means ‘inter-twining’) as an indication that the Shabak are composed of many different tribes. For political reasons, it has at times been tempting to overemphasize one of the component features of the Shabaks, and to claim that they are Arabs, Kurds or Turkmen. During the Hussein era, the government attempted to ‘Arabize’ the Shabak in an effort to consolidate control of the oil-rich north. Following the ouster of the Hussein regime, Shabak in the Ninewa plains faced harassment from some Kurdish activists. Kurds wishing to extend land claims into the Ninewa governorate claimed that Shabaks were really Kurds.

Additionally, the majority of Shabak who are Shi’a were targeted by Sunni militants. Shabak were victims to many incidents of large-scale violence after the American-led invasion and an estimated 1,300 were killed between 2003 and 2014. Those living in the disputed areas of Ninewa governorate, and especially Mosul, were targeted by militant groups attempting to provoke displacement of minorities from the area. Many Shabak who once lived in Mosul were forced to leave and seek refuge in surrounding villages due to harassment, killings and threats.
Shabak, like other minorities, suffered from the ISIS advance into Mosul and the Ninewa plains in 2014. ISIS militants kidnapped 21 Shabak from Gokjali, eastern Mosul in June 2014. Shabak properties in Mosul were marked with an ‘R’ (as opposed to an ‘N’ for ‘Nazerene’ or Christian) to signify ‘Rafida’, a term ISIS militants use to designate Shi’a Muslims and others who have ‘rejected’ their interpretation of Islam. There were also reports that Shabak, as well as Yezidis, who refused to comply with ISIS orders were tried in newly-established shari’a courts and executed. By August, an estimated 60 Shabak villages had come under the control of ISIS. There were reports of massacres and kidnappings of Shabak civilians, with an estimated 117 families killed.

Current issues

Shabak villages on the Ninewa plains are part of the disputed territories, the long-term status of which has not been decided. While the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) views these regions as forming part of an enlarged future Kurdistan, the Shabak are divided between their support for the KRG and the Iraqi government respectively. Some are in favour of transforming the Ninewa plains area into an autonomous zone for minorities. Since the advance of ISIS, many Shabak men have taken up arms, some of whom were incorporated into the Peshmerga as an all-Shabak brigade, while others joined the Quwat Sahel Ninewa militia, associated with the Shabak Democratic Assembly. While many Shabak villages have been recovered from ISIS control, thousands of Shabak remain internally displaced, spread between the Shi’a-majority areas of central and southern Iraq and the Kurdistan region.

Neither the Iraqi nor the Kurdish Constitutions mention the Shabak as a distinct ethnic group, although Iraq’s electoral law reserves one seat in the Council of Representatives for the Shabak minority. Prior to the ISIS advance, Shabak living in the Ninewa plains reported difficulty in accessing clean water, electricity, housing, healthcare and other basic services. Shabak living in the KRG-controlled area and the disputed territories reported heavy pressure to support Kurdish political aims. Since the KRG does not recognize the Shabak as a distinct ethnic group, the Shabak language is not taught in schools and is at risk of extinction.

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