Iraq - Turkmen

Profile
Turkmen claim to be the third largest ethnic group in Iraq, residing almost exclusively in the north, in an arc of towns and villages stretching from Tal Afar, west of Mosul, through Mosul, Erbil, Altun Kopru, Kirkuk, Tuz Khurmatu, Kifri and Khaniqin. Before the American-led occupation of 2003, there were anything between 600,000 and 2 million Turkmen, the former figure being the conservative estimate of outside observers and the latter a Turkmen claim. They are probably descended from Turkic garrisons or, in the Shi’a case, fugitives from early Ottoman control, although they consider themselves to be descendants of the earlier Seljuq Turks. Approximately 60 per cent are Sunni, while the remainder are Ithna’ashari or other Shi’a. Shi’a tend to live at the southern end of Turkmen settlement, and also tend to be more rural. The Turkmen speak a Turkish dialect, and have preserved their language (despite a strong linguistic Arabization policy by Saddam Hussein) but are no longer tribally organized.

Historical context
Turkmen historical origins in Iraq are tied, at least in part, to the role of protectors of the Ottoman empire from tribal raids. Early Turkmen were settled at the entrances of the valleys that gave access to the Kurdish areas, and this historic pacification role has led to strained relations with the Kurds.

Under Saddam Hussein the Turkmen were denied cultural, linguistic or political rights. The Ba’athists replaced thousands of Turkmen (and Kurdish) inhabitants of Kirkuk and its environs with Arabs. No Turkmen ever held ministerial office and the community was subject to purges, including the systematic removal of all Turkmens holding senior posts in the Kirkuk oil fields and in the army, and the assassination of many. They suffered particularly in Kirkuk and Tuz Khurmatu when the 1991 Kurdish uprising was crushed.
Although the Iraqi National Turkmen Party (established in 1988) cooperated with the Kurdish authorities in the de facto autonomous area, Turkmen relations with the Kurds were uneasy. It was the burgeoning oil industry which drew thousands of Kurdish workers into Kirkuk at the same time that some Turkmen were moving to Baghdad, thereby ending historic Turkmen preponderance in the 1950s. A similar process happened in Erbil. In 1959 Kurds and communists rioted, killing Turkmen in Kirkuk, an event which left a permanent scepticism about Kurdish political intentions. During Hussein’s Anfal campaign in 1988, Turkmen suffered alongside Kurds. It was only the fact that the regime in Baghdad was unquestionably worse that persuaded Turkmen to cooperate with the Kurdish national movement.

Tensions between Kurds and Turkmen mounted following the toppling of Saddam Hussein, with such clashes becoming manifest in Kirkuk, especially ahead of the referendum on the city’s future that was initially set for late 2007. Turkmen view Kirkuk as historically theirs and, with Turkish assistance, formed the Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITF) to prevent Kurdish control of Kirkuk. UN reports in 2006 indicated that Kurdish government and Peshmerga militia forces were policing illegally in Kirkuk and other disputed areas. These militias abducted Turkmen and Arabs, subjecting them to torture. Car bombs and shootings claimed the lives of many Turkmen civilians, as well as targeting ITF members.

The Iraqi government showed itself unable or unwilling to protect Turkmen communities from attack, while refusing to allow Turkmen to form their own security forces. In particular, Tuz Khurmatu, home to a majority-Turkmen population, suffered repeated and continuing attacks, most likely perpetrated by Sunni militants. In early 2013, over a period of only four months, Turkmen reported 556 attacks in Kirkuk, Salahuddin and Mosul alone. Eighteen Turkmen were assassinated and 11 kidnapped, and other attacks left 54 killed, 77 wounded and 87 properties damaged, including a significant number of political representatives, judges, lawyers, policemen and teachers among those targeted.

Following the gains made by ISIS in northern Iraq, members of the group carried out campaigns of terror on Shi’a Turkmen communities. On 15 June 2014, ISIS took control of the Turkmen-majority district of Tal Afar in Ninewa Governorate, where they burnt down numerous Turkmen homes. An estimated 200,000 people fled the area, the majority heading to Sinjar. On 16 June, the villages of Chardaghli, Brawchi, Karanaz and Beshir were attacked. At least 40 residents were killed and several thousand displaced. Insurgents reportedly also burnt down homes, set fire to crops, stole livestock and blew up Shi’a mosques. Human Rights Watch also reported that ISIS militants kidnapped 40 Shi’a Turkmen and expelled 950 families from the villages of Guba and Shireekhan. On 21 June, ISIS forces attacked the village of Al-Shamsiyat, abducting 26 Shi’a Turkmen, and prompting the displacement of many families.

A humanitarian emergency of particular intensity took place in the Turkmen town of Amerli in Salahuddin Governorate. The only remaining Shi’a town in the area not taken over by ISIS, the town was under siege from 15 June until 31 August 2014. Water and electricity services were cut off, leaving the town’s 20,000 residents to rely on well water. With food, cooking gas and medical supplies running out, the young, the sick and the elderly were particularly vulnerable. ISIS subjected the residents to frequent rocket attacks and periodic attempts to take over the
town. Dozens were reported to have died, including babies and pregnant women, before sufficient humanitarian aid was eventually delivered.

Whereas Shi’a Turkmen were particular targets of attack by ISIS, Sunni Turkmen were also killed in apparent extra-judicial executions by Iraqi security forces. According to reports collected by Human Rights Watch, 15 Sunni Turkmen prisoners from Tal Afar were taken by government guards from the counter-terrorism prison in Mosul on 9 June on the eve of the ISIS attack and their bodies were later found in a ravine next to al-Karama industrial district.

**Current issues**

The Turkmen remain locked in conflict with both Kurds and Arabs over the status of disputed areas to which they have historical claims. After the advance of ISIS, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) preemptively seized the city Kirkuk and put it under its de-facto control. There have been reports of Kurdish security forces expelling Turkmen IDPs from in and around Kirkuk and demolishing their temporary shelter arrangements.

The future status of Tal Afar, a Turkmen-majority district west of Mosul, is also unsettled. Tal Afar was a mixed Sunni-Shi’a Turkmen town and the site of repeated violent clashes after 2003. After ISIS took over the district in June 2014, the majority of the Shi’a Turkmen fled while many of the Sunni residents stayed. Displaced Shi’a Turkmen from Tal Afar and other districts are largely living in the south of Iraq, and most have been unable as yet to return to their homes.

Turkmen fear being left out of a future territorial settlement between Sunni and Shi’a Arabs and Kurds, and some favour some form of autonomy arrangement for the areas in which they constitute a majority. They also seek access to arms to defend themselves from attack, which is a concession they have been denied in the past.

Hundreds of Turkmen women and girls have also been abducted by ISIS, although their plight is less well known than that of the Yezidis. Many are believed to have been raped and killed by the armed group. Turkmen leaders reported in September 2016 that more than 600 Shi’a Turkmen women and children remained in ISIS captivity, their whereabouts unknown.

Turkmen leaders fear that their community is at risk of political and cultural assimilation. Although the Iraqi Constitution protects the right to education in the Turkmen language, the poor state of the country’s educational system, especially after the recent crisis, prevents Turkmen children from access to mother-tongue education in many cases. Turkmen residents of Kirkuk have been subjected to years of attacks and kidnappings, which they see as part of a strategy to induce demographic change. Many of these attacks have targeted the Turkmen intellectual class, including doctors, professors and politicians.

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