

## Iraq Overview

Updated April 2008

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### Environment

The Republic of Iraq, or ancient Mesopotamia, has an area of 169,236 square miles, and shares borders with Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to the south, Jordan to the west, Syria to the northwest, Turkey to the north, and Iran to the east. It has a very narrow section of coastline at Umm Qasr on the Persian Gulf. The country consists of mostly desert, although land along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers is fertile and lush, and some swamps remain in the southern delta, although many were intentionally drained during the 1990s. The mountainous north gives way to a flatter centre and south. Iraq has sizeable oil reserves in its north and south, estimated to be second largest in the world after those of Saudi Arabia. Those regions are majority Kurd and Shi'a, respectively; most Sunnis inhabit the oil-poor middle of Iraq.

### Peoples

Main languages: Arabic, Kurdish, Turkish

Main religions: Twelver (Ithna'ashari) Shi'a and Sunni Islam, Christianity (Eastern and Uniate Churches), Yezidi faith, Sabian faith

Main minority groups: Twelver (Ithna'ashari) Shi'as (60-65%), Sunni Arabs (20%, although estimates vary greatly and are contested), Christians (3%); Kurds (15-20%); Turkomans (3%), Chaldeans (750,000); Assyrians (225,000); Yezidis (600,000), Sabian Mandaeans (5,000 - 7,000), Faili (Shi'a Kurds), Shabak (200,000), Dom (60,000), Palestinian refugees, (25,000), Sarliya-Kakaiya; Baha'i

[Sources: CIA World Factbook 2007 for Shi'as, Kurds and Christians. Sunnis (est. based on widely circulated media reports, but claims are disputed). US CIRF 2007: Yezidis. Shabak and Sabian-Mandaeans. 2006 US CIRF report: Chaldeans, Assyrians; IRIN News, March 2005: Dom; UNHCR 2006: Palestinians ]

Iraq is composed of several ethnic and religious groups. About 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 not Shi'a Arab, Sunni Arab or Sunni Kurd, and includes ethnic Shabaks, Turkomans and Faili (Shi'a) Kurds, as well as Christians, Sabian-Mandaeans, Yezidis and Baha'is. Among ethnic Shabaks and Turkomans

are both Shi'a and Sunni adherents.

Sarliya and Kakaiya are two names for the same sect, known as Sarliya around Mosul, and more commonly as Kakaiya around Kirkuk, the two cities between which the majority are to be found. The former may be of Turkoman origin, the latter being more probably Kurds. They all use Gurani Kurdish as an in-group language. They are highly secretive about their religion, but their beliefs seem to be virtually identical with Ahl-i Haqq (see Iran). The small Sarliya community lives on the banks of the Tigris, and are mainly farmers and fishermen. The Kakaiya are more urban and educated, some of them being doctors, lawyers or teachers. The most important Kakai area in Iraq is a group of villages in the southeast of Kirkuk. Although the various Kakai communities may have lost some of their original cohesion because of the far-reaching economic and political changes, their religious practices and political loyalty to the *sayyids* appear to have remained largely intact. Kakais are generally considered a Kurdish subgroup, and their religious beliefs and practices do not seem to have been considered as heterodox as for example those of the Yezidis, who are often not even thought of as Kurds by their Sunni Kurdish neighbours.

Of a Palestinian refugee population numbering around 24,000-35,000 at the time of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, an estimated 20,000 remain. Favoured as political pawns under the regime of Saddam Hussein, this mostly Sunni minority now faces retaliatory attacks, including by Iraqi security services.

Followers of the Baha'i faith in Iraq are targeted by Islamic extremists because they don't believe Mohammed was the last prophet. For the past 30 years, Baha'i have not been allowed to have citizenship papers or travel documents, which makes it difficult for them to leave the country. The Government of Iraq confirmed in May that the rights of the Baha'i minority to residency and identity documents had been restored. In principle this decision overturns over thirty years of denial of identity of the Baha'i community in Iraq. MRG is now seeking to ascertain that the decision is being implemented in practice. Iraq's ancient Jewish community has almost entirely disappeared through emigration, its 2,600-year history at an end as a population once numbering 150,000 had dwindled to around 20 by October 2005, according to the UN.

The Dom (also called 'Gypsies') are a highly marginalized people in Iraq. There are Sunni and Shi'a Dom, who speak Arabic and/or the Domari language, which is related to Romani. Official statistics on the number of Dom in Iraq do not exist, but according to IRIN News in March 2005, Dom tribal leaders say there are more than 60,000. Dom are among the poorest minorities in Iraq, and attempt to eek by through sex work, selling alcohol, and singing and dancing are common. These activities brought some protection under the Hussein regime, but made Dom the target of religious extremists after Hussein's fall. In post-invasion Iraq, Shi'a militants of the 'Mahdi Army' in the south have targeted Dom for persecution, in some cases destroying whole villages.

## History

Iraq was formed out of the three Ottoman provinces of Basra, Baghdad and Mosul captured by Britain during 1916-18. In 1921 Britain made Iraq a monarchy under the Hashemite King Faisal, recently ousted from Syria. At the time the political separation of 'Southern Kurdistan' (that is, those Kurdish areas under British control) was still under consideration, but Faisal made its inclusion a vital precondition of accepting the crown. His reason was simple: without the predominantly Sunni Kurds, Sunni Arabs would be seriously outnumbered by Shi'a Arabs. His and every successor's regime has ensured both Sunni and Arab control. The monarchy allowed more community representation than its successors, but remained dependent on co-opting notables and chiefs. The state failed to engage minorities sufficiently. Family, tribal, ethnic or confessional loyalties still have first call on the average Iraqi citizen, although the ordeal of the Iran-Iraq War, 1980-88, did more to forge Iraqi national identity

than any other event.

In 1958 the monarchy was overthrown. For a moment it seemed possible to build a republic based upon communal and individual egalitarian principles, but the coup leader, Brigadier Qasim, became increasingly distrustful of power residing anywhere except in his own hands. After his overthrow in 1963, Arab nationalists and Ba'athists (see Syria on Ba'ath origins) took over, but the latter were soon marginalized. In 1968, however, the Ba'athists ousted the Arab nationalists and established a one-party state.

The new vice-president, Saddam Hussein, emerged as the most powerful member of the regime. He established a regime of secret police and informers so extensive that ordinary Iraqis were fearful of making any political criticisms, even in private. Having defeated the Kurds in 1975, Saddam Hussein sought to destroy the leadership of all other groups that might pose a threat to the regime. All forms of social and economic association were penetrated in order to identify and eliminate all those who dissented from the totalitarian regime now being created. When Saddam Hussein assumed the presidency in 1979 he purged hundreds of senior members from the administration, narrowing the regime to a small coterie from his home town of Tikrit, family and trusted friends. The Ba'ath became largely irrelevant to the exercise of power.

In 1980 Saddam Hussein launched a full-scale war against Iran in the belief he could rapidly defeat it. But Iran soon pushed Iraqi forces back. Hussein notoriously used chemical weapons against Iranian forces and, in the in the genocidal 'Anfal campaign' of the late 1980s, also against Iraqi Kurds, who posed a domestic threat to his regime. Iran only agreed to a cease-fire in 1988 when Western support for Iraq rendered an Iranian victory impossible. Two years later Saddam Hussein seized Kuwait and lost his western support. Iraq was put under an international trade embargo. Having failed to withdraw unconditionally, Iraqi forces were driven out of Kuwait by an American-led international coalition force. In the mid-1990s Iraq remained under embargo because of its reluctance to implement fully UN Security Council resolutions regarding weapon stocks. Despite a UN-administered 'Oil-for-Food Programme', the people of Iraq found themselves starved of food stocks and other essential commodities, and the country bankrupt. It later emerged that some senior UN officials and national governments had accepted kickbacks from the Iraqi government in exchange for political favours and diversion of funds to Saddam Hussein's regime. Kurdish northern Iraq, however, entered into a period of relative calm and economic stability under autonomous rule, largely protected from regime attacks by a no-fly zone, and putting its share of the oil-for-food funds to better use.

Although the Gulf War saw coalition forces push toward Baghdad, and there was a possibility that they would move into the capital and overthrow Saddam Hussein, President George Bush Sr did not go through with this and pulled out. However, before doing so, he encouraged Iraqis to rise against Hussein, with the promise that the USA would support their campaigns. However, this did not materialize at all, and led to pogroms and massacres against the Marsh Arabs and largely Shi'a groups in the south of the country. Hussein mounted reprisal killings of many Iraqis, a campaign of extermination comparable in some sense to the previous Anfal campaign against the Kurds in the north when wholesale towns and populations were destroyed by Saddam Hussein's forces. The West turned a blind eye to such pogroms, but maintained economic sanctions against the regime and launched occasional military strikes against Hussein's military.

In March 2003, however, the US, supported by the UK and several other allies, launched a massive invasion of Iraq without UN authorization. The Bush administration sold the war on two pretexts that were subsequently revealed to be categorically false - that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction that threatened not only the region but also the West, and that through connections with al-Qaeda, Hussein was linked to the 11 September 2001 terror attacks on New York and Washington. It quickly emerged

that the Bush and Blair governments had manipulated sceptical intelligence reports on these matters in order to support a political decision to launch a war for Hussein's removal.

Baghdad quickly fell to the invasion force; but as formal military resistance collapsed, a Sunni insurgency was born. Meanwhile, the Shi'a majority, tasting power for the first time in the country's history, formed its own militant organizations, some with deep ties to new government structures, and the Kurds organized to maintain and expand control over the north with its oil wealth. After four years of bloody fighting, deaths - largely of Iraqi civilians - numbering in the hundreds of thousands, and the displacement of millions, the situation is more unstable than it was before the invasion.

## **Governance**

Like most Middle Eastern societies, under Saddam Hussein the social structure of Iraq operated on patronage networks - either through extended families and tribal structures or through other solidarity groups. This has made the effort to transition to an open, democratic and representative society a formidable task.

Following the ouster of Saddam Hussein's government, an American-led 'Coalition Provisional Authority' (CPA) took responsibility for administering the government. What goodwill the occupying powers gained by overthrowing Hussein, who was widely despised by Shi'as and Kurds, quickly dissipated. Inadequate numbers of foreign troops stood by as government buildings were looted by mobs and public order deteriorated. Massive munitions depots throughout Iraq were left unguarded, even as CPA administrator Paul Bremer disbanded the majority Sunni Iraqi army, Interior ministry force and presidential guard in May 2003. Overnight, the move rendered 720,000 armed Iraqi men unemployed at a time when Sunni insurgents were organizing to avert majority Shi'a rule and against the foreign presence that made it possible. Abuses by American and other international forces in Iraq, notably the use of torture and humiliation against detainees at the Abu Ghraib prison, enraged Iraqis, strengthening Sunni insurgents and Shi'a militias alike.

An American-installed Iraqi Interim Government replaced the CPA when the March 2004 Law of Administration for the State of Iraq for the Transitional Period became operational in June 2004. Ethnic and sectarian quotas used to constitute the new government left Sunnis feeling under-represented. Most Sunnis boycotted elections for the National Assembly in January 2005, and Shi'as and Kurds controlled the new Iraqi Transitional Government under Iyad Allawi, a Shi'a, that replaced the Interim government in May 2005. Shi'a-dominated government security forces responded to military and terrorist attacks by Sunni insurgents with fierce brutality against Sunni communities. Mutual campaigns of ethnic cleansing targeting Sunni and Shi'a communities were in full swing.

Parliament approved the draft of a new constitution in August 2005, followed by its adoption through a popular referendum in October 2005. December 2005 elections to select a first full-term parliament occurred with greater Sunni participation, albeit in a campaign marred by ongoing sectarian and ethnic violence. It took until May 2006 for the new National Assembly to select Shi'a Nuri Kamal al-Maliki as Iraqi prime minister. (President Jalal Talabani is Kurdish and Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi is Sunni.)

The new constitution defined the system of government in Iraq as federal, with significant implications for majority-minority relations, at a time when the very definition of who constitutes a 'minority' in Iraq was shifting. In terms of their political marginalization, Kurds and Arab Shi'a were minorities in Ba'athist Iraq, but now it was Arab Sunnis who feared such marginalization from power.

Federalism has long been the most contentious issue within the Iraqi constitutional debate. The issues of

oil revenue and federalism are intricately linked. Most Sunnis live in Iraq's oil-poor middle, giving the community a strong incentive to support central governance and maximum oil revenue sharing—especially if they can revive their longstanding political dominance. Kurds and Shi'a are predominant in the oil-rich north and south, respectively, and thus have a strong incentive to oppose strong central institutions and cross-regional revenue sharing. Whereas the Shi'a have a numerical majority in the country as a whole and new access to political power at the centre, there is less drive among them for regional autonomy. Meanwhile the Kurds have been the most vocal and insistent regarding federalism, keen to maintain or even enhance their autonomy as enjoyed through the Transitional Law under the Kurdistan Regional Government.

The constitution states that Iraq's oil and gas resources belong to the whole population and will be administered by the federal authorities in cooperation with the governments of the producing regions and provinces, and in a way that will ensure balanced development throughout the country. However, despite immense American pressure, the al-Maliki government has been unable to forge a consensus on a crucial oil bill in parliament.

Article 4 of the Transitional Law stated that 'the federal system shall be based upon geographic and historical realities and the separation of powers, and not upon origin, race, ethnicity, nationality, or confession'. However, the constitution does not contain this clause. It outlines the powers of the federal authorities in Chapter 4, stating that the federal authority will maintain the unity of Iraq.

Iraq's neighbours have taken an interest in Iraq's struggle with compromise over federalism. Shi'a-majority Iran and Sunni-majority Saudi Arabia have observed Shi'a-Sunni tensions with interest and concern, and Kurdish autonomy in Iraq potentially affects Turkey's relationship with its Kurdish population. In September 2005, the Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister voiced fears that Iraq could split apart, disenfranchise its Sunni population and draw neighbouring countries into a wider conflict.

Much NGO activism and media attention have focused on the question of the protection of religious minorities in the new draft constitution. The fear was that reference to Islam as 'the main' source of legislation rather than 'a' source of legislation along with other sources of law (as stated in the Transitional Law) would compromise the rights of religious minorities by imposing Sharia law. The constitution, however, reverted to the term of Islam being 'a' basic source of legislation in its Article 2. Religious minorities were further concerned about the reference that no law could be introduced in Iraq that contradicted the rules of Islam, as it could be used to repress minority rights and forbid conversion from Islam to other religions. It could further be interpreted to degrade women's rights, as it does in other Muslim countries such as Pakistan. The constitution maintains language that no law can conflict with the rules of Islam, but also cannot conflict with the principles of democracy or the rights and freedoms upheld in the constitution. Article 2 further guarantees full religious rights for all, while maintaining the Islamic identity of the majority, and recognizing Iraq as a multi-ethnic as well as multi-religious country. Since the Iraqi Supreme Federal Court has the duty to oversee the constitutionality of all legislation, it is tasked with ensuring that all three strands - of Islam, democracy and rights - are upheld. Ideally, this will bring about a balanced consideration of all three criteria in all legislation, although legal norms in themselves will not be able to secure minority rights in Iraq. For example, the constitution prohibits all coercion in matters of thought and religion as did the Transitional Law of Administration; however, this provision has been ineffectual in light of the fact that tens of thousands of minorities have fled Iraq since March 2003.

Linguistic minorities were concerned that only the Arabic and Kurdish languages were being overtly protected in earlier constitutional drafts - Arabic as the official language of Iraq, but Kurdish as well as Arabic in the Kurdish region. This left out clear protection for Iraq's Turkomans, for example, and concern surrounds the survival of the language and the continuation of their schools. The final

constitution establishes Arabic and Kurdish as official languages but, guarantees in Article 4 the right of Iraqis to educate their children in their mother tongue in governmental or private educational institutions. Further, it recognizes the Turkoman and Assyrian languages as official where they reside, and allows each region to recognize further official languages by referendum.

Women's rights are a matter of grave concern. In an environment where armed militants are rampant, and many of these espouse strict interpretations of Shi'a or Sunni Islam, many women are being forced to cover themselves - even non-practising Muslims and Christians. Many Christian women students are opting out of higher education in order to escape the restrictive practices being demanded of them.

## **Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples**

In July 2007 the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that two million Iraqis had become refugees and two million more internally displaced since March 2003. The agency further estimated that 2,000 additional Iraqis continued to be displaced every day. Most of the refugees have fled to Jordan and Syria, which have taken in some 500,000 and 1.5 million Iraqis, respectively - according to the UN, nearly a third of these refugees come from minority communities.

Iraqis fleeing insecurity and dire economic conditions have encountered new political and physical barriers at foreign borders. Some groups have found escape especially difficult, notably the Palestinian minority. For the internally displaced, new barriers also arose. In October, UNHCR announced that 11 of 18 Iraqi provincial governors had closed their territories to internally displaced persons from other provinces, and that any new arrivals would be denied government support for food and education.

## **Sectarian violence**

Shi'a and Sunni Arabs living as numerical minorities among a majority of the other community face severe threats in all parts of the country, targeted by militias vying for power and land, or exacting retribution for attacks from the other side. Sectarian violence has been especially fierce ever since February 2006 when Sunni militants bombed one of the holiest Shi'a mosques in Samarra. Many in the Shi'a numerical majority are eager to consolidate control over the country, while long-dominant Sunnis fear persecution as a minority. The December 2006 hanging of Saddam Hussein following a war crimes trial deemed deeply flawed by human rights advocates did nothing to dampen those fears. In August 2007, the main Sunni block withdrew from Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's government, accusing him of sectarianism. By October, despite intense international pressure, the Iraqi government still had not reached agreement on how the country's oil revenues should be shared; Sunnis, predominantly from the country's oil-poor centre, fear efforts by Shi'a and Kurds to keep revenues in the oil-rich south and north.

Radical Shi'a militias have overt backers in government, and have infiltrated the Iraqi National Police and, to a lesser extent, the Iraqi Army; from within the security services and without, death squads and militias continue to target Sunni civilians. They have also particularly targeted the Palestinian community in Iraq for abduction, torture and murder. Palestinians are Sunni, and under Saddam Hussein received privileged treatment in the country. The US alleges that Iran is providing support to some of the militants. In overwhelmingly Shi'a southern Iraq, Shi'a militias have fought each other for resources and power.

Many of the Sunni attacks on Shi'a have been perpetrated by foreign-led militias, including 'Al Qaeda in Iraq', and have often featured car bombs and suicide attacks. In February, a bomb at a Shi'a market in Baghdad killed 137; in April five car bombs targeting Shi'a in Baghdad killed 200 people in a single day. As part of an announced offensive during the holy month of Ramadan, Sunni militants conducted a

wave of suicide bombings and other attacks in September. During 2007, the US military began arming and training militias loyal to Sunni traditional tribal leaders, some of whom are hostile to foreign Sunni militants. Shi'a leaders have been wary of the tactic, worrying that support for Sunni militarization could eventually further sectarian attacks on their communities.

The ongoing sectarian violence has continued the process of segregation between Shi'a and Sunni Iraqis. In 2007 the government intervened to try to shore-up the common practice of mixed sectarian marriage in Iraq by introducing cash bonuses for newly married, mixed Sunni-Shi'a couples. Meanwhile, Baghdad real-estate agents experienced a boom in arranging housing exchanges between Shi'a and Sunni minorities in Baghdad neighbourhoods. As the city and country become more segregated, life for remaining sectarian minorities has become more perilous.

International forces, mostly American, have been reluctant to take action on behalf of smaller minority groups, especially as political desperation to find a way out of the quagmire in Iraq has increasingly meant finding accommodation with the three dominant groups, elements of which are usually responsible for targeting smaller groups. Additionally, smaller minorities for the most part have no militias of their own, and must rely on police who are often corrupt or themselves perpetrators of ethnic and sectarian violence.

### **Attacks on non-Muslims**

Iraq's Christian minorities, from the ancient communities of Chaldo-Assyrians and Syriac-speaking Orthodox Christians to the Armenians who fled to Iraq from the Ottoman Empire early in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, are now all under severe threat. Across Iraq, Shi'a and Sunni Islamic extremists have singled out Christian families, often forcing them to pay protection money. When the funds run out, they are given a choice of converting, fleeing or dying. Among Christians who stay, women are forced to wear the Muslim *abaya* body covering. Death threats forced the last Anglican vicar, a British citizen, to flee Iraq in July 2007. He testified before the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (US CIRF) that in a single week earlier in July, 36 of his congregants had been kidnapped. In January 2008, there were nearly simultaneous bomb attacks targeting four churches in Baghdad, two in Kirkuk and three in Mosul. The Chaldean Catholic archbishop of Mosul was abducted in February and found dead in March 2008. In April 2008, gunmen shot dead an Assyrian Orthodox priest in Baghdad.

While many Christians have fled abroad, others have moved to the relatively calmer north. Reports indicate that 3,000 Christian families have left Baghdad and moved to the Kurdish territories, whilst another 4,000 have moved to the Nineveh Plains. The new arrivals often lack employment, schools and housing. There has been talk that some Christian communities - especially the umbrella Assyrian ones - are lobbying for a separate entity in the Nineveh Plains just north of Mosul. Discussions continue over the shape of any such entity and what degree of self-governance it would take on. While representatives of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) have said they support the creation of a 'Nineveh Province' within Kurdistan, the US government has opposed the idea, saying it would 'further sectarianism'.

2007 was a year of devastation for Yezidis, ethnic and linguistic Kurds who are adherents of a 4,000-year-old, pre-Islamic faith. Following a *fatwa*, or religious instruction from a Sunni militant group called 'Islamic State of Iraq' calling for the deaths of Yezidis, suspected Sunni militants pulled 23 Yezidi men from a bus and executed them April 2007. The same group of extremists perpetrated the single most devastating terrorist attack of the Iraq war in August 2007; four truck bombs killed almost 500 Yezidis in two villages in the Nineveh Plains, along the Syrian border. The area is strategically important disputed territory. Following the US offensive against Sunni insurgents to the south, reports indicate that

'Al Qaeda in Iraq' has increased its presence in this region. Many Yezidis have fled the country and those who remain are now fearful of travel outside of their communities. Yezidi farmers are losing their livelihoods because they can no longer travel to markets to sell their produce. In October, the New York Times reported that security fears had led Yezidis to stop performing religious ceremonies.

Sabian MandaeanMandaeans, who practice an ancient Gnostic faith, face extinction as a people. Around 80 per cent of the population has been expelled or killed since 2003. According to testimony before the US CIRF by the head of the Mandaean Associations Union in July, only 5,000 adherents remain in Iraq. Despite Sabian MandaeanMandaeans' recognition under Islamic law as a people to be protected, Sh'ia and Sunni Islamic militants have targeted the group. This is made all the easier, as it is prohibited by its beliefs from attempting self-defence. Hundreds of killings, abductions and incidents of torture have often been accompanied by rhetoric accusing Sabians of witchcraft, impurity, and systematic adultery. Sabian Mandaean women have been targeted for rape and death for refusing to cover their heads. In Baghdad, Mandaean goldsmiths, silversmiths and jewellers have been targeted for theft and murder at much higher rates than their Muslim colleagues.

Iraqi women have born a particular burden on the basis of gender discrimination. A great number of widows have found few opportunities to make money. The Iraqi government estimates that mixed marriages between Sunni and Shi'a Arabs account for nearly a third of all marriages in Iraq. Sunni and Shi'a militants and families have forced many of these mixed sectarian marriages to end, throwing more women into economic uncertainty. Women across Iraq, many of them non-Muslims, have reported numerous death threats for failing to fully cover their heads and bodies in line with strict Islamic teachings. Kidnappings, rapes and sexual slavery of women have also increased.

### **Conflict in the north**

The Kurds in the north have autonomous rule, with centres in Erbil and Suleimaniyyeh, and are drafting a local constitution for the Kurdish areas. Kurdish aspirations for an independent Kurdistan are anathema to Iran, Syria and Turkey, all of which have neighbouring Kurdish minorities who, they fear, would seek to join such a new state. Over the course of 2007, Turkey grew increasingly concerned about attacks on its territory conducted by militants of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), which uses northern Iraq as a refuge. In August, Turkey and Iraq signed an agreement on co-ordination of efforts to combat the PKK, but cross-border incursions by the PKK continued in September and October. In November Turkey moved 100,000 troops and heavy weapons to the border and the prospect of Turkish involvement in Iraq threatened to roil the relatively calm north, where small minorities have suffered the most from what violence has occurred in that region. Through intense US diplomacy with Turkey and pressure on the Iraqi Kurdish government to block support to the PKK, it was hoped that such a scenario could be avoided.

Violence between Kurds and Arabs increased during 2007, as a referendum slated for the end of the year on the future status of the oil-rich town of Kirkuk neared. The Iraqi constitution provides for the referendum to decide on whether Kirkuk province will join the autonomous Kurdistan Region. In April the central government approved an incentive package for Sunni Arabs forcibly settled in Kirkuk under Saddam Hussein to return to their original homelands in the south. According to an Iraqi minister, by October around 1,000 Sunni Arab families had accepted the approximately USD 15,000 payment to leave their Kirkuk homes. Yet, whilst Kurds view Kirkuk as the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, many Arabs and Turkomans oppose the idea, and smaller minorities including Shabak, Faili, Armenians and Chaldo-Assyrian Christians have been caught in the middle. Forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government along with Kurdish militias have targeted Turkomans and Arabs, including through tactics of abduction and torture. Increasingly, Sunni Arab militants opposed to Kirkuk joining Kurdistan have launched attacks on Kurdish targets.

Turkomans view Kirkuk as historically theirs. Out of its opposition to the Kurds gaining control of Kirkuk and the likewise-disputed oil-town of Mosul, Turkey has provided backing for Turkoman militias that are confronting Kurdish forces. Apart from the competition for land, Turkomans have been targeted on sectarian grounds, with women facing particular vulnerability. In June 2007, four Shi'a Iraqi soldiers were charged with the rape of a Sunni Turkoman woman in Tel Afar-one of many such reported incidents. In July 2007 a marketplace bomb attack on Shi'a Turkomans killed between 130 and 210 civilians, mostly women and children.

Kurdish militants have also harassed the small ethnic Shabak community; in the interests of extending land claims in the northern Nineveh governate, these Kurds assert that despite Shabaks' distinct language and recognition as an ethnic group, Shabaks are really Kurds. Additionally, the majority of Shabak who are Shi'a have been targeted by Sunni militants. In July 2007 a Shabak MP claimed that Sunni militants had killed around 1,000 Shabak and displaced a further 4,000 from the Mosul area since 2003.

Faili, who are Shi'a Kurds, also face threats on sectarian grounds. A July 2007 truck bomb at a café frequented by Faili in the town of Amirli killed 105 and injured nearly 250 more. Journalists linked the bombing to the forthcoming referendum on Kurdish autonomy.

### **Grim prospects**

Despite the election of a Parliament and the drafting of a constitution, the prospect of full-scale civil war between Shi'a militias and Sunni insurgents that threatens the very existence of Iraq as a country, is still very real. A 'surge' of around 28,000 additional American troops was meant to restore order in the country. Reported drops in levels of violence in Baghdad by the end of 2007 offered tentative hope - but clearly the country has a long road to travel before it climbs out of the post-invasion abyss. And the success of the surge strategy is by no means assured. Opposition to the war in the US has grown dramatically, and the Bush administration is facing ever stronger calls for force draw-down and withdrawal. In October, the British government announced that it would withdraw 1,000 troops, or 20 per cent of its force, from Iraq by the end of the year.

### **Iraqi refugees**

According to UN figures, nearly a third of the two million Iraqis who have fled the country come from the country's smaller minority groups. Beyond individual survival, these groups fear for the survival of their cultures.

Faced with systematic pressure to convert, leave, or die, many Sabian MandaeanMandaeans have chosen to leave. As their small community is scattered throughout the world, Sabian MandaeanMandaeans' ancient language, culture and religion face the threat of extinction. In 2006, UNESCO listed the Sabian Mandaean language in its *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing*. Some Sabian Mandaean leaders have pleaded with international authorities for group resettlement in order to preserve traditional practices.

Likewise, according to a Kurdish government official in October 2007, at least 70,000 Yezidis, or 15 per cent of the group's population, have fled the country. Iraq's ancient and once sizeable Jewish community has all but entirely emigrated, with only a handful of Jews remaining in Baghdad.

Many Iraqi Christians also are emigrating in disproportionately large numbers. According to UNHCR, while Christians make up 4% of the overall Iraqi population, they constitute 40% of Iraqi refugees. According to the Iraqi non-governmental Christian Peace Organisation, a Christian minority of 850,000

in 2003 has been whittled down to under 600,000 today. In May 2007, United States Commission on International Religious Freedom estimated that up to half of all Iraqi Christians had left the country.

For Iraqis fleeing the devastation of war, Syria has been a prime destination. Since March 2003 the country has taken in around 1.5 million Iraqis and by one Syrian NGO estimate in August 2007, as many as two million. The refugees have swelled Syria's population by 8-10 per cent and the government estimates that the burden, including accommodation of Iraqi children in schools, has cost it one billion USD each year. The influx has caused increases in the prices of housing and basic commodities. Assistance provided by UNHCR and other international agencies has not come close to covering the needs, and many Iraqi refugees are falling into poverty and despair. Homelessness is becoming a major problem, and some desperate Iraqis are turning to begging or crime to get by. Many of the Iraqi refugees are destitute widows, and some have turned to sex work to survive.

Since it allowed 300 Palestinian refugees from Iraq to enter in April-May 2006, the Syrian government has singled out this group for denial of entry. By March 2008, around 2,700 Iraqi Palestinians were living in three camps at the Iraqi-Syrian border - fleeing Shi'a militia attacks at home and refused permission to enter Syria. Despite assistance from UNHCR and the International Committee for the Red Cross, Palestinians are living in squalid desert camps, prone to blazing desert heat and sand storms, and lacking adequate water supplies. In May 2007 UNHCR appealed for international assistance in providing health-care at the camps, noting that some Palestinian Iraqis were dying of treatable illnesses. In March 2008 the agency appealed for immediate relocation of refugees with medical conditions following 12 deaths over 14 months in one camp alone.

Jordan has admitted more Iraqi refugees per capita than any other country, with estimates ranging from 500,000 to one million. As in Syria, the influx has placed a heavy burden on the government, while driving up housing prices and the cost of basic goods. Many of the Iraqi refugees, disproportionately from Iraq's smaller ethnic and religious minority groups, live in poverty. Unemployment rates are high, in part because the refugees are ineligible for work in the public sector. With a higher cost of living, especially in Amman, increasing numbers of Iraqis have turned to begging.

Until February 2007 Jordan still had no visa requirement for entry of Iraqi citizens, which helped make the country one of the prime destinations for those fleeing persecution. Beyond instituting a new passport requirement, ever since the 2005 suicide bomb attack perpetrated by Iraqis on hotels in Amman, the Jordanian government has feared the import of sectarian violence and routinely turned away Iraqi males between the ages of 18 and 45 ]. In April 2007, Human Rights Watch documented the systematic rejection of Iraqi Shi'as at the border, as well as increasing police sweeps and repatriation of Iraqi refugees.

Although the US-led invasion triggered the conflict that has led to mass displacement, by July 2007 the US had only admitted 825 Iraqi refugees, while between 2003 and 2005 the UK had only let in 100. Iraqis working for these and other western governments, international organizations, NGOs and international media outlets have been targeted by extremists; because many of the Iraqis willing to take such work are non-Muslims, these minorities have been disproportionately affected. As the number of Iraqis working at the US embassy killed or claiming asylum status abroad rose, in July 2007, the American ambassador pleaded with Washington to grant refugee visas to all local embassy staff and their families. A bill liberalizing the asylum process for Iraqis associated with US or US-backed institutions passed the US Senate in September, and included special allowances for Iraqis from minority religious groups. Sweden has admitted nearly half of the estimated 20,000 Iraqi refugees who have been allowed to settle in western countries. Many of the thousands of refugees in Sweden are Assyrians and other Christians.