

Turkomans

Updated April 2008

Profile

The Iraqi Turkomans 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 Tel Afar, west of Mosul, through Mosul, Erbil, Altun Kopru, Kirkuk, Tuz Khurmatu, Kifri and Khaniqin. Before the war that began in March 2003, there were anything between 600,000 and 2 million Turkomans, the former figure being the conservative estimate of outside observers and the latter a Turkoman claim. They are probably descended from Turkic garrisons or, in the Shi'a case, fugitives from early Ottoman control, although they claim to be descendents of the earlier Seljuq Turks. Approximately 60 per cent are Sunni, while the balance are Ithna'ashari or other Shi'a. Shi'as tend to live at the southern end of Turkoman settlement, and also tend to be more rural. Tiny extreme Shi'a communities (for example, Sarliyya and Ibrahimiyah) exist in Tuz Khurmatu, Ta'uq, Qara Tapa, Taza Khurmatu, Bashir and Tisin, and Tel Afar. The Turkomans, 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

Turkoman historical origins in Iraq are tied, at least in part, to the role of protectors of the Ottoman empire from tribal raids. Early Turkomans 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 Turkomans were denied cultural, linguistic or political rights. The Ba'athists replaced thousands of Turkoman (and Kurdish) inhabitants of Kirkuk and its environs with Arabs. In the past, no Turkoman had ever held ministerial office since the foundation of the state. They have been subject to purges, including the systematic removal of all Turkomans 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.

However, although the Iraqi National Turkoman Party (established in 1988) cooperated with the Kurdish authorities in the de facto autonomous area, Turkoman 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 Turkomans were moving to Baghdad, thereby ending historic Turkoman preponderance in the 1950s. A similar process happened in Erbil. In 1959 Kurds and communists rioted, killing Turkomans in Kirkuk, an event which left a permanent scepticism about Kurdish political intentions. During Hussein's Anfal campaign in 1988, Turkomans suffered alongside Kurds. It was only the fact that the regime in Baghdad was unquestionably worse that persuaded Turkomans to cooperate with the Kurdish national movement.

Current issues

Although some have been able to preserve their language, the Iraqi Turkomans today are being rapidly assimilated into the general population and are no longer tribally organized. Tensions between Kurds and Turkomans mounted following the toppling of Saddam Hussein, with such clashes becoming manifest in Kirkuk, especially ahead of the referendum on the city's future set for late 2007. Turkomans view Kirkuk as historically theirs and, with Turkish assistance, have formed the Iraqi Turkman 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 have abducted Turkomans and Arabs, subjecting them to torture. Car bombs and shootings have claimed the lives of many Turkoman civilians, as well as targeting ITF members.

Beyond competition for Kirkuk, both Sunni and Shi'a Turkomans have been targeted on sectarian grounds, and women Turkomans confront particular vulnerability. In June 2007, four Iraqi soldiers were charged with the rape of a Sunni Turkoman woman in Tel Afar-one of many such reported incidents.