

The UN and the Assyrians of Iraq

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The UN recently issued two documents. Both documents are important and related in one way or another to the Assyrians and their future on their ancestral lands in Iraq (Mesopotamia) in general and in northern Iraq (Assyria) in particular.

On October 11, 2007, the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) issued its eleventh report on the human rights situation in Iraq, covering the period from April 1 to June 30, 2007 quarter. The report states:

"Having been forced to abandon their homes, many are living in dire conditions without access to adequate food supplies and basic services, with children being particularly vulnerable to disease."

It warns of growing displacement stating that,

"Large-scale displacement of Iraqi civilians continued due to the ongoing violence, including direct death threats, abductions or killings, in many parts of Iraq." The report notes that the, "UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that some 2.2 million Iraqis are currently refugees abroad, around half of whom are in Syria."

The report states that civilians continue to be targeted by armed groups through suicide bombings, abductions and extra-judicial executions. It warns that such systematic or widespread attacks against a civilian population are tantamount to crimes against humanity and violate the laws of war.

I need to stress that according to many sources an estimated 35-40% of the Iraqi 2.2 million refugees abroad are Christians, who are mainly Assyrians (also known as Chaldeans and Syriacs). Furthermore, an article in Al-Nahar Lebanese Newspaper (quoting The Washington Times) stated that one-third of the Christians in Iraq have left the country due to the Islamists' threats. This was also confirmed by the Iraqi al-Najaf News Network. Although most Iraqis are suffering today, with the exception of the Kurds perhaps, the high percentage of the Christian refugees reflects a disproportionately greater suffering by the Christians in the Iraqi conflict since they made around 5% of the total population of Iraq prior to the 2003 U.S. invasion, but make 35-40% of the total refugees. Worth considering that unlike the Christians, all other factions and political groups have their own militias. For example, the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (SIIC) has the Badr militias, the movement of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr has the Mehdi Army, the Kurds have the Peshmerga, etc.

Additionally, the Assyrian Christians have been displaced and forced out from their traditional regions. The UNAMI report states:

"The situation of minority communities in Iraq deteriorated significantly since mid-April in many parts of the country. Representatives of several Christian churches reported a rise of sectarian attacks on Christian families in Baghdad's al-Dora district. By the end of June, the number of displaced Christian families from the Baghdad area reached 1,200, according to church sources. UNAMI interviewed a number of these families, who stated that armed groups identifying themselves as Mujahidin of al-Dora, the Omar Brigade, Nusrat al-Islam and Ansar al-Sunna claimed uncontested control over different parts of al-Dora district, while threatening, abducting, looting and killing residents at will."

The report goes on to state:

"In June, UNAMI interviewed twenty Christian displaced persons from al-Dora. All those interviewed said they had received death threats, while some had had one or several of their family members killed. They described how people were killed and their bodies left on the streets for several days before an MNF or Iraqi police patrol picked them up."

The majority of the Assyrians that fled their homes in Dora have done so empty handed as they were prevented from carrying any of their belongings with them.

On July 26, 2007, British MP Mike Hancock tabled a Parliamentary Question (153462) in the House of Commons concerning the persecution of Christians in Baghdad and Dora. Meg Munn of the Foreign Office acknowledged the serious problem facing the Christians and promised to follow up on the issue with the Iraqi Government. Little, if anything, has been done since. The Assyrians in Baghdad have been told to convert to Islam or be killed. Hundreds of those who could not afford to flee the country are living in churches without adequate food or water, wrote Julia Duin for The Washington Times (July 26, 2007). Duin was quoting Canon Andrew White, vicar of St. George's Anglican Church in Baghdad. The situation is getting worse as more and more Assyrians are fleeing to either the relatively peaceful Kurdish region or to Syria and Jordan.

The systematic and meticulous marginalization of the Assyrians has intensified since 2003. This was reflected in the wording of the Iraqi Constitution. Only the Assyrians were not mentioned in the Preamble despite mentioning Arabs, Kurds, Turkomans specifically. More recently, on May 3, 2007, Secretary General of the ADM, Mr. Younadam Kanna, protested the manner the Iraqi parliament selected and appointed the nine original members of the new Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq (IECI). He stated that the whole selection process is an insult to the Christian citizens and we wished that it did not happen in this manner in the new Iraq. He asked: why would a Christian be selected as the fourth standby or substitute member? Is the Christian a second-class Iraqi citizen? This whole process was an insult to a large Iraqi group [Assyrians] and second largest religion in Iraq [Christians]. The nine new original members included (4) Shi'aa Arab Muslims, (2) Sunni Arab Muslims, (2) Kurdish Muslims and (1) Turkoman Muslim.

Meanwhile, in northern Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) continues its totalitarian policies against non-Kurds and against those who are not supportive of the two powerful Kurdish political parties, The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of Barzani and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) of Talabani.

In regards to Freedom of Expression in the three northern Iraq provinces under Kurdish control, for example, UNAMI states:

"UNAMI urges the KRG authorities to respond to individual cases raised with them involving threats against or arrest of media professionals in the Kurdistan region, including those who had reported on public interest issues. The authorities should clarify the legal basis and reasons for such arrests, and any persons detained should be accorded their rights under the law. No person should be held unless charged with a cognizable offence and referred to court."

Furthermore, in regards to the Situation of Minorities in northern Iraq, the report states:

"During the reporting period, UNAMI continued to receive renewed claims of persecution and discrimination of Assyrians and Turkoman in Kirkuk and Mosul by armed groups."

The Assyrian Christians, the indigenous people of Iraq, face complete extermination; they face policies of ethnic cleaning. The Kurds continue to open offices for their political groups and militias in purely Assyrian towns. The KDP forces Assyrians to raise Kurdish flags even on private Assyrian homes at times. The KDP does not allow businesses to acquire historic Assyrian names or display business banners in the Assyrian language (AINA, 3-10-2007). In Bartella, an Assyrian town near Mosul, efforts are being made to build a Hussainiyya (a Shi'aa mosque) by individuals who built another mosque during Saddam's era. This is being planned despite the fact that this town is within the region that is under Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution. The Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) raised this issue during a recent meeting with Dr. Hunayn al-Qaddo, Iraqi Member of Parliament and Head of Minorities Council. Of course, Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution (based on Article 58 of the Transitional Administrative Law) demands from the elected Iraqi executive authority to complete the normalization of Kirkuk and other disputed territories through census and referendum by a date not exceeding December 31, 2007. In other words, the future of Nineveh Plains and whether it should be annexed to the semi-autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq is at the balance. Now, whether this process will be completed in the next couple of months as instituted in Article 140 is to be seen, still, the plan is in motion.

While members of the special committee that is implementing Article 140 are meant to be impartial, different ethnic groups accuse the committee of being biased and influenced by Kurds. Many of these accusations have come from representatives of the non-Kurdish Arab, Turkoman and Assyrian groups in northern Iraq who believe that Article 140 supports Kurdish interests. Under the pretext of reversing the forced Arabization campaign, between 100,000 to 150,000 Kurds have entered Kirkuk (many even from

outside Iraq), thus altering the city's demographics in their favor. The KDP and PUK have planned this earlier through their Peshmerga (Kurdish irregular armed forces) as they entered government buildings and destroyed government records (including grant deeds records and other records) after the collapse of Saddam's regime in 2003. Thus, it is much easier for Kurds to make claims as suits their national interests.

The implementation of Article 140 today would most likely result in a Kurdish majority and Kirkuk will most likely be annexed into the KRG. On October 21, 2006, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki was compelled to appoint a Turkoman to the committee after the Turkomans complained vigorously that Article 140 only served Kurdish interests, (see "RFE/RL Newline," October 22, 2006), the Kurds protested and were very angry. Why are the Kurds angry? Why not have an Assyrian and a Turkoman on the committee? Why are the Kurds controlling all committees, councils, etc.? Are they the only oppressed minority in Iraq? How about the Yezidis and the Shabaks? How about Iraq's indigenous people of modern Iraq, the Assyrians?

On May 8, 2007, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament met with Mr. Massoud Barzani, President of the KRG region in northern Iraq. Mr. Ablahad Astepho, representative of the Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO) -- European Office, attended the meeting. Although only members of the Foreign Affairs Committee had the right to question and participate in the debate and discussion, the Assyrian European lobby was given the opportunity to present prepared and written questions that addressed Mr. Barzani. After a general introduction on the situation of Iraq, questions were posed to Mr. Barzani, almost a half dozen of which dealt with minority rights, especially those of the Assyrians and Turkmen under the control of the KRG. The questions put forth were of concerns regarding where the non-Kurds would fit into the planned referendum for the contested city of Kirkuk. Mr. Barzani responded by stating that the new Kurdish regional constitution will guarantee the rights of all groups living in the region and that all groups will be able to vote freely and according to their own conscience in the referendum for Kirkuk. Additionally, Mr. Barzani underlined that his "government was adamant to adhere to the unity of Iraq as long as every party respected the Iraqi Constitution" and argued that "separation of religion and state is necessary" for a functioning Iraqi state. Mr. Barzani talks the talk but does not walk the walk. He and the KRG are fully involved in, for example, allowing churches and clergymen to meddle in Assyrian political and national matters and is undermining and marginalizing the officially elected ADM representatives through the 2005 national elections. The latest Kurdish region draft constitution preamble neglects to mention the Assyrians and their rooted history in northern Iraq. It separates the Assyrian people into "Assyrians and Chaldeans" and its wording is very vague in regards to many rights.

I need to stress that the KRG's acts of discrimination, persecution and oppression against the Assyrians, as an ethnic and not as a religious group, have continued since its original establishment in 1992, but intensified since 2003 US invasion. The KRG uses individual Assyrians that are members of the Kurdish political parties, sympathetic to Kurds or sold out to the KDP to represent the Assyrians. It was proven that the KDP had rigged the Iraqi national elections of January and December 2005 (AINA 1-31-2005, 2-10-2005).

Many ballot boxes from areas populated by Christians and Yezidis were stolen without any action or response by local, regional or central authorities. The KRG is marginalizing the winner in those elections, the ADM, and for all practical purposes kept it out of the political process. The KRG filled certain ministerial cabinets with Assyrians that support the KRG, are members of the Kurdish political parties or those who have failed to show in the two elections. Such ministers include Sargis Aghajan, Nimrod Baito Youkhanna and George Mansour. The Barzani's KDP enlisted Assyrians in the Kurdish ticket running in the 2005 elections, such as Abd al-Ahad Afram Sawa, Fawzi Hariri (later a minister) and Romeo Hakkari, in order to have a pro-Kurdish Assyrian in the Iraqi National and in Northern-Iraq Kurdish Regional Parliaments and/or governments to counter the true Assyrian voice represented in the ADM.

These practices are clear. There is a reason why the KDP and Barzani rely on these individuals. The UN General Assembly on September 13, 2007 adopted a non-binding declaration upholding the human, land and resources rights of the world's indigenous people, brushing off opposition from Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States. The vote in the assembly was 143 in favor and only 4 against. Eleven countries, including Russia and Colombia, abstained. The declaration, capping more than twenty years of debate at the United Nations, also recognizes the right of indigenous peoples to self-determination and sets global human rights standards for them. It states that native peoples have the right "to the recognition, observance and enforcement of treaties" concluded with states or their successors. Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, the Philippine chair of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, joined UN chief Ban Ki-moon in hailing the vote. "It marks a major victory for Indigenous peoples," said Tauli-Corpuz, adding that the document "sets the minimum international standards for the protection and promotion of the rights" of native peoples.

This was a historic vote. The Assyrians, as the indigenous people of Iraq, could benefit immensely from it if they take advantage of properly. But on September 23, 2007, Mr. Nimrod Baito Youkhanna, Secretary General of the Assyrian Patriotic Party (APP) and Minister of Tourism in the KRG, at a presentation in Stockholm, Sweden, stated that the Assyrians are not the only indigenous people in Iraq and that the UN resolution was not to include the Assyrian people since the Assyrians are not endangered or are not facing extinction. This he stated despite what the Assyrians are facing today. He also rejected a report by Ms. Margareta Viklund, member of the Assyrian Swedish Association, after her recent visit to Iraq where she talked about the situation of the Assyrians and showed that they are facing persecution by the KRG. The Kurdish minister denied these allegations and stated that they are flat wrong. If the KRG, KDP and other Kurdish institutions are involved in pushing such unfair practices, interfering in internal Assyrian affairs, church included, how would the Assyrians guarantee that what happened in 2005 Iraqi elections for example would not be repeated in the upcoming census and referendum in Kirkuk and other disputed territories, including the Nineveh Plains? The Pro-Kurds Assyrian ministers through the Ankawa Conference of March 12-13, 2007 and its so-called national congress set-up by Sargis Aghajan and Sami Behnam al-Malih are planning everything in their power to annex the Nineveh Plains to the KRG. This would end the

historic status of this Assyrian region, as Dohuk and other Assyrian regions have been lost to the Kurds in the last few decades in northern Iraq.

On October 13, 2007, Ammar al-Hakim, the heir apparent of Iraq's top Shiite politician, came out strongly in favor of giving more control to Iraq's religiously and ethnically divided regions. This call appeared to echo growing support among some in Washington, including Sen. Joseph Biden. Biden, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, who has been the most prominent advocate of a plan in Congress that would break Iraq into three self-rule entities: Sunni Arab, Shi'aa Arab and Kurdish. Biden sponsored a non-binding resolution laying out the plan that won Senate approval last month on a 75-23 vote.

Sen. Biden's suggestion to break up Iraq is the choice of many in US Congress and others around the world. If this became the path of the new administration in 2008, the implementation of Article 140 is more important than ever. The United States needs to assure that its, and Israel's, strong allies, the Kurds, will have a sizeable region to control in northern Iraq, an area which will include oil rich fields of Kirkuk and Diyala and strategic outlet to the Tigris River through the Nineveh Plains. Thus, the annexation of these regions to the KRG must take place before the suggested three divided regions are drawn.

Assyrian political groups must exploit the two latest UN documents: The UNAMI report and the UN Indigenous People declaration in order to secure legitimate Assyrian rights on their own historic and rooted lands.