

The Islamic State Effect on Minorities in Iraq

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Abstract

Since the control of “the Islamic state in Iraq and Syria” (ISIS) over large parts of Iraq, especially in the north, ethnic and religious minorities living there are facing several problems and challenges, including the issue of survival. In this paper, I will examine the impact of ISIS on these religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq and the problems they encounter. I will suggest some ways to help them withstand pressure and stay in their original homeland of Iraq, especially in Nineveh province, where most of these minorities of Christians, Yazedis, Shabaks, and Turkomans live.

Keywords: The Middle East; Ethnic and Minority Issues; Human Rights; Religious Minorities

Introduction

Iraq is one of the important countries in the Middle East that includes several religious, ethnic, and national minorities that have lived there, some for thousands of years. Many are considered the indigenous people of Mesopotamia. They are the Chaldeans-Assyrians-Syriacs, the Yazidis, the Sabeans Mandaeans, the Shabaks, the Turkomans, and formerly the Jews. Their presence in Iraq dates back hundreds of years, some before the advent of Islam. They live in northern, central, and southern Iraq. Today, most of them live near the Kurdistan region of Iraq (Tayyar, 2014). Today, the Iraqi provinces of Nineveh, Kirkuk, Salah al-Dain, Diyala, and Anbar are in particular subjected to the attacks and cruelty from the forces of the so-called the Islamic State (IS)¹. They have claimed the lives of thousands of people, as well as exposed of worship houses, temples, and shrines to demolition or vandalism. Some of these religious sites represent Iraq's and the world's heritage. Minorities in Iraq have not been displaced from their areas in Mosul, the center of Nineveh province, like they are witnessing today. Hundreds of thousands of the Chaldo-Assyrian Christians, Turkomans Shiites, Shabaks Shiites, and Yazidis are being displaced. Hundreds of their children were kidnapped or were faced extortion. Their cultural identity has also faced the threat of extermination. What is facing these minorities is contrary to human and religious values and some acts can mount to ethnic cleansing and genocide (Ahmad, 2014).

The city of Mosul is losing its cultural diversity. It has long been characterized and distinguished by its cultural diversity. Since, ISIS gunmen seized control of the city, humans and ethnic rights are being violated. In Mosul, ISIS announced the creation of its “Islamic Caliphate,” and issued a number of religious rulings (fatwas) that violate citizens' rights, specifically those of the Turkomans, Shabaks, Yazidis, and Christians' minorities. It is the beginning of a map change for Iraq's minorities and another chapter of marginalization and exclusion caused by displacement and the captivity of women and children (Tayyar, 2014). The control of ISIS of more than 70% of the minority areas in Iraq has changed the political and geographical map of minorities and has become a loss that it is difficult to restore. Thousands of people will not return to their areas without the protection, development, and establishment of trust and reconciliation between the various components of the society. The new minorities' political map has changed the relationship between those citizens who have left their home areas and those who stayed there (Tayyar, 2014).

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It is known that ISIS has imposed its control over the city of Mosul, 405 km north of Baghdad, on June 10, 2014, and extended its activities beyond to the provinces of Salah al-Dain, Kirkuk, Diyala, and others. This move led to a large wave of displacement in Iraq. After the mass migration of Turkomans from Tel Afar and the Shabaks, Christians were subjected to prosecution and death threats, forcing them to flee the city. Their properties were also confiscated. Following that, ISIS advanced to Sinjar district inhabited by Yazidis, where the district witnessed destruction and mass migration towards the Iraqi Kurdistan region and Turkey (Ahmad, 2014).

Christians

The Christians who mostly speak Syriac, which is a modern dialect of Aramaic, constitute about three percent of Iraq's population. The Chaldeans make up more than two percent, followed by the Syriacs and then the Assyrians (Hanish, 2008). Christians in Iraq today are subjected to the largest displacement in Iraq's modern history, a campaign outweighing the first immigration several years ago immediately after the U.S. invasion of Iraq in April 2003. At that time, they fled the main cities of Baghdad and Basra under pressure and threat headed towards Nineveh province and also the Kurdistan region. The current displacement is quite similar to the displacement of the Iraqi Jews from Iraq in the nineteen fifties. On July 19, 2014, ISIS issued a threat to Iraqi Christians in Mosul, either to convert to Islam or to pay a tribute, in accordance with the provisions of the "Islamic" law, or they would face death by "the sword." A later statement by ISIS declared that its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has agreed to allow those who do not want to convert to Islam or to pay tribute would be permitted to get out of the "Caliphate State" without taking any of their personal belongings. The statement gave them 24 hours to leave or the "sword would be the only option." ISIS gunmen painted the letter "N" on the walls of Christian houses and properties as a mark of being the possession of the Islamic state (Ahmad, 2014). The Arabic character "noon" or "N" is the first letter of the word Nazareth, the Christian symbol of the city of Nazareth where Jesus was born. Christians are called by some Muslims throughout Islamic history "Nasara," referring to Nazarene instead of Christians. Once the statement was issued, more than 200 Christian families fled Mosul, leaving behind their homes and interests that were later seized by ISIS. Also, ISIS took all Christian people's money and gold jewelry as they were leaving the city (Ahmad, 2014). There has been recent report of ISIS beheading four Christian Children for refusing conversion to Islam (Macfarlan, 2014).

A number of people displaced from the city of Mosul said they had received phone calls from some affiliates of the Islamic state threatening to blow up their homes if they don't transfer a certain amount of money to them. Another extortionist threat was the use of personal and family photographs left in vacated their homes for publicity on social network sites after being altered in inappropriate ways by using software, if they would not yield to the demand of transferring a sum of 1,000 dollars (Ankawa, 2014). Members of the Islamic state removed the crosses from Mar Behnam Martyr Monastery and burned its pictures and precious manuscripts. They marked the phrase "Real estate of the Islamic state" on many of the external walls of the monastery. ISIS is converting some of Mosul's churches into prisons for some detainees who oppose its rule, including the Church of the Immaculate in al-Shafaa neighborhood in Mosul city.

Yazidis (Yezidis or Ezidis)

Yazidism is an ancient religion dating back to the Sumerian period of Mesopotamia. The great majority of Yazidis, numbering close to 600,000, live in Iraq. Their ethnicity is Kurdish and they speak the Karmanji Kurdish dialect. They live mostly in Sinjar district in the western part of Nineveh Province. Other Yazidis live in the Kurdish-administered region (Hanish, 2012). Yazidism is a closed religion and does not seek to convert other people. It has its own philosophy about God and also good and evil. It believes that God is one. The Yazidis have suffered historically from armed campaigns to eliminate them starting with the Abbasid period rule up to the rule of the Ottoman Empire (Tayyar, 2014). They are the most oppressed religion in Iraq because their religion and beliefs are misunderstood by Muslims. Unlike Christians and Mandaeans who are mentioned in the Qur'an and considered the "People of the Book," the Ezidis are not; therefore they are not recognized by Islam and are considered to be unbelievers. According to some extreme fundamentalist interpretation of the Qur'an, it is *halal* (not forbidden) to exterminate them or to force their conversion to the dominant religion of Islam. ISIS in Iraq describes Yazidis as "Satan worshipers." Some Yazidis prefer to use the word Ezidis as their name to disassociate themselves from the name "Yazid bin Muawiyah" who killed the Shiite imam al-Hussein who had become the symbol of Shiism. Some others argue for using the name Ezidi because this is the way it is said in the Kurdish and Persian languages, as opposed to Arabic, which is Yazidi. Historically Yazidis have been faced with discrimination and injustice many times.

The Ottoman Empire (between 1809 and 1876) initiated military campaigns against the followers of the Yazidism, terrorizing them, destroying their homes, selling their women, and killing their sheikhs (Tayyar, 2014). Today, history is repeating itself. The same Yazidi people of Sinjar, who were killed with spears by the Ottomans, are being killed with sophisticated weapons by ISIS. There have been more than 3,000 abducted in addition to thousands of girls who have been raped or taken captive by members of ISIS (Wood, 2014). Iraqi minorities are seeing continuous waves of exodus and emigration to leave the country, which started in the early 1990s. This is causing significant harm to their existence in this location as a religious minority where the demographic character of the region has been changing since the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003 resulting in the rise of Islamic extremism and fundamentalism in Iraq. In early August 2014, militant Islamists stormed several Yazidi towns and villages and gave the population two options, either convert to Islam or die (Iraqicp, 2014). However, people do not want to change their religion. When a major city of Sinjar was taken by ISIS, some 400,000 of the Yazidis fled the area, hundreds were killed, more than 3,000 women were taken as sex slaves, and the fate of thousands is still unknown. ISIS fighters have created an office in Mosul's market where pictures of Yazidi women are displayed along with their price tags. The prices for Christian women are marked higher than Yazidis. Yazidi women are often raped immediately after their kidnapping by ISIS jihadists and then they are sold. ISIS considers them to be spoils of war, and they claim that such practices were done in early Islam. ISIS also proudly declared the revival of slavery in its magazine, "Dabiq" (Alhurra, 2014). The kidnapping of Yazidi civilians, in addition to their systematic exploitation constitute crimes against humanity.

Because of the sense of shame among Yazidi women of being raped publicly and collectively as well as many being subjected to severe beatings if they fail to meet the demands of ISIS men, most survivors deny being subjected to sexual abuse for fear of being killed by their tribes due to "shame" being brought to their groups (Iraqicp, 2014). ISIS militants have worked systematically to separate young women and teenage girls from their families; some have been forced to marry their captors. ISIS has forced boys and their families to convert to Islam while their "ceremonies" were taped. One survivor said that the fighters forced him, along with over 200 other prisoners, to convert to Islam by declaring the Islamic testimony of faith three times, "there is no God but Allah and Mohammad is his messenger." The fighters were telling them repeatedly, "convert to Islam to be saved" (Alsumaria News, 2014)

The Shabaks

The Shabaks are an ethnic minority group living in the province of Nineveh in northern Iraq. They came to Iraq during the Sassanid period, where they blended with other Iraqi populations; their name reflects this blending. They have their own Shabaki language, which is an Indo-European language, with many Arabic, Kurdish, Persian, Turkish and Hindu vocabularies. Their population was about 80,000 in 1977. They follow Islam, mainly the Shiite sect. Some believe that their religious beliefs contain elements of Christianity and pagan religions (Alyasiri, 2009). They might number as many as 200,000 today. The Shabaks were living in 56 villages in the Hamdaniya and Telkaif districts and sub districts of Basheqa and Bartalah. The Shabaks used to live on the left coast of Mosul before being targeted and displaced by Al-Qaida militants in the previous years. Today, almost all the Shabaks have been displaced or become refugees. Only about 5% remained in the villages (Almada, 2014). The Shabaks are a direct target of terrorist organizations like the ISIS, resulting in the displacement, abduction, murder, and bombing and shelling of their areas because of their being Shiites and being the target of "Sunni" ISIS. All Shiites groups have been labeled as infidels by ISIS. Currently, tens of thousands of the Shabaks are displaced in the Kurdistan region, Karbala, and other areas, as well as suffering from the lack of food and medical supplies, and the scarcity of water and electricity. ISIS confiscated their homes and caused death to many of them, where others still were buried in mass graves.

The Turkomans

The Iraqi Turkomans are a distinct Turk ethnic group who live mainly in Kirkuk and Mosul provinces. Their population numbering over a half a million, although they claim that their numbers are much higher than that (Park, 2005). Turkomans are a national minority, where location is spread from Tel Afar, northwest of Iraq, to Mandali in the east, and are within the territories that separate the Arab areas from the Kurdish areas. The Turkoman Shiites in Tel Afar, west of Mosul, after having been targeted by ISIS for the sectarian reason of being Shiites, were displaced by tens of thousands fleeing towards the Kurdistan region and Sinjar city before it was taken by ISIS, as well as Baghdad, and other central and southern governorates.

The Turkoman today are living in harsh conditions after fleeing for their lives. They suffer from lack of supplies, medicine, and tents. Therefore, a large number of children and women are at risk. They live in tragic circumstances in schools and other government buildings where they are unable to be accommodated by the government. Large number of Turkoman people lost their territories to ISIS. They were the first to suffer when ISIS took Tel Afar district in Nineveh province (Almada, 2014).

Possible Solutions

1. The Iraqi government should have plans and clear policies on how to deal with religious and national pluralism in order to discourage them from leaving the country, especially to stop the exodus of Christians and Yazidis. The absence of a special budget for the development of minority areas means continuous economic decline, which pull them out of the country.
2. Both the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan regional government in Erbil need to think seriously about granting autonomy and issuing laws to protect minorities, backed by financial support. Otherwise, the minority map will change forever and Iraq will be deprived of its mosaic cultures.
3. As a temporary measure, areas inhabited by minorities should be made safe areas protected by the UN, where as the central Iraqi forces and the Kurdish Peshmerga forces have failed to provide protection for minorities. The United Nations in Iraq must play a greater role for the protection of minorities, where such minorities of Mosul as the Turkomans, Shabaks, Christians, and Yazidis have left Mosul and those few who have stayed are living in humiliation and disgrace.
4. The Nineveh plain that is part of the province of Nineveh is located to the north and east of the city of Mosul. It consists the three districts of Hamdaniya, Sheikhan, and Telkaif where minorities are the majority there. It must be made a new province (governorate) in Iraq.
5. The UN should investigate serious crimes committed by the "Islamic state" against minorities and bring charges against it to highlight the plights of minorities in Iraq.
6. Local and international humanitarian agencies operating in Iraqi Kurdistan, including the United Nations agencies should increase medical and psychological services for displaced people fleeing from the advance of the Islamic state. These services should give top priority for the secret identities of the victims of sexual assaults and their privacy in a manner not to reinforce stigma or harassment of the victims.

Conclusion

What religious and ethnic minorities are facing in Iraq is unprecedented and can be mounted to war crimes or crimes against humanity. The leaders of the "Islamic state" militants are justifying their infamous deeds by their claim of religious devotion, and this is not acceptable to most Muslims. The Iraqi government support for the displaced people is below expectation for hundreds of thousands of displaced families from Mosul who live in very tragic circumstances. The number of challenges facing the government service comes because of the large number of displaced persons, their deployment in the whole of Iraq, the fuel crisis in the hot spots, as well as the security risks that hinder the arrival of field teams to the displaced. This comes along with the delay of approving a state budget that causes a delay in financial grants to displaced families. The "Islamic state" targeting of the minority communities of Yazidis, Shiites Shabaks, Shiites Turkomans, and Christians is systematically being carried out. Under international law, crimes against humanity include crimes of persecution committed against a religious group, as well as unlawful imprisonment and sexual slavery, or any other form or similar sexual violence when committed systematically or whereas is part of a broad policy of the organization. The Commissioner of the Office of the United Nations Human Rights has accused IS of ethnic cleansing, noting that their terrorist acts against Shiites and other ethnic minorities includes willful killings, forced belief change, and crimes of abduction. In sum, the future of the Iraqi minorities depends on stabilization and freedom in their own country. Without stabilization, they will continue to flee Iraq, causing the loss of its indigenous people. The increasing number of Christians and Yazidis fleeing their country is a clear indication of the deteriorating conditions in Iraq since 2003.

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End Notes

1. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is also called the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL). In Arabic, the acronym of ISIS is Da'ish (Daesh). ISIS lately changed its name to simply the "Islamic State" (IS). ISIS is simply a "Sunni" extremist, jihadist group based in Iraq and Syria and operates in few other states in the Middle East.