

Iraq: Long history of multi-faith co-existence in jeopardy

Eerie Silence on Northern Iraq

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The term “Turkmen” means little to most western people, even those here who think they are up on Iraq ethnography. This is because Turkmen have not figured in media reports for reasons that will become clear. But watch for it. Iraqi Turkmen will soon demand world attention.

Iraq, for outside observers is increasingly a land of ethnic and death statistics, usually in the context of the current conflict. More and more, Iraq is debated in terms of the Sunni-Shia-Kurd formula, as if Kurd were not themselves populated by sunni and shia devotees. Forgotten are the once romanticized Marsh Arabs of the south. (For the most part, they have moved to the cities.) Christians are also set aside, as are Iraqi Jews. Iraq’s Christians represent probably the earliest Christian community anywhere, and along with Iraqi Jews, demonstrate the long history of multi-faith co-existence in this part of the world. Iraqis had rightly been proud of that.

Today, upheavals resulting from the US invasion in 2003, from Zionist penetration of Iraq and the breakdown of civil order, create new and fiercely protected divisions. Christians are departing, continuing the exodus begun in the early 1990s. Jews are little heard from; if anything their numbers are increasing as Israelis, some of them of Iraqi origin, return to purchase homes and land and engage in business, if not settle here immediately.

While a terrifying power struggle and polarization goes on between Sunni and Shia in the country’s center-around Baghdad, home to more than 25% of the nation’s people–Iraqi Kurds, with Israel’s help, are consolidating their expansion and hold in the north. They have largely escaped the upheaval across Iraq, protected in three autonomous northern governates which are somehow sheltered from the deadly forces unleashed across the rest of Iraq after 2003.

The north ‘appears’ stable (as far as Kurdish-speaking Iraqis are concerned); in fact, there are troubling signs of an ethnic cleansing underway. Here we return to the Turkmen Iraqis. They number close to 3 million:–12% of Iraq’s people. While press attention focuses on Sunni-Shia battles, Iraq’s Turkmen face a campaign of discrimination that could become very ugly and costly. Tel-Afar, a Turkmen-speaking majority Iraqi city was subject to bombardments and a crushing siege by US forces. According to Iraq Turkmen Front spokesman Orhan Ketene, “This was instigated by Kurds who called in American firepower on the claim that the city harbored foreign terrorists”. (see www.Kerkuk.net) Two years ago US air and land assaults on the scale of Falluja were carried out in Tel-Afar. A city of more

than 300,000, it remains under military siege, crippled and little heard from. This, say Turkmen survivors and Ketene, is part of new Kurdish campaign to extend their sway and dominance West, beyond their traditional governates of NE Iraq.

As troubling as the terrorizing of Tel-Afar is, we also see signs of a Zionist-type settlement by Kurds in the coveted city of Kirkuk. Kirkuk is targeted as a new center for Iraqi Kurdistan. Until recently, the city was multi-ethnic, although it is identified as the center of Turkmen Iraqi society and economy. For the past 3 years, Kurds have been moving into the city at an increased pace, frightening the Turkmen residents. As with Israeli 'settlement' in the West Bank, this is a strategy of "changing the facts on the ground". Assassinations against Kirkuk's Turkmen families have begun. Fear and tension are rising. Because the city is center of the important Kirkuk oil fields, it is a major economic prize and Kurds do not hide their ambitions for the city. Kurds, backed by Zionist and American elements, are well armed and powerfully placed in the Iraqi government. Turkmens say the ongoing settlement of tens of thousands of new residents, all of Kurdish origin, is in anticipation of a referendum on the city's fate in 2007. With a majority Kurdish population, the city could become an official Kurdish territory. It is a frightening prospect for Iraq's Turkmens.

How Turkey, long an antagonist to Kurdish sovereignty, will react, no one knows. It could be brought into the equation if Iraqi Turkmens are further threatened and find no alternative protection. They say they have been unable to interest the Occupation Authority in their fate and their rights. With the Americans hardly able to protect themselves and with the city of Baghdad out of control, US support for Turkmens appears unlikely, especially when Washington would be unwilling to confront the Israeli partners of Iraqi Kurds. American troops will one day depart. Now or after some years, it would not undo the wickedness their arrival planted.

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