



“The Future of Iraq’s Minorities: What’s Next After ISIS?”

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by

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Mr. Chairman, Mr. Ranking Member, and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the future of Iraq’s minorities after the defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). I would like to note that these views represent my own and not those of the United States government, the Department of Defense, or the National Defense University.

The prospects for Iraq’s most vulnerable minorities after ISIS are tied to the larger framework of Iraqi politics and minority group dynamics. They will likely be affected by post-ISIS stabilization challenges. These challenges include, but are not limited to ethno-sectarianism, disputes between the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), and the proliferation of militias.

Iraq’s minorities are not monolithic. They represent about ten percent of the Iraqi population and include Assyrians, Yezidis, Mandaeans (Sabians), Turcoman, Armenians, Circassians, Jews, Kaka’is, Shabaks, and Faily Kurds. Most of these groups live in northern Iraq; the Ninawah Plains, Kirkuk, Sinjar and other localities. Although these territories have become politicized as ‘disputed areas’ - lands claimed by the Iraqi government and the KRG - they are regarded by Assyrians and Yezidis as ancestral lands. Since the breakdown of the Iraqi state and emergence of sectarian conflict in 2003, the most vulnerable non-Muslim minorities have been the Christians (Assyrians/Chaldeans/Syriac and Armenians) and Yezidis. According to a report by Minority Rights Group International, from 2005-2014 the Yezidi population decreased from 700,000 to approximately 500,000. Christian populations also fled Baghdad during this period, with about fifteen percent remaining.

Threats against Christians and Yezidis increased significantly after the ISIS onslaught in June 2014. Reports indicate that about 9,900 Yezidis were killed or captured by ISIS while 6,800 others were kidnapped, with over a third still missing. Thousands of Yezidis also escaped to



Syria, Jordan and other states, adding to refugee strains. By 2016 Christian populations declined from about 1.4 million to about 300,000. At present, most Christians and Yezidis in Iraq are living as internally displaced persons (IDPs) in camps inside the Kurdistan Region, with smaller numbers in central or southern Iraq.

Despite a shared persecution for their religious beliefs, Iraq's minorities are fractured. Successive Iraqi governments attempted to exploit religious differences between Christian denominations, and these differences persist today. Religion also overlaps with ethnicity, language, and geography within and across groups. Some Yezidis emphasize their Zoroastrian roots and differentiate themselves from "Sunni Kurdish Muslims", while affiliating more closely with secular groups. Others, however, regard their Yezidi identity as being ethnically Kurdish first. These differences often overlap with political affiliations. Yezidis living in northern Ninawah and in Dohuk province support the KRG while others, mainly in Sinjar and southern Ninawah, back the Iraqi government. Still others are independent and seek their own autonomous region. The Yezidis are also isolated by their own traditions – to include a caste-like system that restricts marriages within the Yezidi community. Similarly, Assyrians regard themselves as a distinct ethnic group with their own language that is in danger of extinction, a sentiment that has grown alongside increased KRG control of Ninawah. Assyrians are also divided between supporters of Baghdad and Erbil, and independents.

After ISIS: vulnerabilities and opportunities

The liberation of former ISIS safe-havens has provided some reprieve for minorities and encouraged the return of IDPs. According to the International Organization for Migration, by September 2017 about 2.2 million of about 3.2 million IDPs had returned to their homes. The vast majority of these IDPs are Sunni Arabs, and about 20,000 of 200,000 Assyrians from the Ninawah Plains. Some Yezidis have returned to northern Ninawa but not to Sinjar, which according to local groups, remains "a ghost town" since its liberation three years ago. What prevents a more robust return of Christians and Yezidi IDPs?

The main obstruction to IDP return is ongoing security threats and lack of services. Some localities remain dangerous; public buildings and homes are destroyed and/or filled with improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Reconstruction support is also lacking. Another reason is a deep sense of mistrust and vulnerability. Yezidis and Christians victimized by ISIS distrust government authorities in Baghdad and Erbil, as well as some Sunni Muslim groups – Arabs and Kurds. Most Yezidis from Sinjar blame Peshmerga from Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) for disarming and abandoning them during the ISIS onslaught, which led to the mass atrocities against them. Post-liberation security arrangements have exacerbated their sense of fear and mistrust. One Yezidi man from Sinjar told me that former ISIS militants and members from some Sunni Kurdish and Sunni Arab tribes made deals with the KDP to help stabilize the border area. He affirmed that "they shaved their beards and are now walking around



Dohuk, Sinjar and other areas.” Those Yezidis who do not support the KDP have been obstructed from returning to Sinjar by KRG Peshmerga.

IDP return is also inhibited by the presence of various militia groups that have proliferated since 2014 and which control checkpoints and influence local activities. These militias are tied to the Iraqi government, KRG, or Iran (and to a lesser extent, Turkey). In Mosul, Iranian-backed militias are recruiting Sunni Arabs through salaries, food provisions, and security – services which until now, are not offered by the Iraqi government. In the Christian town of Bartella, recently liberated from ISIS, there is a new Imam Khomeini primary school with flags of Iran. Although these militias and institutions are not targeting Christians and Yezidis directly, they are feeding local power struggles, sectarianism, and the risk of conflict.

Minority groups are caught in the political cross-fire between Baghdad and Erbil and have become cannon fodder for everyone else’s contestations. A key tension involves unresolved claims to disputed territories and their resources, the vast majority of which have fallen under the de-facto control of the KRG, but which remain administratively and legally under Baghdad’s authority. The KRG has expended important resources on some Christian and Yezidi populations as part of its larger aim to annex the territories into a future Kurdish state or expanded Kurdistan Region. In two Christian towns in Ninewah, the provincial council, which is largely controlled by the KDP, recently replaced mayors with a KDP-Christian party affiliate. These dynamics have further divided and weakened Christian groups politically. While many Assyrians regard these actions as the “Kurdification” of the Ninewah plain and seek greater autonomy under Baghdad’s authority, others support the KRG and the largess it has offered to local officials.

In some areas, political tensions have turned to violence since the liberation of ISIS safe havens, further inhibiting IDP return. Sinjar is a case in point. During my visit to Iraq in March 2017, armed conflict broke out in Sinjar between Syrian Kurdish forces tied to the KDP and Yezidi affiliates of the Kurdistan Worker’s Party (PKK) – which has expanded its influence in northern Iraq and disputed areas. The conflict also involved Turkey’s bombing of PKK bases in Sinjar and Syria and resulted in the deaths of 11 people, including KRG Peshmerga forces. Since then, some Yezidis have defected from PKK groups and joined the Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs) under the auspices of the Iraqi government. Still others affiliate with KRG Peshmerga.

There are small pockets of opportunities for post-ISIS stabilization that could potentially reduce minority group vulnerabilities. I just returned from another research trip to Iraq two weeks ago. I spoke with diverse groups and officials in northern Iraq and Baghdad, including Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi, members of the Iraqi parliament, Sunni Arab tribal sheikhs, provincial representatives, civil society leaders, members of the business community, and teachers and students. Most expressed “cautious optimism” about Iraq’s future. Their optimism is tied to an important political trend; efforts to create a civil state and diminish ethno-sectarianism.



This trend is rooted in a strong sense of Iraqi nationalism that has revived since the ISIS onslaught, and demands for political reforms and citizens' rights (Of the 150 entities registered for the 2018 Iraqi parliamentary elections, 76 have the word civil or civilian in their title). Iraqis also largely support al-Abadi, a political moderate, although worry about Iranian influences, including former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. All - including Sunni Arabs and critics of Baghdad - expressed high respect and trust for Iraq's Counter Terrorism Forces (CTF). Iraqis are also tired of war. They are attempting to build trust across communities through local leaders and educational and cultural exchanges within and across governorates.

Still, ethno-sectarianism persists, particularly among the political classes. Powerful blocs in the Iraqi parliament may have changed their names, but many remain committed to supporting distinct religious and ethnic constituencies; Sunni Arab, Shi'a Arab, and Kurds. Regional states also continue to back particular leaders or proxy forces that promote sectarian agendas.

The Kurdish referendum has aggravated challenges to post ISIS stabilization.¹ It has deepened tensions between Baghdad and Erbil, enhanced ethnic divisions between Arabs and Kurds, and instigated militia groups seeking to assure Iraq's territorial integrity. The referendum has raised the ire of the Iraqi parliament – Sunni and Shi'a Arabs alike – and placed al-Abadi in the position of having to more forcefully assert Iraqi sovereignty and push back the KRG's unilateral actions. The Iraqi government, alongside the governments of Iran and Turkey, have reacted with a series of economic, political, and security measures that aim to assert Iraqi sovereignty. They have threatened to use military force to enter and control the disputed territories directly, or through militias. The potential for armed conflict that will destabilize the Ninewah Plains and Kirkuk and its minority populations is significant. Although minorities have developed their own local forces, they are tied to Baghdad and Erbil and are likely to become further entrenched in the political cross-fire.

Recommendations: protecting minorities in a post- ISIS Iraq

Even after ISIS is defeated militarily, minorities will remain vulnerable to political instability in the disputed territories. This vulnerability is complex, highly localized, and tied to the cohesion of the Iraqi state. The challenge will be to create conditions that keep minorities out of the cross-fire between Baghdad and Erbil, minimize regional interventions, allow IDPs to return to their homes, and assure some form of local autonomy and self-protection.

It is in the U.S. interest to assure the stability of Iraq after ISIS is defeated so that minority communities remain in Iraq and their homelands. U.S. policy should be based on a nuanced

¹ It is important to note that the referendum results are not representative of minorities and non-Kurdish populations in the disputed territories. A large percentage of Christians and Yezidis remain as IDPs and did not vote. Many also reported being threatened by Kurdish authorities to vote "Yes." Similarly, most Arabs and Turkmen are displaced, oppose the referendum, and did not vote.



understanding of minority groups that addresses their distinctions and role in the larger Iraqi political arena. The U.S. should:

- *Support local minority rights in conjunction with the Iraqi constitution.* Efforts to stabilize Iraq after ISIS and ascertain minority group rights should be made within the framework of the existing Iraqi constitution. The U.S. should support a political and security architecture that allows people within localities to administer and secure their own areas. All assistance should be conducted in cooperation with the Iraqi government and based on enhancing local decentralization and self-protection of minority groups. This effort can include training local minority police as part of Iraqi security forces and helping to integrate minority group PMUs into official state institutions, to include provincial structures and the KRG as part of a unified Iraqi state.
- *Reinforce a sovereign, civil state and Iraqi institutions.* The U.S. should take advantage of current trends in Iraq that support a civil state and end sectarianism. It should continue to support Iraq's state institutions through clear and consistent messaging that affirms Iraqi sovereignty and territorial integrity. The U.S. should also address Iraqis and its sub-state entities as territorial units and refrain from using ethno-sectarian narratives ("Sunni, Shi'a and Kurds").
- *Mediate disputed territories.* The U.S. should help mediate tensions between Baghdad and Erbil, to include control over territories and energy resources in the disputed areas. The U.S. should also assist in brokering local power and revenue sharing agreements between the Iraqi government, KRG, and provincial councils.