



1.5 Million Assyrian-Iraqis Fear Marginalization in Upcoming Iraq Elections

Posted 12-30-2004 12:56:26 (GMT 12-30-2004 18:56:26)

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(AINA) -- The upcoming Iraqi National Assembly elections slated for January 30 have placed the Assyrian Christian population (also known as Chaldeans and Syriacs) in a dire predicament. Assyrian leaders had hoped to capitalize on voter turnout both in Iraq and in the Diaspora where up to one half of Iraqi Assyrians reside. However, as the election date approaches, turnout from both sectors of Assyrians remains seriously threatened.

For Assyrians in Iraq, the overwhelming concern remains the lack of security. The initial euphoria of freedom to finally express a long repressed identity as well as assert real political aspirations ([AINA, 04-19-2004](#)) has long faded into a daily struggle for survival. A string of church bombings in August, October, November, and December have been supplemented by continuous, nearly daily attacks against civilians including beheadings, burnings, kidnappings, threats of violence, and mutilations aimed simply at terrorizing the population into leaving the country. As one leader commented "Assyrians have already voted with their feet with 40,000 reported to have left in the immediate aftermath of the August [church bombings](#) ([AINA, 08-07-2004](#))." Further attacks have only accelerated the exodus.



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Despite calls by several organizations and activists for security and the establishment of a Safe Haven ([AINA, 11-30-2004](#)), neither the Coalition nor the Iraqi government have made any real or even symbolic gesture to relieve the escalating pressure against Assyrians or their villages. Assyrians believe that the only reason they are tolerated is because they can be used to fund terrorism via ransom for kidnappings, as they are thought to be good businessmen. Thousands have been kidnapped so far with ransoms paid on the average of \$100,000 each. Some have been kidnapped more than once. The kidnapping happens throughout Iraq as there is no safe region for them.

Although Assyrians in Iraq are expected to widely support the election process, fears remain that if the security situation continues to deteriorate, many Assyrians will choose the safety of their homes rather than risking still further attacks. Most Iraqi Assyrians live in Baghdad followed by Mosul, Karkuk, and the towns in the Nineveh Plain-- the proposed self administered area. The once vibrant presence in Basrah has virtually vanished following scores of Islamist attacks and threats. Without a real program or strategy for ensuring security for potential voters, the major Assyrian population areas may be drastically under represented. One activist noted "Although all Iraqis face security issues, the ChaldoAssyrian predicament is especially dire. The Kurdish areas have been relatively secured and the major communities of Kurds, Sunnis, and Shiites are well able to fend for themselves. ChaldoAssyrians have no such security presence."

Calls for the establishment of Assyrian enforced security by Assyrians themselves around Assyrian neighborhoods, Churches, and villages have gone unheeded by the Iraqi government already preoccupied with a substantial insurgency. As one recent visitor to Baghdad reported "ChaldoAssyrians are often forced to pay sympathetic Muslim neighbors to bring food home since in some areas ChaldoAssyrians may not even leave their homes." Those minority communities struggling for their very survival including Assyrians, Yezidis, Mandeans, and Turkman stand to lose the most in a process that seems to ensure participation by the numerous and strong over the vulnerable.

Assyrian leaders had once hoped that an energized Diaspora vote free from threat could help bolster or at least offset a poor showing inside Iraq. Some estimates have suggested that Assyrians in the Diaspora may constitute up to half of the total Iraqi Assyrian population. Early on, the Iraqi government had declared that Iraqi expatriates would not be allowed to vote in the upcoming election. As the most adversely impacted community, ([AINA, 08-01-2004](#)) Assyrians were the most adamant that expatriates be allowed to vote. In a last minute reversal, the Iraqi government decided to allow expatriate voting ([NEWS, 11-19-2004](#)).

The reversal, though, is widely viewed by Diaspora-based Assyrians as merely a symbolic gesture designed more to project a facade of democratic inclusiveness as opposed to a genuine effort to enable full expatriate participation. The attempt is seen as a public relations effort to white-wash the government's earlier overt exclusion of the predominantly Assyrian expatriate North American vote. As one observer noted, "The Iraqi government has not provided any funds or logistical assistance to actually enable the expatriate community to register." Another lamented "Imagine trying to register 400,000-500,000 Assyrians

in the US spread from coast to coast for a first ever election in a matter of a few weeks without any financial resources. Any real intention to register Iraqi Americans would be coupled with the necessary funding, experienced consultants, and field workers. None of these essentials have been provided."

The out of country voting process in the US has been seriously contaminated by political expediency as well. The designation of official polling places by the organization overseeing the election process- the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has been tied more to Iraqi power politics than to legitimate Iraqi population centers. The initial designation of Washington DC, Los Angeles, and Detroit was [recently extended](#) to include Chicago with a population of 80,000-100,000 Assyrians after vigorous protests by Ms. Katrin Michael, a prominent ChaldoAssyrian activist. Nashville was also included with a mere population of 2000 Kurds simply to placate Iraq's powerful Kurdish paramilitary warlords. The predominantly Assyrian areas of San Diego, San Francisco, San Jose, Modesto, and Turlock with markedly greater numbers than Nashville were ignored despite community protests and US Census Bureau estimates. Even Las Vegas and Phoenix Arizona have significantly greater numbers of Assyrians than Nashville's small population of Kurds. Such discrepancies have reinforced the belief that this electoral process discriminates against smaller Iraqi minorities- most notably, the Assyrians.

The real predicament and dilemma for Assyrians remains a deep-seated and genuine desire to see the democratic process proceed but a desire that is now coupled with an equally strong apprehension of a wholesale under representation of Assyrians both inside and outside Iraq. Assyrian organizations and leaders are deliberating appeals for three essentials in exchange for full participation and support for the electoral process. First and foremost, immediate and adequate funding for out of country voting, secondly, an increase in polling places to all cities with more than 2000 Iraqi Americans - the same number as in Nashville. Finally, a guarantee by the Iraqi government for a minimum number of representative seats in the new National Assembly in the event the Iraqi and out of country votes do not materialize.

One leader noted "We cannot believe in a system that unfairly affords us less representation than our numbers deserve. We need to be assured a minimum 7-10% of Assembly seats as a just approximation of our combined in country and out of country numbers." Referring to decades of persecution by the Iraqi state and Kurds, another activist added "We will resist our 'democratic' disenfranchisement every bit as vigorously as we resisted our disenfranchisement under Saddam and Barzani."