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Were Assyrians, Turkmen, Yezidis Intentionally Locked Out of the Iraq Election?

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(AINA) -- The January 30 elections in Iraq were a historic breakthrough in the development of Iraq as a free and democratic society. Never before had Iraq had free, fair and transparent elections, with thousands of candidates and hundreds of political parties. Never before had the Christian Assyrians (also known as Chaldeans and Syriacs) been allowed to participate in elections with their own independent parties.

Two lists represented the ChaldoAssyrians, the Rafidain list (204), spearheaded by the [Assyrian Democratic Movement](#) (ADM), and the Assyrian National Coalition (ANC, 139). ADM was founded in 1979 and has worked since then for the Assyrians in Iraq; it opposed Saddam Hussein, who executed many of its members. ADM has significant membership and presence throughout Iraq and operates and administers various programs and schools, especially in North Iraq. The ANC was hastily organized for the election and has no significant presence in Iraq. Preliminary [results](#) show that ADM received most of the votes from Assyrians.



But on January 30 the vote was denied to 300,000 Assyrians, Yezidis and Turkmen in north Iraq, and to a significant number of the 500,000 Assyrians in the Diaspora.

The Lockout in Iraq

On January 30 voting boxes and supplies were not delivered to the districts of Al-Hamdaniya (Qaraqosh-Baghdeda), Karamlesh, Bartilla County, Bashiqa, Bahzani, and the district of Al-Shikhan (Ain-Safni), which have a population of 300,000. The voting boxes were to be delivered from Kurdish controlled Arbil. Abdul-Hussein al-Hendawi, head of the Iraqi electoral commission, was contacted early in the morning and he repeatedly gave assurances that the boxes would arrive soon from Arbil, but without any results.

An Assyrian government official, who wishes to remain anonymous, stated that no collaboration was received from the Mosul Governor and the Mosul City Council concerning the personnel who must open the centers in the Christian villages. Instead of having the Assyrians manning these voting stations, officials said they were "obliged" to bring Muslims from Karbala, Baghdad and elsewhere to carry out the responsibility in Mosul and the surrounding areas.

The Assyrian Democratic Movement protested the lockout in a January 31st [communiqué](#).

The lockout also affected The Turkmen and Yezidi communities in North Iraq. The Iraqi Turkmen Front issued a lengthy [document](#) detailing Kurdish voting abuses. In an [interview](#) with Radio Free Europe, the leader of the Yezidis, Prince Tahsin-beg, asked for an investigation into the lockout of Yezidi voters.

Assyrians, Turkmen and Yezidis held [protests](#) on 2/5 and 2/6 in Detroit, Toronto, Stockholm, London and Baghdad regarding the Kurdish lockout of voters in North Iraq.

On February 8, in a strongly worded [statement](#), the Al-Rafidayn Democratic Coalition, the main party representing the Christian ChaldoAssyrians, rejected the Iraqi Independent Electoral High Commission's report on voting irregularities and lockouts in North Iraq. The statement specifically criticized the Commission's white-washing of the incident and blasted the decision to open only 93 of the 330 voting centers in the Nineveh governorate on election day.

The Lockout Outside of Iraq

There are an estimated 500,000 Iraqi Assyrians living outside of Iraq, with 350,000 in the US, 30,000 in Australia, 23,000 in Canada, 15,000 in France, 8000 in England and smaller communities in other countries. In the US Assyrians comprise 85-90% of the Iraqi expatriate community; this is because they have been persecuted in Iraq because they are ethnically, linguistically

and religiously different, and as a result they have emigrated the most to escape ethnic and religious persecution.

The organization responsible for administering the vote for Iraqi expatriates is the [International Organization for Migration](#) (IOM). The IOM set up a special [website](#) for the Iraq Out of Country voting program and established polling centers in fourteen countries outside of Iraq.

When the polling locations were initially announced Assyrians cried foul. The locations in the U.S. were limited to three: Washington D.C., Detroit and Los Angeles. There is a small Iraqi community in D.C., there are 30,000 Kurds and 5,000 Assyrians in Los Angeles, and there are 150,000 Iraqis in Detroit, with 120,000 of them being Chaldeans (Catholic Assyrians).

There are 90,000 Assyrians in Chicago, 10,000 in Phoenix; in California there 15,000 in San Francisco and San Jose, 25,000 in Modesto/Turlock and 25,000 in San Diego. There are 5,000 Assyrians on the East coast in Hartford, Boston and Yonkers.

The ChaldoAssyrian American Advocacy Council (CAAAC) notified the IOM about the Assyrian population centers and asked for polling centers to be added to the above mentioned cities. The IOM refused, stating that it did not have "time" to add these centers. This was not a satisfactory answer to CAAAC, since the IOM had known 11 months in advance the date of the Iraqi election. CAAAC pointed out that a combined population of 170,000 Assyrians were given no polling centers. In fact, only one polling center was available to serve all Iraqis west of the Mississippi.

Intense pressure from CAAAC, from Ms. Katrin Michael (a prominent ChaldoAssyrian activist in Iraq) and an internet Assyrian email protest campaign directed at the IOM forced the IOM to add a polling center in Chicago; Nashville (home to 3,000 Kurds) was also added, presumably to appease the Kurds. This still left approximately 80,000 Assyrians without a polling center. CAAAC made the extraordinary offer to underwrite the additional polling centers. The IOM refused, this time citing the fact that it had a 5 polling center limit for each country. CAAAC pointed out that 6 polling centers were established in Iran and 9 in Australia. The IOM stood firm.

Seeing that it could not make headway with the IOM, CAAAC turned to various Congressional members with Assyrian constituencies. A letter was sent on [January 13](#) by a bipartisan caucus of 12 California Congressional members; the letter was addressed to the director of the Iraq Out of Country voting program, Peter Erben in Amman, Jordan. The lawmakers asked for polling centers to be established in San Diego and Modesto. The response from Mr. Erben came in a letter dated [January 15](#), in which he stated that the polling center locations were based on US census data and consultations with the Iraqi community. He stated without justification that "only one location is possible on the West coast." Remarkably, he said that "establishing additional facilities would set a precedent which we could not apply across all fourteen host countries," making the invalid assumption that the geographic distribution of Iraqis in the other countries is analogous to the US.

Congresswoman Anna Eshoo, an Assyrian from California, sent a reply to Peter Erben on [January 19](#), again asking for polling centers in San Diego and Modesto, and asking for clarification on why the IOM could not do this. Mr. Erben's reply, dated [January 22](#), stated without justification that "it is impossible to provide any further registration/polling facilities", and repeated that "in order not to appear to discriminate against particular Iraqi communities the Program would strongly resist any attempt to extend facilities in one country or region without being able to offer such extensions in all." Thus, Mr. Erben implicitly acknowledged that it was possible to add polling locations, but he chose not to do so, and he still made the false assumption that the geographic distribution, necessities and particulars of the Iraqi expatriates are identical across 14 countries.

On [January 14](#) Senator Carl Levin (Michigan) sent a letter to Roger Bryant, the US director of the Iraq Out of Country voting program, asking for a polling center to be established in San Diego, again to no avail. On [January 18](#) Senator Rick Santorum (Pennsylvania) sent a letter to President Bush regarding the lack of polling centers in the California Assyrian communities.

Shiite Bias

The Chaldeans are the largest block of Iraqis in Michigan, with 120,000 primarily Catholic members in the community, while the other, primarily Shiite, Iraqis number about 30,000. Yet the polling location in Michigan was placed squarely in the center of the Shiite community, in Southgate, which is 90 minutes away from where the majority of the Chaldean community resides. Nina Shea, the director of Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom, called [attention](#) to the fact that the polling center locations seemed to discriminate against Christian Iraqis in the US.

Economically Prohibitive

Expatriates were required to register and vote in person on two separate occasions. No provision was made for online, mail-in or proxy registration. This meant that each voter had to make two trips, once to register, once to vote. Given the polling locations, this made it economically prohibitive for a substantial number of expatriates to vote. Furthermore, considering that 85-90% of Iraqis in the US are ChaldoAssyrians, it begs the question as to whether this was a deliberate policy, especially since Nashville, with only 3,000 Kurds, had two polling locations, while San Diego (25,000), Modesto (25,000) and Phoenix (10,000) had none.

Low Turnout

The result of the polling centers distribution in the US was a low turnout for ChaldoAssyrians. Chicago only had three weeks to ramp up for the election, while the other locations had four months lead time. Aladin Khamis, the President of the Chicago based [Assyrian American National Federation](#), stated that there are a lot of Kurds in Nashville but not in Chicago and that the

"Kurds have the power, and the money." The Chicago spokeswoman for IOM, Kathleen Houlihan, conceded in a Chicago Sun-Times interview that Khamis might have a point. But she added, "Welcome to politics. To these people, this is a new experience."

Seat Distribution

To understand the significance of the Assyrian expatriate vote it is necessary to understand how the election worked in Iraq. There are 275 seats in the Iraqi National Assembly (INA). To win a seat, a certain number of minimum votes must be acquired. It is estimated that 8 million Iraqis voted on January 30th. Dividing 8 million by 275 gives 29,000, the minimum number of votes required to win a seat. The lockout of the ChaldoAssyrians potentially cost them 10 seats, assuming 300,000 eligible Assyrian voters were denied the opportunity to vote.

Although Assyrians applauded the election, and have been staunch supporters of the US policy in Iraq, they feel they have been deliberately locked out of the process. In their eyes this is not an auspicious beginning to Iraqi democracy but a continuation of 1400 years of discrimination and marginalization of their community, not only in Iraq but now also in the West.

Given the inequitable access to voting, the ChaldoAssyrians should be guaranteed a minimum number of seats in the INA; this should be between 22 and 27 seats, proportional to the Assyrian population in and out of Iraq, estimated to be between 8 and 10 percent.

Iraqis will head to the polls in eleven months to ratify the constitution the INA is mandated to produce. ChaldoAssyrians are expecting that they will be allowed to vote in Iraq and that more polling places will be added outside of Iraq. As one Assyrian observer noted, "next time there can be no excuses, the IOM, the Iraqi Election Commission and the Kurds have been put on notice."