

Iraq's Yezidis

A Religious and Ethnic Minority Group Faces Repression and Assimilation

By Christian Peacemaker Teams in Iraq
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Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) in Iraq recently met with members of the Yezidi Academic & Cultural Association and the Yezidi Political Movement for Reform and Progress. The Yezidis are very concerned because they feel they are being forced to assimilate into Kurdish culture and identity. They experience injustice in very specific ways, from elections tampering, to threats, to constitutional questions. They fear that their rights as a separate culture and ethnicity will disappear in the new Iraq.

The following is a summary of their experience and concerns, as told to CPT.

History

The Yezidi community is indigenous to Iraq, with religious practice dating back to the Sumerian period in Mesopotamia, circa 2000 BCE. They are a unique ethnic group, with a religion, language, and culture distinct from the Arab and Kurdish cultures among whom they live. According to Islamic belief, they are classified among the “unbelievers,” and have been attacked by religious extremists at different times in their history. In 1700 CE, Yezidis numbered more than one million, but today there are only about 650,000 Yezidis in Iraq, 90% of whom live in Kurdish-controlled Northern Iraq near the city of Mosul.

Under the pro-Arab Saddam regime, Yezidi towns and villages suffered from repression and neglect. Often they lacked basic services such as water, electricity, healthcare and education. As a result, they found themselves in a severe state of poverty and illiteracy. In addition, Saddam's regime required the Yezidis to register themselves as Arab in ethnicity. They resisted this classification, wanting to maintain their unique cultural identity.

Current Problems

After the 2003 invasion, the Yezidis placed high hopes in the creation of the new Iraq, and fought successfully for their inclusion among the cultural and religious groups protected by section 1, article #2 of the new constitution. They dreamed of sharing in the freedom and democracy of the new Iraq.

However, they report that they are experiencing similar repression and forced assimilation, this time under the power of the Kurdish political system. Some of the incidents they report include:

- * Kurdish authorities forcing Yezidis to register as Kurdish.
- * Peshmerga troops control Yezidi areas near Mosul.

* Yezidi political leaders receive threats, and one was assassinated in the spring of 2005.

* Two competing Kurdish political parties are preventing development projects in Yezidi areas. Apparently \$12 million was approved for projects in Yezidi areas in Sinjar, but a political leader in Mosul intervened and blocked the projects from moving forward.

* The Yezidi representatives specifically accuse Kurdish government officials of diverting funds slated for the Yezidi town of Sinjar (pop. 20,000) to a smaller Kurdish village (pop. 1,000). The Yezidi representatives reported that the government funds wells to be drilled in Muslim villages, but does not drill wells in higher-populated Yezidi areas. In addition, Yezidi areas suffer from a lack of schools. In the village of Al Jazeera (pop. 25,000) there are only two elementary schools and six teachers for 1,000 students. Students must go to school in three different shifts. There is no secondary school.

Elections

During the elections in January 2005, Yezidi villages experienced interference and injustice. Yezidi representatives reported that some Yezidi villages received no ballots. Other villages that received ballots did not receive the boxes in which to place the ballots. In other areas, the promised buses for voter transportation failed to appear. In one place, the polls opened from 11AM to 2PM only. In other places, ballot boxes were found stuffed before voting even started. Yezidi leaders submitted claims concerning these incidents to a UN representative, Kurdish leaders, the Iraqi president, and the independent electoral commission in Iraq.

Constitution

Yezidis are mentioned as one of the minority religious groups protected by section 1, article #2 of the new constitution. However, the Yezidi representatives report that the name "Yezidi" is misspelled in its Arabic form. It is misspelled in such a way that it is identical to the name of an Islamic tribe that exists in Yemen. The Yezidi representatives feel that this is a deliberate attempt, by political leaders, to blur the ethnic and religious lines between Arab and Yezidi and Islamic and Yezidi. They fear assimilation, and demand recognition as a separate ethnicity, neither Arab nor Kurdish. In addition, they request the right to have a quota established of independent Yezidi representatives (i.e. not from Kurdish political parties) to ensure that Yezidis are represented in the new Iraqi Council of Representatives.

Yezidi Hopes

As the October 15th deadline for approval of the new constitution approaches, Yezidi cultural and political groups are reaching out to the international community. They request that the international community put pressure on the Iraqi government to:

* Allow Yezidis to identify themselves as Yezidi in ethnicity, not as Arab or Kurdish.

* Recognize Yezidis' political and religious rights by protecting these rights in the constitution (with their name spelled, in Arabic, as they would choose to spell it):

الديانة الإيزيدية

* Establish a quota of independent Yezidi representatives (i.e. not from Kurdish political parties), so that there will always be Yezidi representation in the Iraqi Council of Representatives (Iraqi Parliament).

Contact

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