

---

## IRAQ'S TURKMENS CALL FOR INDEPENDENT PROVINCE

-

18.10.2016

---

Almonitor, 17 October 2016

Iraqi Turkmen, who are citizens of Iraq with Turkish origins, have been calling for their own independent province in the Tal Afar district west of Mosul, located in the center of the Ninevah province. The Turkmen demands coincide with calls for the establishment of other new provinces in Ninevah, such as the Ninevah Plain province for Christians and Sinjar province for the Yazidis.

All of these projects are based on religious or ethnic division, whether among Turkmen, Kurds, Arabs, Sunnis or Shiites. Some see these proposals as the solution to the sectarian, religious and ethnic diversity problems that have caused so much killing and displacement of minorities since the Islamic State (IS) took over the areas in June 2014.

But others fear the proposals would further divide the country into regional fiefdoms, fending off peace and causing new conflicts for power and influence.

Turkmen are a mix of Sunnis and Shiites and are the third-largest ethnicity in Iraq after Arabs and Kurds, numbering about 3 million out of the total population of about 34.7 million, according to 2013 data from the Iraqi Ministry of Planning. Turkmen have escalated their demands as the battle to retake Mosul from IS approaches.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Oct. 2, After liberating Mosul from [IS], only Sunni Arabs, Turkmen and Sunni Kurds should stay there. His remarks drew wide divisions between the Turkmen regarding their areas in Iraq. The Turkmen Rescue Foundation on Oct. 4 denounced Erdogans statements, demanding that he respect the ethnic and sectarian diversity in Iraq, since Mosul is home to a variety of social components, not only the ones he mentioned.

Ahmed Hassan, a Shiite Turkmen who was displaced from Tal Afar and has been living in the predominantly Shiite province of Babil since 2015, told Al-Monitor, Sectarian strife has erupted

among Turkmen. The Shiites among them have fled to Shiite areas in the center and the south, while Sunnis headed to Kurdish areas or crossed into Turkey.

He added, Shiite Turkmen will avoid going to Mosul even after expelling IS, because the latter has instilled a dogmatic ideology in the city's citizens, which will take time to wither."

Of Turkmen, he said, "We are a minority in an unfriendly environment. We have been ethnically persecuted by Arabs and Kurds, while Shiites have been subjected to more sectarian persecution by Arab Sunnis because they are Shiites.

Despite multiple projects to divide Nineveh between the Sunni Arabs and Kurds, Shiite Turkmen are accused of being supported by the armed Popular Mobilization Units seeking to establish a Shiite province in a Sunni environment, to serve as a safe land route for Shiite factions and Iranian forces to Syria to ensure logistic communication and armament.

On the other side, Sunni Turkmen have been calling for the Turkish army to participate in the upcoming military operations to liberate Nineveh, to protect them along the front lines of the Kurdistan Workers Party, which is protecting the Kurds in Syria and Iraq.

The Sunni-majority Nineveh province is also home to other ethnicities, including Arab Shiites, Shiite and Sunni Turkmen, and Kurds. There have been efforts to preserve the diversity, as was the case before the IS invasion. However, there are some agendas seeking division that have resulted in the displacement and suppression of minorities such as Shiite Turkmen.

Ahmed Qader, a Shiite Turkmen who fled to Babil, told Al-Monitor, It won't be safe for minorities, namely Shiites, to return to Tal Afar and neighboring villages unless the city is turned into its own province. Turkmen have suffered from three waves of displacement since IS entered the city. This state of stability is only a fleeting period.

Nahla al-Hibabi, a member of the Iraqi parliament for the Turkmen, told Al-Monitor, The Turkmen demands to manage their affairs independently are not based on sectarian grounds. The constitution allows the establishment of new provinces. However, the sectarian divide already exists within the Turkmen component itself.

But Turkmen spokesman and human rights activist Jaafar al-Talaafri downplayed the disagreements among Turkmen. He told Al-Monitor, Shiite and Sunni Turkmen of the city were

seeking to turn it into a new province before the fall of Mosul in June 2014. This was when the Iraqi Cabinet announced that Tal Afar would become a province. Therefore, the Turkmen's demands do not fall within the sectarian and ethnic context that is being brought up today.

Ali Akram al-Bayati, the director of the Turkmen Rescue Foundation, told Al-Monitor there are other reasons for Turkmen's to call for an independent province.

This would allow access to a certain budget for the construction and development of the province, the formation of a security protection force made up of its citizens to fight against terrorism, as well as providing job opportunities, he said.

Like Hibabi, Bayati noted that the constitution provides for the right to establish new provinces. He stressed that turning Tal Afar into an independent province does not mean it will only include Turkmen's. It will be open to any other ethnic and sectarian components.

Wassim Bassem is an Iraqi journalist who tracks social phenomena in investigations and reports for various media outlets, including Al-Esbuyia, Bab Nour and Elaph.

---

Kaynak/Source: