
ISDP Policy Alert

KRG Continues to Fail Vulnerable Minorities in Iraq

On Friday, December 2, 2011, after Friday prayers, hundreds of Muslim Kurdish youth in Zakho were mobilized by the preaching of a fundamentalist Imam to attack businesses and properties owned by Christian Assyrians and Yezidis. The attacks were ostensibly directed against establishments ‘offensive to Islam’, such as those which distribute alcohol owned by Christians. Shortly after the attacks in Zakho, violence erupted in Simele, Dohuk, Shioz, Amadiyah, Derelok and Zaweeta, targeting Christian Assyrians (also known as Chaldeans and Syriacs) and Yezidis. On December 4th, notes delivered to owners of the destroyed businesses warned that any attempt to reopen would mean death.

The KRG portrays itself as a bastion of toleration with respect to non-Muslim minorities and indeed has won recognition as such by many international observers. In 2009, however, International Crisis Group and Human Rights Watch produced reports on the situation of ethnic and religious minorities in the KRG and KRG-controlled territories which highlighted human rights abuses by a government operating more like a dictatorship actively subjugating minority peoples.¹

The KRG deems it a vital priority to present its society as moderate and its government as a source of protection for Christian Assyrians. International human rights and policy observers, however, already exposed the KRG’s dictatorial, predatory behavior towards vulnerable minorities. As such, the international community, especially the Government of the United States of America, must recognize these attacks as part of a pattern of KRG failure when it comes to minority rights.

The reality for ethno-religious minorities inside the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is that crimes against them rarely go punished and they are often denied any restitution. Violence in an array of forms has been endured regularly in the KRG against minorities with impunity. The criminal justice system has not prosecuted Muslim Kurds who target Christians. In instances of physical violence, cases often do not reach the courts.

The scope and geographic breadth of the violence over the last three days reflects a concerted campaign that is organized and thus makes it of enormous significance. The violence also falls well within the boundaries of the KRG’s anti-terrorism laws, which is what many Christian Assyrian political representatives are proclaiming. Moreover, these are licensed, legally sanctioned businesses that operate with the assumption that the state will protect them as equally as the businesses owned by neighboring Muslims.

¹ International Crisis Group. “Iraq’s New Battlefield: The Struggle Over Ninewa”, Sept. 28, 2009. www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-iran-gulf/iraq/090-iraqs-new-battlefront-the-struggle-over-ninewa.aspx. Human Rights Watch. “On Vulnerable Ground: Violence Against Minority Communities in Nineveh Province’s Disputed Territories”, November 2009. <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2009/11/10/vulnerable-ground-0>.

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The test for the KRG is whether it will devote the resources to capturing the perpetrators (who brazenly allow themselves to be filmed). It also requires a full and public investigation that punishes the orchestrators of the violence, including the Imams and the people instructing and organizing the Imams.

In the KRG today, the greatest source of minority insecurity has been impunity; such as that demonstrated by the Muslim Kurdish assailants in recent attacks. Since the creation of the No-Fly-Zone covering the KRG in 1991 and the creation of a de facto government, crimes committed against minorities with impunity have been accumulating. The most serious of these crimes include murder and rape at the individual level and land theft at the communal level. For over 20 years, Christian Assyrians have been assassinated, murdered, women have been raped (and sometimes murdered) and whole villages have been illegally seized and made the property of Muslim Kurds, with government sanction.

It is for this reason that ethno-religious minorities in Iraq maintain a heightened insecurity in the KRG, as they are fully aware of their second-class citizenship. Decades of witnessing a state unwilling to defend their fundamental individual and collective rights, both in the courts and in the enforcement of laws, has scarred the population and left them deeply skeptical of being able to fully realize their rights in the KRG.

For now, the KRG's President, Mr. Massoud Barzani, has been vocal in his dismay regarding the violence and vociferous in his calls for measures to end the violence. Termination of the violence is of course critical. The real question is whether President Barzani and Prime Minister Barham Saleh will use KRG resources to capture and prosecute the assailants and organizers. The KRG's criminal justice track record indicates that violence against Christian Assyrians and Yezidis will go unpunished and that the victims will once again be reminded of their second-class citizenship in the face of a culture of impunity when targeting minorities in the KRG.

The international community cannot separate these events from the emergent trend of Islamization that is targeting Christians in Egypt and trends developing in Syria. While determining the extent of government involvement in violence against Christians in the KRG remains subject to investigation, it is clear that the government's inability to reign in Kurdish Islamist extremists reflects serious government failure. In the first stages of the violence, KRG security services appear to have simply allowed the assailants to wreak havoc unimpeded.

These events, and decades of violence perpetrated with impunity, belie the notion that Christian Assyrians can live safely, and enjoy full equality and full protection of their rights in the KRG. Given the desperate situation of the Christian Assyrians and other vulnerable minorities, such as Yezidis and Shabaks, it is necessary for the international community to target these peoples with specific policies meant to preserve their existence in their homeland.

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Recommendations for the United States of America:

1. Prioritize passing legislation in the 2012 appropriation already approved in the United States Senate which articulates the clearest form of an 'Iraqi Vulnerable Minorities Policy' seen to date.
2. Use the remaining stages of the 2012 appropriations process to expand the language and reallocate not less than \$75 million of the 2012 appropriation for Iraq in support of the language.
3. Work towards a USG policy on Iraq's vulnerable minorities that reinforces support for the minorities as they pursue: i) the creation of a province in the Nineveh Plain via Article 125 of Iraq's constitution, ii) expansion, training and resourcing for the Nineveh Plain's local police force and increasing fair inclusion of vulnerable minorities in Iraq's various security services, iii) ensuring an increase in development funding that is channeled through independent NGOs.
4. Finally, the USG should freeze all funding for development and economic support projects in the KRG until the recommendations listed below are realized

Recommendations for the International Community, including the United States:

1. Call for swift governmental action to prevent any further attacks in the short-term;
2. Require a transparent, well-resourced investigation into the violence;
3. The capture and full prosecution of *all* involved with emphasis on the fundamentalist Imams inciting the attacks;
4. A full report into how this was allowed to happen and governmental measures to prevent its recurrence;
5. Ensuring that measures of restitution for the victims are realized;
6. Sanction companies engaging in bilateral oil deals with the KRG, requiring them to freeze business until the KRG brings the perpetrators to justice and provides full restitution to the victims;
7. The creation of a longer-term agenda of providing justice and restitution for the long list of serious crimes committed with impunity against Christian Assyrians, Yezidis and other minorities.