

# Iraqi Turkmen: The Controversy of Identity and Affiliation

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Since 2003, Turkmen in Iraq have sought to preserve their identity with a desire to integrate with the surrounding environment, which has manifested in their entry into non-Turkmen parties and their antipathy to those who view them as a minority



This duality has shaped Turkmen behavior, from a rush to integrate with the surroundings on one hand to a turning inward because of the inability to confront larger groups



This study seeks to reveal the Turkmen's self-understanding of their situation, and what their future should be in Iraq, based an analytical survey approach through direct interviews with the "elites".





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# 1

## Introduction

In the years since 2003, as in previous eras, the Turkmen of Iraq have sought to preserve their identity as the third largest ethnic group in the country by emphasizing their distinctive language, their popular folklore, and their cultural presence. This has coincided with a strong desire to integrate into the social and cultural environment, which has manifested in their entry into non-Turkmen political parties and antipathy from those who view them as a minority in the country.

This duality has shaped Turkmen behavior, ranging from a rush to integrate with the broader surroundings on one hand to a turning inward on the other because of an inability to confront larger groups (Shiite Arabs, Sunni Arabs, and Kurds).

This duality has made its imprint on Turkmen political alliances and the community's demands of the federal government – historical demands that seem to have received insufficient popular and official attention at times, in comparison to other ethnic and religious groups in Iraq.

This study seeks to reveal the Turkmen's self-understanding of their situation and their aspirations, and what their future should be in Iraq.

## 2

# Methodology and Comparative Concepts

This study is based on an analytical survey approach reliant on direct interviews with “elites,” by which we mean activists, academics, media figures, members of political parties. These individuals are knowledgeable about and have a real, effective presence in the public arena, and geographically they are spread across the governorates of Baghdad, Saladin, Diyala, Mosul, Kirkuk, and Erbil.

Twenty interviews were conducted with several matrix questions that addressed Turkmen elites’ perceptions of relationships with the federal government, the Kurdistan Region, and Turkey, as well as their perceptions of themselves as a group.

The interviews took place in April 2021. The surveyed elites have various Islamic, liberal, territorial, and tribal affiliations, which was a deliberate attempt at broader qualitative representation across all divisions of Turkmen society.<sup>(1)</sup>

The term “Turkmen” is used in an ethnoanthropological sense in this study. The standard for identification as “Turkmen” in the study is belonging to this ethnic group, culture, space, geography, or folkloric identity existing in various Iraqi governorates.

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1 The researcher has listed the names of the elites interviewed at the end of this study.



### 3

## The Turkmen: Who are they? What is distinctive about them?

Turkmen citizens are descended from Anatolian origins in Central Asia. The Turkmen were introduced to Islam through trade and travel circa 673 AD, when they entered Iraq through Basra. Some of them settled in different regions in the Umayyad Period and were called “Turk Eman” or Turks of Faith, meaning that they believed in Islam. This descriptor later morphed into “Turkmen.” Later, the Abbasid Caliphate recruited Seljuk Turkmen to fight due to their great valor and skill in warfare.

The Turkmen who migrated in the Abbasid Period settled in their own areas with a view to preserving their identity and avoid intermixing with Arabs. The Turkmen brought their architecture, arts, and folklore, and they named their cities in Iraq after the ones they came from in Turkestan. The architecture of the famous Mustansiriya Madrasah, the distinctive cemeteries, the Seljuk-style religious shrines, the citadels of Erbil and Kirkuk, and the Bayati musical mode well-known in Turkmen song are still alive in Iraqi culture. Also still with us is the name of the city of Samarra, one of the

first areas that the Turkmen tribes established. According to some researchers, the name goes back to Samara, a city in the present-day Russian republic of Tatarstan, as it was formerly a military camp for those tribes.<sup>(2)</sup> The names of some of the districts of the current Samarra, such as Samarkand and Bukhara, also trace back to the names of districts and cities from which Turkmen arrived in centuries past.

Turkmen power, influence, and numbers in Iraq then increased in the Ottoman Era, as they were part of the Turkic world. Nevertheless, the Turkmen of Iraq speak diverse dialects only partially related to the Turkish language now predominant in Turkey. They see themselves as closer to the Turks of present-day Azerbaijan than those of Turkey.

The number of Turkmen in Iraq today ranges from 2 million to 3 million. They inhabit a swath separating the Arabs and the Kurds, from the city and suburbs of Tal Afar in northwestern Iraq to Tuz Khurmatu in Saladin Governorate,

2 <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samara>

then Kirkuk, then Mandali and Khanaqin in Diyala in far eastern Iraq.<sup>(3)</sup>

Turkmens are organized into “houses” in urban areas and into tribes and clans in rural areas. The names of the houses refer to the occupations practiced by Turkmen. Other Turkmen have joined Arab tribes such as Jubur, Ubaid, Sabawi, and Shammar. The Bayati tribe is one of the largest Turkmen tribes and exists alongside dozens of other tribes and houses. In general, Turkmen suggest that the folkloric role of the houses and tribes goes beyond the embodiment of a decisive power among the people of this ethnic group. Many of those surveyed assert that the Turkmen tribes do not engage in many of the tribal customs present among Arabs, in particular tribal justice and marriage customs. They note that Turkmen women have high standing in the family, and polygamy is rare among Turkmen men.<sup>(4)</sup>

In religious terms, Turkmen are divided into an overwhelming Muslim majority and a small Christian minority. The Muslims are roughly equally split between Shiite and Sunni. Like other peoples of Central Asia and the Middle East, Turkmen celebrate Nowruz. They

have a folkloric culture of food, dance, and song. Their dress is distinctive, and Turkmen women’s clothing is largely sky blue, also the color of their flag.

Some researchers note that the distant roots of the Turkmen originated with Sumerian peoples. One Turkmen journalist says, “Many of the names of villages, cities, and food come from Sumerian.”<sup>(5)</sup> To date, researchers have discovered more than 350 Turkmen words that trace back to the Sumerians. There is also speculation that traditional Turkmen dress strongly resembles Sumerian dress from thousands of years ago.

**3** Zahed al-Bayati, “The Turkmen: Iraq’s Third Ethnic Group,” *Minorities in Iraq: Memory, Identity, and Challenges*, ed. Saad Salloum, Baghdad and Beirut, Masarat for Cultural and Media Development, 2013: pp. 192-205.

**4** Conversation with Berkel al-Bayati, activist at the Turkmeneli Foundation for Development and Reconstruction, and Mohammad Oji, a university student from Kirkuk.

**5** Conversation with Nermin al-Mufti, a journalist in Baghdad and Kirkuk.

## 4

# The Turkmen: History's tale and the pain of identity

Turkmen reserve special disdain for being characterized as the vestiges of the Ottoman Turks, which has been part of this ethnic group's experience under the contemporary Iraqi state. British colonial authorities were keen to remove the Turkmen, seeing them as vestiges of the Ottomans, while local political forces seized on and promoted this idea for political purposes. It later became an element of the suspicion that rulers of Iraq wielded against the Turkmen.

A Turkmen politician says: "The English viewed Turkmen as Ottoman agents, because the Turkmen stood up against colonization. It was even said that the 1920 Revolution began in Tal Afar. The English committed massacres against the Turkmen, including the 1920 massacre in Kirkuk and then the Levi massacre in 1924. Various regimes then committed other massacres against the Turkmen, including the 1946 massacre against Iraqi Petroleum Company workers. After the 1958 Revolution, the Turkmen rejoiced at this event because they were against the monarchy brought by the English. But in 1959, when the Turkmen

wanted to celebrate the anniversary of the revolution, Arab and Kurdish communists committed a massacre that lasted three nights in Kirkuk. Dozens were executed, including leaders, merchants, and intellectuals."<sup>(6)</sup> After that massacre specifically, many Turkmen were forced to migrate from Kirkuk to Baghdad and out of Iraq. "On December 16, 1980, four Turkmen leaders were executed by Saddam Hussein's regime. When the March 1991 uprising broke out, the city of Altun Kupri in Kirkuk suffered a massacre that killed 100 people who were executed in the city center. The youngest was 19, while the oldest of those executed was 70 years old."<sup>(7)</sup>

After 2003, Turkmen cities – as well as other cities – were subjected to targeted terrorist attacks, especially the cities of Tuz Khurmatu, Taza Khurmatu, and Amirli. There were sometimes 20 car bombs a day in Tuz Khurmatu.

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6 Conversation with Mohammad Tahsin, political activist in Kirkuk.

7 Conversation with Attila Nizamuddin Khurshid, a media figure from Kirkuk.

After the Islamic State emerged in 2014, the extremist organization also heavily targeted Turkmen areas. “The Taza area was also subjected to chemical attack. They committed massacres in the village of Bashir, as well as Kirkuk and Tuz, where the Turkmen population was subjected to widespread genocide.”<sup>(8)</sup> “The Turkmen girls captured still have not been freed. No one remembers them the way they do other ISIS victims.”<sup>(9)</sup>

It is not just a sense of eternal danger and a defensive posture that are part of Turkmen identity, but also a general sense of loss. A Turkmen youth says: “We have a problem with the language. It is only a little Turkish, it is not fully Azeri, and it is definitely different from Arabic. The identity crisis we have is clear. Even between Turkmen areas within Iraq, sometimes we do not understand each other. We always have a sense that others are plotting. The Turkmen memory is full of massacres by the Assyrians, the Baathists, the Communists, and the Kurdish region. It is dangerous to be Turkmen.”<sup>(10)</sup>

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**8** Conversation with Mohammad Hashem al-Salehi, writer and media figure from Kirkuk.

**9** Conversation with Mustafa Mahmoud, a civil activist in Baghdad.

**10** Conversation with Mohammad Oji.

## 5

# Turkmens and Kurds: A tense relationship

None of the respondents spoke of a positive view of the Kurds. In fact, some of them spoke of “a perpetual problem with the Kurds due to old tribal conflicts as well as the Kirkuk issue.”<sup>(11)</sup>

After 2003, the Kurds took possession of disputed areas with a Turkmen majority. “Because of this, the Turkmens in this zone were subjected to murder, robbery, kidnapping, and looting that continued until 2017, when the federal government retook control of Kirkuk following the illegal referendum for the region to secede from Iraq.”<sup>(12)</sup>

Prior to the Kurdish referendum, the situation in Turkmen areas with Kurdistan Region authorities was very tense. A young activist says, for example, “Eleven of 12 young people on our street were beaten and robbed at the hands of Kurdish gangs.”<sup>(13)</sup> “The assassinations of Turkmen figures and activists never ceased during that period,”<sup>(14)</sup> which

was “like ethnic cleansing. But they stopped completely after 2017, that is, after Kurdish forces were removed from Kirkuk.”<sup>(15)</sup>

The Turkmens spoke bitterly of their community’s experience with Kurdish governance from 2003 to 2017. They pointed to a systematic violation of rights through the exclusion of Turkmens from posts, privileges, and reconstruction aid due to Turkmen areas. This went so far that “the Kirkuk airport was out of operation because of the potential for harm to the Erbil and Sulaymaniyah airports from this project.”<sup>(16)</sup>

During this period, the number of Kurds in Kirkuk rose unusually fast, as regional authorities encouraged Kurdish women living in the region’s governorates to register their newborns in Kirkuk. There was also extensive migration from the Kurdistan Region to these governorates. “This policy increased the number of Kurds from 480,000 in 2003 to

**11** Conversation with Ahmad Hassan.

**12** Conversation with Ali Abbas Shammeh, activist in Tuz Khurmatu and Khalis.

**13** Conversation with Mustafa Mahmoud.

**14** Conversation with Haider al-Damerji.

**15** Conversation with Attila Nizamuddin Khurshid.

**16** Conversation with Ali Hussein Shammam, a university student in Kirkuk.

more than 1.2 million. They even burned land registries, documents, and records to hide all of this.”<sup>(17)</sup>

In Turkmen areas still under the control of Kurdistan Region, such as Kifri, Jalawla, Mandali, Qazaniyah, and Hamrin, “the people feel harmed, marginalized, and mistreated”<sup>(18)</sup> when it comes to administrative issues, financial allocations, government appointments, and the distribution of positions due to the community in these areas.

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**17** Conversation with Nermin al-Mufti.

**18** Conversation with Yasser Badr Abd, media director for Diyala Governorate.

## 6

# The ambiguous Turkmen relationship with Turkey

Despite the Turkmen consensus that they are not Turkish, attitudes in Turkmen society betray a feeling that their relationship with Turkey is marred by a considerable lack of clarity or stability of vision. It is understandable that culturally, the Turkmen are descended from the seven countries of the world that speak Turkic languages. Despite the diversity of dialects, the linguistic commonality is an important factor in rapid acculturation and the sense of cultural and civilizational connection to those countries. Naturally, on this basis, Turkmen typically tend to travel to Turkey for tourism, buying property, education, and medical treatment. Most of the respondents pointed out that Turkey offers Iraqi Turkmen standard preferential accommodations in terms of residency, facilitation of administrative transactions, and so on, making Turkey “the preferred country for Turkmen seeking life opportunities that other Arab and non-Arab countries do not offer them.”<sup>(19)</sup> Turkey not only provides aid to Turkmen in its territory, it also has helped Turkmen areas in Iraq in the event of crises such as bombings and natural

disasters,<sup>(20)</sup> as well as with the reconstruction of destroyed areas.

The Turkmen proudly point to their cultural connection to the Turkic world, just as other ethnic and religious groups show pride in their reach in the region and the world. Their political attitude toward Turkey, on the other hand, was not so clear.

Many of the respondents acknowledge that “Turkey supports Turkmen parties morally and materially.”<sup>(21)</sup> It seems that Turkish decisions have a critical impact on Turkmen parties’ positions because Turkmen leaders are frequently in Turkey and rely on Turkish support in policies that concern the Turkmen. One activist downplayed this idea by saying, “The Turkmen take advantage of their relationship with Turkey because they do not marginalize them in the region and Baghdad.”<sup>(22)</sup>

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19 Conversation with Mohammad Hashem al-Salehi.

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20 Conversation with Berkel al-Bayati.

21 Conversation with Ali Abbas Ali.

22 Conversation with Mohammad Yassin Shaker (alias), university student and activist for minorities.

The Turkmen position on Turkey goes further than that. There is a narrative<sup>(23)</sup> among most of them (including the educated) to the effect that “Kirkuk and Mosul, which both encompass extensive Turkmen areas, became part of Iraq under the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, a treaty that expires in 2023, and thus the governorates will revert to Turkey, their mother country.”<sup>(24)</sup> Revealing the depth of bitterness about the hardships of life under successive Iraqi governments, one of the Turkmen adds: “These two cities will revert to Turkey. Even Turkmen children want their areas to become Turkish, because our rights have been violated so much.”<sup>(25)</sup> Despite all this, other Turkmen insist, “We are not a part of Turkey,”<sup>(26)</sup> and, “Despite the affinity and amity with Turkey, we are Iraqis.”<sup>(27)</sup>

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**23** This narrative owes to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on the Treaty of Lausanne and his demand to put in writing what he says are secret clauses. Experts have noted Turkey’s inclination to reclaim the areas lost by the Ottoman Empire as a result of this treaty. For more on the Turkish president’s statement, see [shorturl.at/fuLX6](https://shorturl.at/fuLX6). Also read the text of the Treaty of Lausanne: [https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Treaty\\_of\\_Lausanne](https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Treaty_of_Lausanne)

**24** Conversation with Ali Hussein Shammam and Yasser Badr Abd.

**25** Conversation with Ali Hussein Shammam.

**26** Conversation with Attila Nizamuddin Khurshid.

**27** Conversation with Haider al-Damerji and Ali Gharib al-Bayati in Kirkuk.



## 7

# The Turkmen and the Iraqi Government: Constant push and pull

The post-2003 structure of the Iraqi state distributes positions according to ethnic, sectarian, and partisan allotments based on compromise agreements. Article 4 of the Iraqi Constitution mentions the Turkmen's right to be educated in their mother tongue, an implicit recognition of Turkmen as Iraq's third ethnic group in addition to being the second-largest group in the Kurdistan Region. The Turkmen acknowledge that they have more than 70 Turkmen schools in the various areas where they have a presence, but they disagree in their assessment of the government's handling of the entitlements owed to them.<sup>(28)</sup>

Several of the surveyed Turkmen noted that the number of Turkmen among government members, officials, and high-ranking personnel in the federal government, state ministries, governorates, the army, and independent authorities do not match the allotments due to the group.<sup>(29)</sup>

On the other hand, there are those who acknowledge the inclusion of Turkmen in important positions in the country but see this as a partisan allotment to non-Turkmen parties, with the positions awarded based on the competence of individuals who happen to be Turkmen, not an ethnic allotment to Turkmen.<sup>(30)</sup>

Meanwhile, the Turkmen former minister and parliamentarian Torhan al-Mufti stated: "Turkmen have taken important positions in the state, with one ministry in the government of Ayad Allawi, two ministries in the first al-Maliki government and four ministries in the second, in addition to independent authorities, deputy ministers, and general directors in important service ministries. Turkmen also had one ministry and independent authorities in the al-Abadi government."

Perhaps the internal political division among Turkmen and their place on the margins of the three major players (Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds) make the people of this ethnic group feel weak

<sup>28</sup> For more, see Habib Hürmüzlü, "Turkmen education in light of the provisions of Iraqi legislation," on the website Kerkuk Vakfi: [shorturl.at/kvwxl](http://shorturl.at/kvwxl)

<sup>29</sup> Conversation with Ali Gharib al-Bayati, Ali Hussein Shammam, Yasser Badr Abd, and Mohammad Oji.

<sup>30</sup> Conversation with Ahmad Hassan, a civil activist from Baghdad, and Duraid Tawfiq, Ali Abbas Ali, and Mohammad Yassin Shaker (alias).

and excluded without that necessarily being the reality on the ground, given the historical feelings of marginalization and suspicion that have characterized Turkmen culture generally for years.

The Turkmen generally acknowledge that there is no “unjust” legislation against them within the Iraqi state, but they carry with them decades-old complaints about previous actions, especially during the Baath era. That includes the confiscation of substantial territory by the Committee for Northern Affairs pursuant to decisions of the since-dissolved Revolutionary Command Council. That land still has not been recovered, despite the existence of authorities like the Property Claims Commission that have been created since 2003.

Meanwhile, the Turkmen believe that they experience discrimination in government hiring as the upshot of three main factors: political conflict between Arabs and Kurds,<sup>(31)</sup> a lack of unity among Turkmen leaders in defending their community’s rights, and the ethnic group’s geographic dispersion across far-flung governorates. This has naturally resulted in the neglect and destruction of infrastructure and an increasing sense among Turkmen of discrimination within the State.

Turkmen believe the new elections law, which provides for the election of individual

lawmakers in smaller electoral districts, poses a significant risk to their representation. Given the dispersion of Turkmen across Iraq, the new law does not guarantee a significant parliamentary presence for Turkmen representatives. In Baghdad, for example, there are 300,000 Turkmen residents across 17 separate electoral districts. According to experts, this makes it difficult for any Turkmen candidate to win comfortably.<sup>(32)</sup>

Article 140 of the Constitution, concerning the fate of disputed areas, may be the crux of Turkmen’s relationship with the federal government. Turkmen refuse to call these areas “disputed,” believing them to be historically Turkmen areas, including Kirkuk and many cities and villages. Some of those surveyed even see Article 140 as nothing but the “Kurdish normalization article.”<sup>(33)</sup>

Turkmen have felt wounded since the October 2017 referendum on Kurdish secession. They also complain that Article 130 of the Constitution, concerning the distribution of positions in Kirkuk, has not been enforced. Both things, they say, have deprived Turkmen of their political rights.<sup>(34)</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Conversation with Attila Nizamuddin Khurshid.

<sup>32</sup> Conversation with Duraid Tawfiq and Salma Abdul Aziz.

<sup>33</sup> Conversation with Yasser Badr Abd, Mohammad Tahsin, Nermin al-Mufti, and Salma Abdul Aziz.

<sup>34</sup> Conversation with Berkel al-Bayati and Haider al-Damerji.

## 8

# The Turkmen: A confused political situation

Turkmen political parties formed outside Iraq prior to 2003. The National Turkmen Party, founded in 1988 in Ankara,<sup>(35)</sup> was one of the first Turkmen parties. It was followed by the Movement of the Independent Turkmen, which formed in 1991. Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish parties, included – and still include – prominent Turkmen figures. Kurdish leaders in Kurdistan Region in the 1990s deliberately encouraged the establishment of Turkmen parties that Turkmen today call “cardboard parties.” In their view, these parties came about not to represent Turkmen demands<sup>(36)</sup> but to sow division in the Turkmen ranks for the benefit of the Kurds.<sup>(37)</sup>

In 1995, Turkmen parties unified into the Turkmen Front, which still officially represents Turkmen. The Turkmen Front comprises nine

parties, including the Turkmen Rights Party, the Turkmen Movement, the Decision Party, Islamic Allegiance, the Islamic Union, the Turkmeneli Party, and others, as well as a large number of independent political figures.<sup>(38)</sup>

Turkmen from various regions and political orientations insist that the Turkmen Front is sole representative of Turkmen, despite the existence of parties and figures outside the Front.<sup>(39)</sup> Turkmen political tendencies can be categorized as taking two main directions: Sunni nationalism, represented by the Turkmen Front, and Shiite sectarians divided among the Islamic Dawa Party, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, the Badr Organization, and Shiite Turkmen detachments within the Popular Mobilization Forces.<sup>(40)</sup>

Since 2003, the internal political disputes among Turkmen have fallen along the same sectarian lines as the Iraq-wide sectarian

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**35** Conversation with Mohammad Tahsin.

**36** Conversation with Yasser Badr Abd, Nermin al-Mufti, and Mohammad Oji.

**37** For more, see, for example, these parties’ position on the Kurdistan Region, “Turkmen parties back Kurdish federalist project”: [shorturl.at/hyABF](http://shorturl.at/hyABF); and the parties’ position on the Kurdistan Democratic Party, “Seven Turkmen parties choose KDP list as the defender of all communities’ rights”: [shorturl.at/kzNP3](http://shorturl.at/kzNP3)

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**38** Conversation with Ali Gharib al-Bayati.

**39** Conversation with Mohammad Yassin Shaker (alias), Duraid Tawfiq, Berkel al-Bayati, and Ali Abbas Ali (alias), a civil servant in Kirkuk.

**40** Conversation with Ali Abbas Ali.

conflict,<sup>(41)</sup> forcing Turkmen to prioritize their sectarian religious affiliations (Muslim Brotherhood or Shiite Islamist) over their ethnic affiliation. The decline of political sectarianism in recent years, however, has given the Turkmen growing hope of unification based on inclusive ethnic grounds. This has manifested in the form of Turkmen Shiite parties' entry into the Turkmen Front and the formation of Turkmen detachments within the Popular Mobilization Forces that embrace Turkmen without regard to sect and have a mission of protecting Turkmen areas,<sup>(42)</sup> especially in Kirkuk.

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**41** Conversation with Abu Mustafa and Mohammad Tahsin.

**42** Conversation with Haider al-Damerji.

## 9

### What comes after ISIS?

The sectarian division within the Turkmen community has been reflected in their political and military choices as well, specifically the choices of Sunni Turkmen because of the incursion of Naqshbandi militants. They were impacted by severe discriminatory measures by the Iraqi security forces against the people of Mosul before ISIS occupied Nineveh Governorate in 2014, all of which influenced some Turkmen in the Tal Afar area to join ISIS.<sup>(43)</sup> Turkmen society noticed that the first ISIS school was founded in Tal Afar, and the aide to the organization's head was Turkmen.<sup>(44)</sup>

Despite all this, Sunni, Shiite, and Christian Turkmen in other areas remained loyal to the federal government and aligned with the general political order.

Both paths (i.e. joining ISIS or aligning with the political order) reveal the Turkmen desire for solidarity with the social environment, the influence of their surroundings, and the

choice not to be an isolated, secluded minority group.

After all of that, ISIS left an indelible mark on Turkmen society. Turkmen Shiite women who were abducted remain unaccounted for, as they did not receive the same local and international attention as abducted Yazidi women.<sup>(45)</sup> In addition, the populations of 39 villages around Tuz, along with 150,000 Tal Afar families, have not yet returned to their homes.<sup>(46)</sup>

The emergence of ISIS coincided with the Kurdistan Region taking control of Kirkuk and many Turkmen areas. The community was deprived of appointments in the public sector, as well as civil privileges and freedoms, to an extent that one respondent stated, "The Turkmen were prisoners under Kurdish rule."<sup>(47)</sup>

Following community and government efforts to eliminate ISIS, Turkmen Shiites who

<sup>43</sup> Conversation with Ahmad Hassan, Mustafa Mahmoud, Mohammad Oji, and Berkel al-Bayati, a civil activist in Kirkuk and Baghdad, and Haider al-Damerji, an activist in Tuz Khurmatu.

<sup>44</sup> Conversation with Ali Hussein Shammam.

<sup>45</sup> Conversation with Attila Nizamuddin Khurshid.

<sup>46</sup> Conversation with Mohammad Yassin Shaker (alias).

<sup>47</sup> Conversation with Mohammad Tahsin.

suffered doubly at the hands of both the Kurds and IS joined the Popular Mobilization Forces, forming four full brigades. They were then joined by Sunni Turkmen within the very same brigades, and large numbers of Shiite and Sunni Turkmen joined the federal police.<sup>(48)</sup>

The Turkmen take a highly positive view of their situation today, describing it as the best they have known since 2003, given their capacity for armed self-protection of their territory and people.<sup>(49)</sup> The new Turkmen reality has granted the community a general sense of relief, which is reflected in their security and political situation, especially in Kirkuk. They note that the killings, kidnappings, thefts, and extortion came to an end after the liberation of these areas and have not resumed.

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**48** Conversation with Salma Abdul Aziz, an activist in Kirkuk and Erbil with the Alliance Network for Minorities, and Fayhaa Zayn al-Abidine al-Bayati, a former National Assembly member representing Kirkuk Governorate.

**49** Conversation with Ali Abbas Ali (alias), Nermin al-Mufti, and Mustafa Mahmoud.

## 10

# Kirkuk and Turkmen territory: A promise deferred

Turkmens are insistent on the Turkmen character of Kirkuk, which Kurds see as “Kurdistan’s holy of holies.” The federal government, meanwhile, sees it as an Iraqi governorate that cannot be annexed to the Kurdistan Region.<sup>(50)</sup>

Turkmens marshal several points of evidence to argue that Kirkuk is Turkmen, including the 1957 census, which showed a Turkmen majority in the governorate. Since the Ottoman era, the center and seat of power for Kirkuk has been the Citadel. It is a Turkmen area, as are the riverfront, the historical homes, alleyways, the old cemeteries, and the prevailing musical modes of Kirkuk – all Turkmen.<sup>(51)</sup> The old names of most of the villages and districts in Kirkuk, as well as the prevalent trades and occupations, trace back to Turkmen families.<sup>(52)</sup>

The Turkmens remember the pain associated

with the political decision that led the government in Baghdad to encourage Arab citizens to migrate to Kirkuk in the 1980s and 1990s to Arabize it, as well as the partition of Turkmen Tuz Khurmatu from Kirkuk and its annexation to Arab-majority Saladin Governorate.

Since 2003, Kurdistan Region authorities have deliberately encouraged Kurds to migrate to Kirkuk for the purpose of demographic change in the governorate. In that time, 600,000 Kurdish families have settled there. According to the respondents, the Kurdish authorities have burned the relevant records and documents to hide this scheme, but they cannot hide the unnaturally large vote shares that Kurdish political forces have obtained in several parliamentary elections since 2003 as a result of this broad demographic change.<sup>(53)</sup>

The Turkmens insist that Kirkuk be treated as its own governorate or region, and they

**50** The late President Jalal Talabani, a prominent Kurdish leader and a founder of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, used this expression more than once. For example, see: [shorturl.at/bdAQW](http://shorturl.at/bdAQW)

**51** Conversation with Ali Abbas Ali (alias).

**52** Conversation with Salma Abdul Aziz and Ali Abbas Ali.

**53** Conversation with Ahmad Hassan, Ali Gharib al-Bayati, and Duraid Tawfiq, an elections researcher and coordinator for the Turkmen Front in Baghdad.

categorically reject annexation to the Kurdistan Region. This attitude seems to confirm the Turkmen desire for Iraqi unity and a strong federal state. Any weakness in the State itself negatively affects this group's situation and interests.

With respect to other Turkmen areas, Turkmen seem to be united in demanding that large districts such as Tuz Khurmatu and Tal Afar be converted to governorates. This proposal has been submitted to previous governments and sent to the House of Representatives, but political disagreements have delayed a decision on it.<sup>(54)</sup>

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**54** Conversation with former minister and parliamentarian Torhan al-Mufti, Mohammad Oji, and Mohammad Yassin Shaker (alias).



# 11

## What is next for the Turkmen? (closing recommendations)

The Turkmen have varied private and public demands. As Iraqi citizens, they demand security, stability, and services. As Turkmen, they point to the need to resolve problems that have concerned them for decades. Turkmen demands can be enumerated according to the required governmental, legislative, and judicial policies as follows:

1. A solution to the problem of land that has been stolen, or politically and administratively seized by the Kurdistan Region or other governorates, or expropriated under agricultural contracts for the benefit of non-Turkmen tribes.
2. The Turkmen expressed a deep sense of marginalization, even in their "grievances." They note how the local and international community have treated women who survived ISIS and the rights of martyrs who died years ago. It is therefore necessary for the relevant institutions to attend to the plight of Turkmen victims.
3. Turkmen demand the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Turkmen areas following the Arabization and Kurdishization campaigns, and after ISIS as well. This is a public issue, but it is a potential source of tension if left unattended, especially because tens of thousands of displaced persons have not returned to their homes because of the destruction.
4. With respect to cultural rights, Turkmen demand institutions to sponsor, lead, and support Turkish culture within the ministries of culture and education, the Communications and Media Commission, and so on. These are demands that should receive attention for this community.
5. Turkmen representatives proposed to the previous government a draft law to protect Turkmen rights, including the establishment of a body concerned with Turkmen rights, which would oversee the ethnic group's administrative and

cultural rights.<sup>(55)</sup> The resubmission of this proposal could serve as a catalyst for the restoration of Turkmen rights in many arenas.

6. Turkmen feel that attention must be given to Turkmen in appointments within various ministries and state bodies. This is an issue that cannot afford to get lost amid the mounting political conflicts among major players in the political process, as such neglect would have considerable social and perhaps political consequences.
7. Turkmen demand recognition of the massacres committed against them, along the lines of the recognition of the massacres in Halabja and Anfal. This would be the beginning of genuine societal reconciliation and the aspiration for a new era free of exclusion and invisibility.

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**55** See Habib Hürmüzlü, "A look at the Iraqi House of Representatives decision to recognize Turkmen rights and deem them the third main ethnic group in Iraq," from the website Nahnu al-Turkman: [shorturl.at/pFH78](http://shorturl.at/pFH78)

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### Names of the Turkmens interviewed for the purposes of this study (listed alphabetically)

1. Abu Mustafa (alias), Tal Afar, local dignitary, retired
2. Ahmad Hassan, Baghdad, civil servant and activist
3. Ali Hussein Shammam, Kirkuk, student
4. Ali Abbas Shammeh, Tuz Khurmatu and Khalis, teacher and activist
5. Ali Abbas Ali (alias), Kirkuk, civil servant
6. Ali Gharib al-Bayati, Kirkuk, media figure
7. Attila Nizamuddin Khurshid, Kirkuk, media figure
8. Berkel al-Bayati, Kirkuk and Baghdad, activist at the Turkmeneli Foundation for Development and Reconstruction
9. Duraid Tawfiq, Baghdad, elections researcher and coordinator for the Turkmen Front
10. Fayhaa Zayn al-Abidine al-Bayati, Kirkuk, former National Assembly member
11. Haider al-Damerji, Tuz Khurmatu and Saladin, activist and freelancer
12. Mohammad Oji, Kirkuk, student in Turkey
13. Mohammad Tahsin, Kirkuk, political activist and student in Turkey
14. Mohammad Hashem al-Salehi, Kirkuk, media figure and writer
15. Mohammad Yassin Shaker (alias), Kirkuk, activist for minorities
16. Mustafa Mahmoud, private sector and civil activist
17. Nermin al-Mufti, Baghdad and Kirkuk, journalist, retired
18. Salma Abdul Aziz, Kirkuk and Irbil, activist at the Alliance Network for Minorities
19. Torhan al-Mufti, Baghdad, former minister
20. Yasser Badr Abd, Baqubah, media figure and media director for Diyala Governorate

### **About the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Jordan & Iraq**

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### **About the author**

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## Iraqi Turkmen: The Controversy of Identity and Affiliation



The term “Turkmen” is used in an ethno-anthropological sense in this study. The standard for identification as “Turkmen” in the study is belonging to this ethnic group, culture, space, geography, or folkloric identity existing in various Iraqi governorates.



The number of Turkmen in Iraq today ranges from 2 million to 3 million. They inhabit a swath separating the Arabs and the Kurds, from the city and suburbs of Tal Afar in northwestern Iraq to Tuz Khurmatu in Saladin Governorate, then Kirkuk, then Mandali and Khanaqin in Diyala in far eastern Iraq.



The Turkmen have varied private and public demands. As Iraqi citizens, they demand security, stability, and services. As Turkmen, they point to the need to resolve problems that have concerned them for decades; this includes: finding a solution to the problem of their stolen land, the recognition of the massacres committed against them, and other demands.

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