

THE UNDERMINING OF TURKMEN IDENTITY AND CULTURE IN IRAQ

Although the Turkmen represent the third largest ethnic group in Iraq after the Arabs and Kurds, they have suffered from assimilation policies and have seldom enjoyed their cultural rights.

In the early 1970s many of the limited cultural rights they had been granted were taken away, education in their Turkish mothertongue in the primary schools was stopped. They could no longer publish their Turkish language newspaper and their radio and television broadcasts were cancelled.

They were treated as second class citizens and were deprived from their basic human rights. In 1997 when the “*nationality correction*” process was introduced some Turkmen residents from Kerkuk, Tuz Khurmatu and other Turkmen towns and districts were obliged to change their Turkmen identity and register as Arabs in order to buy a house or find a job.

All these cultural and identity repressions have had serious consequences on the Turkmen community as whole. Turkmen culture was not allowed to flourish and people were not even allowed to speak their mothertongue in government offices in the Turkmen regions.

Although Kerkuk is one of Iraq’s major cities which lies on 40% of Iraq’s oil wealth, it was the only big city in Iraq which did not have a University, students residing in the Turkmen region were obliged to go and study in Baghdad, Mosul or Suleymaniya, far away from home.

After the fall of the Ba’ath regime, the Turkmen had high hopes and thought their cultural rights would finally be respected and that the Turkish language would again be considered one of Iraq’s official languages. Their disappointment was great when the new Iraqi constitution recognized only two official languages: Arabic and Kurdish.

Thus a language spoken by more than 13% of Iraqi citizens and one of the world’s major languages was simply ignored in the “*new democratic Iraq*”!

When they took over the city of Kerkuk in April 2003, the American supported Kurdish *peshmergas* imposed the use of the Kurdish language in all government offices in Kerkuk and other Turkmen cities, they removed all signs which were not in Kurdish to put up Kurdish signs in the streets and even in the city’s hospitals. The Turkmen are opposed to the Kurdicization of their region and will not allow that Kerkuk, their main cultural center, be annexed to a ‘so-called Kurdistan’. The Turkmen of Kerkuk do not want their city to suffer the same fate as Erbil.

During the January 2005 national Iraqi elections, the ballots and all other official documents were printed in two languages only: Arabic and Kurdish. The Turkmen protested against this discrimination and demanded that Turkish be recognised as the third official language in Iraq and that Turkish would have its place on future official Iraqi documents and forms.

If their language continues to be denied the place it deserves in Iraq and especially in the Turkmen region, the Turkmen fear that they will continue to be subjected to assimilation and marginalization policies, this time not by the Ba’ath regime, but by the Kurds in the so-called “democratic Iraq”.

The Turkmen denounce this injustice and demand that the Turkish language be recognized as one of Iraq’s official languages.

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