

Iraq's Beleaguered Turkmen Enclaves

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It has been a long seven weeks for all Iraqis, but that is especially true for Iraq's Shiite Turkmen communities, which are under siege by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In one of the besieged cities, Amerli, which is majority Turkmen, nearly twenty thousand men, women, and children have been living in a kind of hell. According to friends and relatives, ISIS, which now calls itself the Islamic State, cut off water and electricity supplies over a week ago. Each day temperatures rise to over 120 degrees. There is very little food or medical supplies left. The people have been under intense shelling for weeks, with few medics present to treat their children, the sick and elderly, or the injured. In just one neighborhood where one of my relatives lives, eight people have lost their lives and eighty are seriously injured or ill.

Over the years, Amerli and its residents have suffered significant persecution. Take the travails of one of my cousins as an example. After fighting for his country in the Iran-Iraq War, he was held as a prisoner of war in Iran for fourteen years. When he returned to Iraq, he could not return to his old job with Iraq's national oil company because he is Shiite. Then, in 2007, Amerli was destroyed by a massive car bomb carried out by al-Qaeda, and he lost his older brother, 16-year-old nephew, brother-in-law, and many other relatives. Since then he has looked after ten orphans. Recently, a rocket hit his neighbor's house; it blasted apart the front door of my cousin's home.

It is hard for people like my cousin to keep up their morale when the world does not seem to care for their suffering. "If no one is willing to help," they ask, "are we stuck in a death trap?" The Iraqi army is stationed just twenty miles south of Amerli, but it has been sitting there for five weeks, watching as Amerli is destroyed for the second time in a decade. The Kurds are even closer, but they do not provide the town and its residents with supplies or help the wounded. Turkey came to Amerli's rescue in 2007 when the bombing happened, but where is the Turkish government now? Why don't they care anymore? The Turkish government vocally supports the Palestinian people in Gaza, but seems reticent to aid its own Turkic brethren.

As a pediatrician, I have always worked to stop cruelty against children. In Bashir, another of Iraq's Turkmen enclaves, a girl was raped and killed by several members of ISIS. ISIS reportedly hung her naked body from a lamp post. When members of her family tried to retrieve her body, ISIS killed fifteen of them too. No one should tolerate such an atrocious violation of human rights.

The international community – the United State and United Nations in specific – must intervene at once to stop the bloodshed and save the lives of Iraq's Turkmen population. Much like the Kurds in the early 1990s, they need a UN-mandated to safe haven. They need the United States to push the Iraqi army to travel the short distance to save Amerli. Turkey should convince its new friend, the Iraqi Kurds, to do the same – they are but a few miles away.

If the world will not help Iraqi Turkmen defend their homes, then at least help them escape before it is too late. The Kurds could negotiate a ceasefire with ISIS to open just one humanitarian corridor that would allow medical supplies and food into Amerli and the wounded, the young, the old, and the sick out. Those people need to be airlifted, and only the United States has the means to do so.

Help came too late for the Iraqi Turkmen at Tal Afar, another city closer to Mosul. It fell to ISIS in the middle of June and the Shiite Turkmen were driven out. Hundreds died and ancient communities were destroyed; they might never be put back together. Losing our shrines and our history is terrible, but losing our communities, with people dead or scattered across the world, would be far worse.

Amerli and the areas around it have avoided sectarian strife for much of the last decade. The population is educated, and many Shiites and Sunnis, Arabs and Turkmen, have even intermarried. There was relative harmony until ISIS became stronger. Amerli and other towns like Tuz Khormato, Bashir, Taza, and Daquq can still be saved from ISIS. But they need assistance right away. Every minute counts. America must help in our hour of desperate need.

Dr. Elham Al-Bayati is a consultant-pediatrician who has worked in the United Kingdom for the past twenty years. She is a Turkmen Shiite who is married to an Iraqi Sunni Kurd, a good example of how many Iraqi families live in harmony.