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Iraq: The minorities of Nineveh Plain

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A Yazidi temple in the Nineveh plains

The conflict in Iraq is often framed as a struggle between Shias and Sunnis and Arabs and Kurds - but the country is home to a number of minority groups who find themselves caught in the violence and in political bargains beyond their control.

Christians, Turkmen, Yazidis, Shabak, Sabian Mandaeans, Bahais, Kakais and Fails Kurds have lived in Iraq for a very long time - some for centuries, others for thousands of years.

Many of them live in Nineveh, a culturally rich province 250 miles (400km) north-west of Baghdad.

Since the US-led invasion of 2003, Nineveh has been wracked by two parallel conflicts - between the central government and extremist Islamist groups, and the central government and the autonomous Kurdish region.

Persecuted under the Ottomans, Saddam Hussein's Baathists and nowadays by jihadists, and facing prejudice and intolerance, some of the smaller minority groups, such as the Shabak, Yazidis and Bahais, have led a life of secrecy.

This in turn has given rise to misconceptions and suspicions about them, and led to further persecutions.

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Isis released this image of the destruction of a Shia mosque in Nineveh

With the takeover of Mosul, Nineveh's capital, on 10 June by the Islamic State (formerly known as Isis), the minorities in the city fled en mass to the villages in the Nineveh plains or further north to Kurdish cities. Many of them took up arms alongside the Kurdish forces.

Since then, there has been a steady flow of reports of attacks carried out by the Islamists against minority groups and destruction of their places of worship. The Islamic State itself has posted pictures of dozens of historic and religious sites in Nineveh that it demolished, under the pretext that reverence of such sites is heretical.

Christians

Iraq's Christians are of diverse ethnicities and denominations, but the majority are Chaldeans and Assyrians.



Iraq's Christian population has plummeted in recent years

Their numbers have fallen from around 1.5 million in 2003 to 350,000-450,000. In Nineveh, they live mainly in villages such as Qaraqosh (also known as Baghdida), Bartella, Al-Hamdaniya and Tel Kef.

One of the most devastating attacks targeting Iraqi Christians happened in 2010 when jihadists stormed a church in Baghdad during Sunday mass killing 52 people.

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Yazidis

A highly secretive group, the origins and ethnicity of Yazidis are subjects of an ongoing debate. Their religion incorporates elements of many faiths, including Zoroastrian.



Many Iraqi Yazidis live in disputed territories

As a result of some of their beliefs and the mystery surrounding their religion, many Muslims and non-Muslims have come to see Yazidis as devil worshippers.

This has led to violent attacks by Islamist groups who consider them infidels. In August 2007 jihadists attacked Yazidi villages in Nineveh, killing between 400 and 700 people.

There are estimated to be around 500,000 Yazidis today, most of them living in the Nineveh plains in territories disputed between Arabs and Kurds.

Shabak

A minority group with their own language and customs, Shabaks are mostly Shia and a minority are Sunnis.

It is thought that there are about 250,000-400,000 Shabaks, almost all in Nineveh.

Some Sunnis accuse the Shabak of being an extreme Shia sect while others consider them to be an apostate offshoot of Islam, giving way to violent attacks against them.

Located in areas of disputed ownership between Kurdish and Arab Iraq, the Shabaks have faced persecution from both Arabs and Kurds.

Turkmen



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The Turkmen are the third largest ethnic group in Iraq, after the Arabs and Kurds, estimated to number between half a million and 2.5 million.



Iraqi Turkmen people after fleeing to Kirkuk this month

They are mostly Muslim, roughly divided between the Sunni and Shia traditions. A minority are Catholics.

Turkmen have their own language and customs. They live mainly along the line between the Arab and Kurdish regions - in the provinces of Nineveh (mostly in Tal Afar), Kirkuk and Diyala, but also in other parts of the country.

Often caught up in the power struggles between the Kurdish region and the central government, they have also been the target of attacks by jihadists.

Following the Islamic State's takeover of Tal Afar, most of the town's 250,000 population fled to the Kurdish region.

Sabian Mandaean

Sabians are one of the indigenous peoples of Mesopotamia, tracing their roots to the Aramaic people. Today, their community, culture and language face extinction.



Iraqi Sabians participate in a cleansing ritual

As with Christians, Mandaean enjoyed some freedom and protection during the Baathist era. But since the 2003 invasion, up to 90% have left the country.

The Mandaean religion requires them to be close to a clean and preferably natural water source for baptism rights. As a result, historically they have settled near the marshes and rivers of southern Iraq as well as in Baghdad.

Being pacifists, and with no clans or militias to protect them, many Mandaean have migrated to northern Iraq, including Nineveh and the Kurdish region, in search of security. But due to their disputed status as "a people of the book", they continue to be a target of threats by religious extremists.

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