

Kurds in Iraq besieged by Arabs yet again

by Hugh Fitzgerald



The greatest divide within the world-wide Ummah, the community of Muslim believers, is that between the Arabs, who are 20% of the world's Muslims, and non-Arab Muslims, who constitute 80% of Muslims world-wide.

Arabs have long believed, and acted, as if they are superior to non-Arab Muslims. And many non-Arab Muslims appear to share that view. The Qur'an was given, after all, to a 7th century Arab, and in his language, Arabic. A Muslim must prostrate himself in prayer five times a day, turning toward Mecca, in Arabia. If he can afford it, he must at least once in his lifetime perform the Hajj in Mecca. He should ideally read, memorize, and recite the Qur'an in Arabic. All this promotes the prestige of Arabs within Islam. Many non-Arab converts assume Arab names at the time of their conversion. And many non-Arab Muslims, especially in Pakistan, appropriate the word

“Sayyid” as part of their name, intending to signify that they are descendants of the Quraysh, the tribe of Muhammad.

Among non-Arab Muslims who have suffered from Arab depredations, and from other Muslims too, none have suffered as much as the Kurds. The Kurds are the largest ethnic group without a state of their own. There are about 35 million Kurds world-wide. Of that number, there are 12 million in Turkey, 6 million in Iran, about 5 to 6 million in Iraq, and less than 2 million in Syria, which adds up to close to 28 million. Another 7 million are spread throughout the Middle East and Europe. After the breakup of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, plans were made for a mandate that would prepare the Kurds for self-rule in an independent Kurdistan. Those plans were scuttled when Turkey, having recovered somewhat from its defeat in the war, objected to any Kurdish state.

Divided among four countries – Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria – the Kurds have been routinely oppressed by Turks, Persians, and Arabs. Saddam Hussein’s *Operation Anfal*, during which his Arab soldiers killed 182,000 Kurds, is the greatest atrocity the Kurds have ever suffered. Saddam not only murdered Kurds on an industrial scale (for example, by gassing Kurds in Halabja), but moved Arabs onto Kurdish lands in an attempt to *arabize* Kurdish Iraq.

The Americans protected the Kurds after the Gulf War, providing air cover so that Saddam could not use his air force to bomb the Kurds. Iraqi Kurds thus enjoyed a *de facto* autonomy; for that, they were, and remain, tremendously grateful to the Americans. American soldiers in Iraq frequently commented on how friendly the Kurds were, as compared to the Arab soldiers. The Americans in Iraq took their R & R in the Kurdish-held territories, with no fears for their safety. When ISIS appeared, while the Arab soldiers ran from Mosul, the Kurds proved to be the best fighters against ISIS, in both Iraq and Syria, frequently fighting alongside American units.

Now Iraqi Arabs are trying to re-arabize lands that had once been Kurdish, then arabized – settled by Arabs – under Saddam, and then re-taken and re-settled (“de-arabized”) by the Kurds after Saddam was removed.

[Here's](#) the story:

“Locals from a predominately-Kurdish town outside of Kirkuk claimed that a large number of Arabs “carrying firearms,” forcefully invaded their homes on Tuesday. Villagers responded by contacting the Iraqi Army, who are responding to the incident.

“Today more than 300 Arabs broke into Palkana village to invade and once again Arabize the village,” Badradin Yousef, a member of the Sargaran Township Council, told Rudaw.

“Palkana village is near Sargaran town, west of Kirkuk city. Despite the declared defeat of the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2017, the village and surrounding areas have been a hotbed for the extremist group’s lingering, deadly remnants.

‘According to Yousif, Arabs who had previously settled in the area, returned to the village in 25 vehicles and were carrying weapons.

“Those Arabs, who had been transferred to Arabize the area during the Baath regime and later fled, are now coming back with the support of the Kirkuk governor, invading our properties ... and wanting to confiscate our lands,” said Yousif.

“Yousif added the township council informed the Iraqi army “immediately” and called on them to come to the aid of Kurdish inhabitants of the village.

“The Iraqi army has mobilized us all in one place and surrounded all the people including the villagers and the Arabs” he said. According to Yousif, the village is currently

held by the Iraqi Army's 14th Commando Force, but another force will soon arrive.

"A villager from Palkana, who agreed to speak on the condition of anonymity told Rudaw TV by phone on Tuesday afternoon, claimed the returnees have "invaded five households so far" and were still in the village.

"The villager claims that the group arrived in "armed Humvees" and "stormed Kurdish households."

'The villager said he and his Kurdish neighbours have shown documents, including land deeds, to the Iraqi forces to prove the properties belong to them.

"The villagers lay partial blame on the attacks on the Kurdish parties. They say that they have contacted Kurdish parties, security and government departments in Kirkuk to help stop the seizure of lands, but not received support or a response.

"Vian Sabri, head of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in the Iraqi parliament called the situation in Palkana and the attacks on village "not legal", "unconstitutional", and "inhumane" in a tweet on Tuesday.

"Hatam Taii, a spokesperson for Arabs in Kirkuk told Rudaw English they have "official proof" and documents from the 1940s and 1950s that the area belongs to the Shammar, a large Arab tribe. Taii said that there are many sides who would have attempted to escalate the situation for political reasons, but that "the determining factor between all has to be the law."

"Arabs from elsewhere in Iraq were brought into the disputed areas of Kirkuk largely between 1970 and 1978. The Arabization of the province has been a historical flashpoint between Baghdad and the Kurds.

“After 2003 and the fall of the Baath regime, Iraq began a policy of de-Arabization to reverse the demographic changes, within the framework of Article 140. Lands that had been confiscated from Kurds and Turkmen were returned, while the Arabs who had been settled there by the Baathists were given financial compensation.

“Following the events of October 16, 2017 with the Iraqi federal forces taking over most of the disputed areas claimed by Baghdad and Erbil, many Kurdish villagers fled the area fearing violence from Iraqi and Shiite armed groups. Since then [late 2017], Kurdish locals in the area have alleged that a “re-Arabization” of the region is underway.

“Acting Kirkuk Governor Rakan al-Jabouri issued 14 decrees seizing land owned by Kurds and giving it to Arabs, before Iraq’s Federal Court rescinded his decrees in December.

“ISIS remnants have remained active in the region. Since early April, the elite US-trained Iraqi Counterterrorism Service (ICTS) has conducted large scale operations in and around Kirkuk.

“Last month, (Asayesh) Kurdish security arrested a man who confessed to being “in charge of the transfer of Daesh militants from Kirkuk and Hawija to Palkana.”

Of course the American government should take the side of the Kurds, who have been our allies through thick and thin, and whose lands these clearly were, until Saddam’s policy of “arabizing” the Kurdish north forced the Kurds out, and Arabs moved in. After Saddam’s overthrow, the Arabs left the Kurdish territories, and Kurds returned to reclaim their lands. Now the Arabs are back, trying once again to lay violent claim to these lands.

The American government can help the Kurds resist this without sending any more troops on the ground. It can threaten that if

the government in Baghdad does not prevent armed Arab groups from seizing Kurdish lands in the north, then America will cut its aid to Iraq, which has amounted to tens of billions of dollars, and continues still to be very high, with \$454 million from USAID, and \$3.7 billion in aid from all agencies, in 2018-2019. That threat is sure to get the attention of Baghdad.

We should be supplying Kurdish forces in both Iraq and Syria with as much weaponry as they can handle. They have proven their mettle as fighters against ISIS, have been our steadfast allies, but they are greatly outnumbered by the Arab militaries in Syria and Iraq. American weapons, if provided to the Kurds in sufficient quantity, could give them a fighting chance. And if there were any threats by the Iraqi Arabs to bomb Kurds, the American Air Force could do what it did when Saddam was in power: supply air cover for the Kurds.

In Syria, Bashar Assad cannot be more angry than he already is with the Americans for their alliance with the Kurds in Rojava, but there is nothing he can do to prevent further weapons deliveries from the U.S. to the Kurds. In Iraq the Arab-dominated government will have to decide if it wants to support the re-arabization of Kurdish lands, or if it wants to continue receiving vital American aid; it can't have both.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey, and Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, will be furious with further American military support for Iraqi Kurds, naturally fearing the boost that will give to Kurds in Turkey and Iran harboring secessionist designs and hopes for an independent Kurdistan. But why should we care? Turkey is no longer our friend, and Iran is our enemy. Save for the Israelis, the Kurds have been our steadiest allies in the Middle East. In their attempt to prevent the re-arabizing of Kurdish lands, they deserve our support.

First published in