

Mixed Fortunes of Yazidis in New Iraq

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They've better opportunities than they did under Saddam, but have become the target of insurgents. The ancient town of Sinjar may be on Mosul's doorstep, but the road connection to Iraq's third-largest city is so treacherous that it has to get its supplies from Dohuk in Iraqi Kurdistan, more than four hours' drive away.

"Mosul has cut its connection with us. If we go there, the insurgents will kill us," said Eido Shingali, a resident of Sinjar, driving along the road to Dohuk. "This route takes longer but it is safe."

Giant truck bombs flattened two villages in Sinjar district in August 2007, killing more than 300 people in the bloodiest attack of its kind in Iraq since 2003.

The victims were mostly Yazidis. As Kurds who follow a pre-Islamic faith, they are doubly distinct from their Sunni Arab neighbours.

"Insurgents attack everywhere in Iraq but in our case, we believe they do so because of our ethnicity and religion," said Jalal Khalo Zandini, an employee of the mayor's office in Sinjar, who lost two relatives in the 2007 bombings.

Many Yazidi villages erected sand barriers after the attacks. Entry and exit to these villages is now controlled at a single gate, where identity cards can be checked and vehicles searched.

Sinjar district borders Syria and is now heavily guarded by Iraqi army and police units, whose ranks include many Kurds of Yazidi and non-Yazidi origin.

The leaders of Iraqi Kurdistan argue that Sinjar is a historically Kurdish territory and ought to be given the option of joining it in a referendum.

However, Sunni and Shia Arab parties in the Iraqi government oppose Kurdish efforts to expand the semi-autonomous region under their control in the north.

Kurdish forces operating outside that region are also viewed with suspicion by politicians in Baghdad.

Yezidi Kurds make up the majority of Sinjar district's 340,000 people. The region is also home to long-established communities of Sunni and Shia Arabs and Christians.

Taking a walk through Sinjar's old town is like travelling thousands of years back through time: there are several Yazidi temples; a gate apparently dating to the Roman Empire; an ancient Islamic minaret; and a shrine believed to contain the remains of Zainub, the infant daughter of Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad.

Dakhil Qassim Hassoun, the mayor of Sinjar, says there is no conflict between the district's ethnic and religious groups.

"They have been living with each other for thousands of years," said Hassoun, the first Yazidi to be elected mayor of an Iraqi town. "There are no kidnappings, assassinations or gunfights here."

The only risk, he says, comes from suicide attacks.

Areas bordering Sinjar district are plagued by unrest. Talafar to the east has seen fighting between Sunni Arabs who support the Shia-led government in Baghdad and those who do not. Its Sunnis and Shias have fought each other, while rivalries between local tribes have erupted into violence.

Local political posts remain vacant with potential candidates deterred by the threat of assassination. Rabyha district, to the east of Sinjar, lost its mayor four years ago. The mayor of Bahaj district, to the south, was killed in 2006.

Mosul, just over an hour from Sinjar, remains tense, with regular clashes between US-backed Iraqi troops and militants allied to al-Qaeda.

The border with Syria lies southwest of Sinjar. The US has accused Syria of tolerating the traffic of weapons and fighters into Iraq – a charge Damascus denies.

Hassoun says security along the border has improved since the deployment of troops on both sides and the construction of a US military base nearby.

Young Yazidi men are increasingly finding work as border guards and as employees of the police and Iraqi Kurdish forces, known as peshmerga.

They are also taking up jobs in restaurants and hotels in the Kurdistan region.

Most of the Yazidis in Sinjar remain extremely poor. Wheat and barley crops are their main source of income.

Northern Iraq boasts the biggest Yazidi community, though followers of the ancient faith can be across Turkey, Syria, Iran, Armenia, Georgia and Russia.

The Yazidis of Sinjar speak Kurdish in the same Kermanji dialect as the one used by Kurds in Syria and parts of Turkey.

The war has brought mixed fortunes for the Yazidis.

On the one hand, they are happy to have better opportunities than they did in the days of Saddam Hussein.

“Under the former Iraqi government, we used to be cleaners and manual workers at best,” said Jalal Khalo Zandini of the Sinjar mayor’s office.

“Now many Yazidis work as government employees, the mayor of Sinjar is a Yazidi and two of the Iraqi president’s advisers are Yazidis.”

On the other hand, Yazidis say the Iraqi conflict has exposed them to insurgents’ attacks.

A day after IWPR visited the district, it received a phone call from Eido Shingali, one of the Yazidis interviewed along the road to Dohuk.

He described how a car bomb had just exploded in the town centre, injuring several of his relatives.

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