

Whom Do Iraq's Turkmen Parties Serve?

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Brief Analysis

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Despite being a key ethnic group in Iraq, the Turkmen have been denied legitimate rights since the founding of the modern Iraqi state. Until the fall of the Baath regime, Turkmen areas of residence were subject to discrimination, Arabization, and systematic neglect. After initial excitement and hope for the future upon the fall of the Baathists in 2003, Iraqi Turkmen continued to be marginalized by successive governments. To understand the Turkmen situation in Iraq, we must consider the Turkmen parties in the country and understand why they have failed to effectively and appropriately advocate for their people.

Turkmen parties, in general, are divided into three main camps. The first is a group of Turkmen parties founded by Iraqi Shia parties that receive indirect Iranian support. This group appeals to Shia Turkmen living in disputed areas and other cities in Iraq. This campaign successfully seized the votes of Shia Turkmen in favor of Shia parties that supported their founding. Thus, a large percentage of Shia Turkmen support these parties for sectarian reasons. The second group is those founded by Kurdish parties in the Kurdistan Region. They receive direct support from Kurdish parties in exchange for political support. The third group consists of the Turkey-backed Iraqi Turkmen Front, which enjoys the largest and strongest popular base among Turkmen in Iraq. Thus, we can say that the first two groups of Turkmen parties are loyal to the parties that found and support them, whereas the Turkmen Front is loyal to a united Iraq, despite the support it receives from Turkey.

Turkmen are divided between Sunni and Shia. Iraqi Shia parties founded and funded Shia Turkmen parties to gain votes from their followers. For example, there are Shia Turkmen MPs in the Sadrist Movement, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq, and the Islamic Dawa Party. Sunni parties and movements have also made use of Sunni Turkmen figures. In the Kurdistan Region, Kurdish parties – particularly the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) – established parties loyal to them on behalf of the Turkmen. Four out of the five Turkmen seats in the Kurdistan parliament are occupied by figures with close ties to Kurdish parties. In addition, Turkmen participation in the Kurdistan regional government is limited to those with close ties to Kurdish parties.

The Turkmen Front is one of the largest and most popular Iraqi Turkmen parties. It was founded in Erbil in 1997 to unify Turkmen political influence and was composed of several Turkey-backed Turkmen parties. But after 2003, they moved their headquarters to Kirkuk. After relocating to Kirkuk, the Turkmen Front limited its focus only to the

governorate's Sunni Turkmen. Official Turkish support to the Turkmen Front continues, but the Turkmen Front's policies have failed to make it an effective representative of the Turkmen people in Iraq.

Instead of unifying Turkmen discourse nationwide, the Turkmen Front indirectly encouraged the division of its people in different areas in Iraq. Since 2003, all the leaders of the Front have come from Kirkuk's Turkmen community. Tal Afar, which is home to nearly 350,000 Turkmen, has not been properly represented in the Front. It has suffered a great deal from war and sectarian strife, and yet the Front failed to unite the Turkmen living there across sectarian lines. Unfortunately, this pushed many Sunni Turkmen to join groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. One of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi's associates, Abu Muslim al-Turkmani, was a Sunni Turkmen from Tal Afar.

Moreover, since its founding, the Front has failed to create a stable leadership capable of representing the country's Turkmen community. Every leader who has left the party has gone on to create an independent party, withdraw completely from the political sphere, or be accused of treason by his successor.

The Front has been accused of colluding with Turkey since its founding, an exaggerated charge that lacks a basis in evidence. The Front does receive direct support from Ankara, but this does not mean it colludes with a foreign state. The strong links between the Front and Turkey are purely ethnic, ensuring a strong and close relationship between both sides. In addition, we must not forget the Turkish people's sympathy with Turkmen in Iraq, and especially in Kirkuk. This sympathy has resulted in pressure on successive Turkish governments to offer assistance to Iraq's Turkmen. And yet, despite this support, the Turkmen Front has been unable to establish itself as a positive political force for Iraqi Turkmen.

The majority of Turkmen parties in Iraq in general, and in Kurdistan in particular, do not truly represent the Turkmen people. Since the current Turkmen parties were not established by the Turkmen public, they do not have their best interests at heart. Instead, they are mere tools used by powerful non-Turkmen parties to divide and use the Turkmen population. ❖

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