

The advances of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) across large areas of Iraq have left the Shia Turkmen minority facing an imminent and catastrophic threat to their personal safety and property. The Shia Turkmen are particularly vulnerable, as they do not have their own security force to defend them.

Turkmens of Iraq:

- The Iraqi Turkmen are ethnically Turkic and are the third largest ethnic group in Iraq.¹ The Iraqi census of 1957 (considered the last reliable census that allowed minorities to register) recorded 567,000 Turkmen out of a total population of 6.3 million, forming 9% of the total Iraqi population.² The 1997 census recorded a total of 600,000 Turkmen out of a population of 22,017,983, forming 2.72% of the total population; however this census only allowed citizens to choose between two ethnic groups, Arab or Kurdish, forcing many Iraqi Turkmen to identify as Arabs.³ Today the Iraqi Turkmen population is estimated at around 3,000,000 (13% of the Iraqi population).⁴
- The Turkmen mainly reside in the north of the country, in an area stretching from Tel Afar in the northwest to Badra and al-Aziziyya in the Wasit (al-Kut) province in the middle of Iraq. Their strongest presence is in the area near Kirkuk, Mosul and Arbil; the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation estimate that at least 180,000 Turkmen live in Kirkuk, 250,000 live in Arbil and a further 500,000 in the Mosul area; they also make up around 95% of the population of the Tel Afar district.
- The Turkmen are primarily adherents of Islam, some following the Shia branch, with others following Sunni Islam.

Rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria:

- Since forming as an offshoot of Al Qaeda, the extremist group the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has expanded rapidly across large parts of Syria (from April 2013) and northern and central Iraq (from June 2014). On 29 July 2014, the group declared a caliphate in the areas it controlled, changing its name to 'Islamic State'.⁵ Following its occupation of large areas of Syria and Iraq, ISIS has violently targeted religious and ethnic minorities, including Shias, Christians, Yazidis and ethnic groups such as the Shia Turkmen, Shabak and Kurdish Feyli communities.⁶

Attacks against the Shia Turkmen of Iraq:

- The advance of ISIS has forced hundreds of thousands⁷ of Shia Turkmen to flee⁸ from their homes; they face the prospect of execution, rape and imprisonment if they remain, a reality made all the more alarming as the Shia Turkmen community do not have their own security force to defend them, such as the Kurdish Peshmerga or Arab militias.⁹
- On September 1 2014, the ISIS siege on the town of Amerli was broken by government forces after over two months of intense fighting. ISIS commenced its offensive on the town after the fall of Mosul on June 10, 2014 and since then has attacked it repeatedly with mortar shelling and heavy fighting, including a major attack on July 15; as part of its psychological campaign to instil fear into neighbouring communities, after capturing the surrounding villages of Qara Naz, Chardaghli and Birawejli, the local Shia Turkmen population were subjected to brutal violence, including executions and the burning of their homes, schools and mosques. Over 4,000 people have been forced to flee from the area.¹⁰
- ISIS systematically attacks places of worship and heritage. On June 25 and June 26 2014, seven Shia heritage sites (some of which were over 1300 years old) and mosques in Tel Afar were totally demolished by ISIS forces.¹¹
- On June 16 2014, ISIS seized Tel Afar, forcing 80,000-100,000 Shia Turkmen to flee¹². According to eyewitness accounts, some were only granted clearance into the Kurdish region after paying a \$400 fee, whilst many more were refused entry, forcing them to migrate south through the scorching heat and insecure roads of northern/central Iraq.¹³
- Many of the Shia Turkmen who have fled are living in shelters set up in schools and camps throughout Baghdad, which lack very basic necessities. Thousands have found refuge in guest houses in the area between Najaf and Karbala, reliant on the aid provided by local residents. Thousands of other refugees have been forced to camp in the surrounding deserts under extremely harsh conditions, including living in tents and rooms accommodating up to 45 people. Many of the refugees are severely malnourished and dehydrated, with many of the children having developed diarrhoea, skin disorders such as scabies and life-threatening diseases due to the lack of sanitation and shortage in safe clean water. There is limited access to electricity in some camps whilst others are completely cut-off. The lack of basic essentials such as formula milk for babies, medication for the elderly, adequate medical support for pregnant women and the sick is creating an ongoing humanitarian catastrophe that shows little sign of improving.¹⁴

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For Further Information

www.shiaresearch.com

info@shiaresearch.com

+ (44(0) 20 7372 4049

The Stone Hall, Chevening Road, London, NW6 6TN