

THE TURKMENS OF THE MIDDLE EAST

The Turkmens, descendants of the Oghuz confederation of Turkic-speaking nomadic tribes of the early Middle Ages, are currently scattered across the Middle East and Central Asia. Focusing on the Turkmen populations of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Iran, the author delves into their situation as minority groups who are barred from political participation and from expressing their cultural identity. This plight has only been exacerbated for the Iraqi Turkmens since the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). In order to overcome socio-political marginalization, the author advocates for Turkmens to unite and form linkages with other minority groups.

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Today, what we label as the Middle East was once home to two Turkish Empires, the Seljuk and the Ottoman, both of which were descendants of the Turkic Oghuz tribes that migrated from Central Asia. However, with the end of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of newly formed nation-states in the Middle East, the region witnessed mass population movements. For Turkey, which officially became a republic in 1923, this usually entailed the immigration of people of Turkish decent and culture into Turkey and the emigration of non-Muslim minorities out of it. However, not all the Turks managed or chose to migrate and settle within the Turkish borders, instead staying behind and becoming the “other” almost overnight.

Regardless of the lens through which you observe the situation, the Turks that chose to stay behind – and who are contemporarily referred to as Turkmens – are said to total approximately seven million.¹ But who are these Turkmens of the Middle Eastern region, where do they reside, and quite crucially, will they carve out their own identity or remain as a footnote in the annals of history books? It is the aim of this article to provide a historical overview of these peoples.

Iraqi Turkmens

The Iraqi Turkmens’ roots in the Middle East can be traced back to the year 637, primarily as descendants of recruits to the then-ruling Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties. It is these Turkmens who laid the foundation for the establishment of the Seljuk and subsequent Ottoman Empires.² With the conquest of Sultan Tuğrul in 1055 and establishment of the Seljuk Empire (1118-94), a further, and more substantial mass movement and settlement of Turks from various branches of the Turkic Oghuz tribe began, primarily in the northern regions of modern-day Iraq. The mass population movements of Turkic tribes continued with the ever-growing influence of the Ottoman dynasty, most evident with the arrival of Sultan Süleyman in 1534 and thereafter by Sultan Murat IV in 1638.

When one analyzes Turkmens living in various locations across Iraq today, we see that the Turkish language – albeit a different dialect then is commonly spoken in Turkey – is still very much intact. In fact, the diverse range of Oghuz tribes can be traced today when researching contemporary Turkish dialects, which differ to varying degrees, across different regions in Iraq. Geographically, the Turkmens mainly inhabit areas from the northwest to the southeast of Iraq. Starting from the west of

1 Historically, members of the Oghuz Turkic tribes were predominantly referred to as Turkmens, hence the label.

2 In between the Seljuk and Ottoman rule, the Turkmens were responsible for the emergence of Mosul Governorate under the family authority of the Zengies (Atabeg), the Kerkuk Turkmen government (*beylik*), and the states of Karakoyunlu (Baranlı) and Akkoyunlu (Bayındırlı).

Mosul where a substantial Turkmen population reside in Tal Afar, they stretch out to villages and cities of Erbil, Altunköprü, Kirkuk, Tazehurmatu, Tavuk, Tuzhurmatu, Bayat Köyleri, Kifri, Hanekin, Karağan, Kızlarbat, Şahraban, Bedre, Kazaniye, and Mendeli.³ As a result, the Turkmens left behind a substantial load of cultural and historical heritage that dates back to the Seljuk and Ottoman era but is evident even today in the main urban areas of Iraq, including Baghdad, Basra, Mosul, and Kirkuk to name a few. Most of the cultural artifacts found in modern-day Iraq are a product of Turkish heritage.

Current Turkmen population numbers, however, is a contested issue. Because a systematic and apolitical census for Iraq has not been completed in recent years, accurate and reliable population statistics for the Turkmens, as well as other ethnicities, are hard to come by. Even the reliability of the last official census in which Turkmens were able to register in 1957 has been seriously questioned. This was remedied by the 1958 government proclamation that cited 567,000 Turkmens,⁴ which is approximately 9 percent of the total Iraqi population.⁵ With a conservative estimate, this means roughly 2.5 million Turkmens reside in present-day Iraq.

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Following the break-up of the Ottoman Empire, the Turkmens suffered a great deal. In 1924, the British deployed the Levy forces to suppress nationalist sentiments by any means necessary; the levies were directly responsible for looting and the loss of Turkmen lives.

In the 1930s, tactics changed but the objective remained the same. In order to quell public unrest amongst the Turkmen population, which was aggravated by the banning of Turkish in education and court hearings, a well-documented strategy implemented by successive Iraqi governments involved the deportation and relocation of Turkmen intelligentsia to southern regions. Others were less fortunate. During an

³ For detailed information on Turkmen demographics and the location and names of hundreds of villages, please see: Subhi Saatci, *Iraq Türkmen Boyları, Oymaklar ve Yerleşim Bölgeleri* [The Tribes and Branches of the Iraqi Turkmen] (İstanbul: Kerkük Vakfı Yayınları, 2009).

⁴ Soner Çağaptay, “Turkmens, the Soft Underbelly of the War in Northern Iraq,” *Policy Watch* #735, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 23 March 2003. The report goes on to further claim that the census also counted 819,000 Kurds (13 percent of the population).

⁵ Zubaida Omar, *British Inquiry Magazine*, February 1987, p. 37.

oil worker strike that involved peaceful demonstrations in 1946, Iraqi police forces opened fire on Turkmen and Iraqi oil workers. In 1959, during the first anniversary celebrations of the newly overthrown Iraqi monarchy and the establishment of the republican regime, a violent crackdown on the population of Kirkuk resulted in the deaths and injuries of Turkmens, as well as damage to personal and business properties.⁶

In 1980, a process of social engineering aimed at altering the demographic make-up of Iraq resulted in the execution of Turkmen leaders and forced “Arabization” of the population. The process of arrests and executions in Erbil, Altunköprü, Tavuk, Taze Hurmatu, and Tuz Hurmatu continued until the US-led invasion in 2003. At that time, the end of the Baath regime was seen as a glimmer of hope for the Turkmen population; however, what was to ensue was far from hopeful. Instead, the occupation of Iraq led to a security vacuum, which enabled the flourishing of terrorist organizations. Like members of other ethnic groups, the Turkmens were again subject to attacks, losing their lives almost on a daily basis.

In the political arena, despite gaining some rights under the newly formed constitution including the ability to form political parties and representation in the Parliament, and provincial councils, these rights were largely ceremonial. As a result, the Turkmen population is still unable to have its voice heard in ministerial positions, foreign relations, and special status organizations.

Lately, with the rise of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in Iraq, Turkmens as well as other ethnic groups have been bearing the brunt of the group’s vicious behavior. Large parts of Kirkuk, Diyala, and Mosul – which house the majority of Turkmens in Iraq – have come under direct ISIL occupation. In fact, the city of Tal Afar – predominantly a Turkmen city – fell to the hands of ISIL despite putting up a resilient fight, forcing more than 100,000 Turkmens to abandon their homes and become internally displaced. Similar incidents occurred in Turkmen towns and villages south of Kirkuk as well.

Syrian Turkmens

In the late 11th century, Syria was conquered by the Seljuk Turks leading the way for the subsequent establishment of the Ottoman rule in the areas currently bordering modern day Syria. In fact, even before the Turks made headway into the Turkish Anatolia region during the battle of Manzikert (Malazgirt), the Seljuk Turks, headed by Alp Alparslan, began to settle in areas surrounding Rakka and Aleppo. After the

⁶ Erşat Hürmüzlü, *The Turkmen Reality in Iraq* (Istanbul: Kerkuk Vakfi, 2005).

victory, which undermined Byzantine authority in Anatolia, and subsequently as a counter-reaction to the Crusades, Turkic tribes were strategically relocated around what is today known as Syria.⁷

Since 1936, the Syrian Turkmens have not been able to communicate or publish in the Turkish language. Devoid of any ability to publicly engage their cultural heritage, including setting up foundations and trusts, the Turkmen minority has been unable to express itself freely.⁸ Despite these restrictions, Turkmens have continued to live in large swaths across Damascus and Daraa. In fact, in Damascus, an area named Harret Al Turkman (Turkmen District) is a well-known part of town where Turkish is predominantly spoken.

According to sources, the Turkmen population in Syria account for between 2 to 2.5 million people, not to mention a substantial amount of Turkmens who have become assimilated, or “Arabified,” and who only speak Arabic.⁹

Latakia Region

Close to the Mediterranean, the city of Latakia hosts a number of Turkmen districts, most notably Jimmel Harresi and to a lesser degree Basit, Bayır, Behluliye, Kesap, and the village of Bayır-Bucak. Sources show there are a total of 265 Turkmen villages in Latakia and its surrounding regions, mainly six villages connected to Latakia city and Kesap region; 84 villages along the coast of Bucak; 12 villages as part of Behluliye region; 46 villages in the vicinity of Kebel and connected to the Bayır region; and a further 37 villages of İncesu.

Aleppo Region

During the days of the Ottoman Empire, Aleppo was an important administrative capital. With traditional Turkish houses, streets, and market stalls, Turkish was predominantly spoken and the city resembled the likes of Mardin in Turkey and Mosul in Iraq,

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⁷ *Suriye Türkmen Meclisi* [Syrian Turkmen Council], <http://suriyeturkmenmeclisi.org>

⁸ See: *Dünya Türkmenleri Eğitim Vakfı* [World Turkmens Education Foundation], <http://www.dtev.org>

⁹ *Dünya Türkmenleri Eğitim Vakfı*.

with remnants of Turkish architecture still very visible. The majority of Turkmens in Syria resides in Aleppo, with over 700,000 living in Huyluk neighborhood. Other districts include Kurdağı, Jerablus, Mumbich, Musabeyli, and Azez villages.¹⁰

Hama and Humus Region

Turkmens predominantly live in Humus city as well as some of the surrounding villages such as Kara Avshar, Inallu, and Kapushak.¹¹ In Hama, the Turkmens can be found in Baba Amir Haras (a prominent Turkmen district), Zara, Mitras, Bdada, Arjun, Alhusun, Dar Kabira, Kizhil, Um al Kasab, Samalil, Burc Kaya. In Hama they include Akrab (Kara Halili), Tulluf, Hazzur, Huvvır el Trukman, Bit Natir, Hirmil.¹²

Golan Region

Located in southern Syria, today over 400,000 Turkmens live in Quneitra region of Golan. However, due to the ongoing Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights, it is believed that many Turkmens who lived in the mountains have fled the area and instead reside with fellow Turkmens in other areas of Syria. However, one can still trace the Turkmens to a multitude of Golan tribes, most notably the Turan and Aga tribes who predominantly reside in the villages of Dababiye, Rezaniye, Sindiyane, Aynul Kara, Aynul Simsime, Ulayka, Aynul Alak, Ahmediyeh, Kafer Nafah, Mugir, Hafir, Hüseyeniye, Ayn Ayse.¹³

Lebanese Turkmens

Turkmens predominantly reside in the northern parts of Lebanon and continue to maintain their cultural heritage to this day. Currently, the number of Turkmens is said to total approximately 75,000 people.

Remnants of the Atabeg dynasty and the Ottoman Empire's architectural works can still be found in modern-day Lebanon; approximately 1,500 monuments and works of art remain intact.¹⁴

10 The break-down of the Turkmen population in the township and surrounding areas is: 16 villages to the south of Jebeli Sema; 17 villages connected to Azez Kazası; 29 to the east of Azez; 3 villages connected to Aleppo; 69 villages in Cobanbegi region towards Mumbich; 26 villages in Jerablus region; 23 towards the south Sacır Suyu. From the borders of Urfa in Murshid Pınar and Akchakale to the South, which stretches out as far as Belih Irmag, and excluding the Turkmen neighborhoods of Aleppo, approximately 350 Turkmen villages are scattered throughout this region.

11 Other villages include Doger Oğlani, Hama Degeri Mustafa Kethuda, Hama Dugeri tabi-i Dervih kethuda, Sham Begmislüsü, Hujetlu, Eymir Dundvarlu, Chozlu Cherkez Oları, Harbendulusu, Kara Tohtemurlu, Sherefli, Ushak Obası, Beshir, Eymir Sinjarlu, Bozlu, Bozlu, Tohtemurlusu, Salur, Genjeli, Kızıl Ali, and Kara Halil.

12 See: Footnote 10.

13 For more information on Turkmen tribes of Golan see: M.E. Khayr, *Turkmen Tribes*, (Damascus: Turkmani Print, 2004).

14 Architectural historians such as Khalid Tadmuri estimate that close to 200 pieces and artifacts were destroyed during the republican period.

In Tripoli, Turkmens continue to use their Turkish family names, which include Mevlevi, Çelebi Dervish, Yamak, Ramazanoğulları, Çuhadar, Kavukçu, Bazarbaşı, and Sancakdar. The Lebanese Turkmens continue to protect their identity and culture.

Important areas of Turkmen population in Northern Lebanon's Akkar region are Aydemun, Kuveyshra, Bire, Mashta Hammud, and Kishlak, while the Daniyye region contains Huvara and Jayroun. Furthermore, the Bekaa Valley is the region containing Shamiyya, Dores, Ka'a, Addus, Hadidiyya and Nanaiyya.¹⁵

Iranian Turkmens

Approximately 2 to 2.5 million Turkmens live in Iran, constituting the second-largest Turkic population, after the Azeris. According to Iranian sources, the areas populated by Turkmens are referred to as Deste Gorgan; and amongst the Turkmens this is known as the "Turkmen Sahara."¹⁶ Starting from the border of Turkmenistan and stretching towards the Caspian Sea, the Turkmen Sahara constitutes a total area of 18,752 km², including a 16,375 km² area of the Gulistan governorate.

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In the past referred to as Gurcan but more recently known as Gonbad Kavoos city, the Turkmen tribes of Yumut, Goklen, and Teke continue to inhabit these areas along with other Turkic ethnic tribes.¹⁷

Palestinian Turkmens

Amongst modern day Turks, the existence of Turkmens in Palestine is probably the least well-known phenomenon. Despite losing their linguistic roots, the Turkmens of Palestine continue to protect their historical and cultural identity. In fact, I was only made aware of the existence of Turkmens in Palestine in the 1980s with the publishing of *The Arab Turkmen* written by Alya Khateeb.¹⁸

15 "Ortadogu Analiz" [Middle Eastern Analysis], ORSAM, Vol. 1, No. 9 (September 2009).

16 Some of these cities of the Turkmen Sahara are known as Hotten, Kuren, Cergelan, Deregez, Gullu Mountain, Marava Hill, Aydervish (Kelale), Hacılı (Minudeshit), Iremyan (Ramiyan), Akkale (Agh ghala), Turkmen Port (Bender Turkmen), Hoca Nepes, Gumush Tepe (Gomishan), Ashur Adayı (Ashuradeh), Kurdish Village (Kordko), Gez port (Bender Gez), Gurgen (Gorgan). Some of the great Turkmen poets' burial grounds, such as Mahtumkulu Parahi, Devlet Mehmet Azadi, and Miskin Kilich, are found in the Turkmen Sahara.

17 Fikret Türkmen and Gurbandırı Geldiev, *Turkmen Siiri Antolojisi* [Anthology of Turkmen Poems] (Ankara: Turksoy, 1995).

18 Alya Khateeb, *The Arab Turkmen – Merj Beni Amir Children* (Amman: Dar Al-Jalil, 1987).

As is well known, Palestine is comprised of three regions: the Great Plains, Sahra, and Saba. The Turkmens are said to populate the Beni Amir plains region and constitute an important part of the population.¹⁹ The historical facts explaining the migratory and settlement patterns of Turkmens in this region are still contested. Whereas some claim that the settlement took place during the Ottoman Empire, others argue Turkmens began to settle in these regions long before, dating back to the first waves of migration of Turkic tribes from Central Asia.

To date, there are no reliable statistics for the Turkmen population. However, some researchers claim that today approximately 400-500,000 Turkmens live in present-day Palestine.²⁰

Conclusion

The Turkmen population living in the Middle East is notable not only for its sheer numbers, but also with the role the Turkmens have played in the shaping the cultural and historical make-up of the nation-states formed following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Despite this, research on Turkmens existence in the Middle East is extremely thin and accordingly, public awareness – not only in Turkey but across the world – is clearly lacking. However, what is clear is that due to the ethnicity of the Turkmens and their perceived past loyalties to the Ottoman and Seljuk Empires, and recently to the modern Turkish state, the Turkmen minority has always suffered at the hands of the majority. Nevertheless, despite being prohibited from expressing its cultural identity, gaining equal civil rights, and the ability to enter the political arena, the Turkmen minority has maintained a peaceful resistance.

When we look over the Middle East landscape and see civil wars, public unrest, and the rise of yet another terrorist organization, is it just or permissible for millions of Turkmens to be left stranded? In Crimea, Bosnia, Kosovo, Myanmar, and other areas across the world, when peoples have been assimilated, assaulted, and degraded, the international community – as well as the Turkish state – stepped up to defend their rights. Unfortunately, the same fervor and passionate defense has not been directed toward the plight of the Turkmens in our neighboring regions. It is time to stand up to defend the rights of all peoples when they need it the most, not when their lives have been extinguished. Of course, the Turkmens live across international borders in clearly defined territorial entities. However, without impeding on our neighbors' national sovereignty, at the very least, Turkey should lend a hand of support to the

19 Some of the most important Turkic tribes to which the Palestinian Turkmen belong are the Shukaryat, Tavatha, and Nagnagiya tribes. Today, the remaining tribes can be listed as: Beni Suaidan, Alkemiler, Beni Gerra, Dabyalar, Shukayrat, Tavatha, and Nagnagiya. The Turkmens currently populate villages in El-Mensi, Ein el-Mensi, Abu Shusha, Abu Zureyk, Gubiyat, Ledul Avadin, and Kerkur.

20 Khateeb (1987).

Turkmens with the sole objective of protecting their cultural rights so they may be able to live without fear of persecution.

On the other hand, a great deal of work rests on the shoulders of Turkmens themselves. For example, the establishment of the “Turkmen Brotherhood Society” – a cultural club established not in the predominantly Turkmen-populated areas but in the capital city of Baghdad – by the Iraqi Turkmens in 1960, became the backbone of all subsequent political movements by the Turkmen population. A similar enterprise that upholds the territorial integrity of the state they belong to should be replicated in other Turkmen-populated states. Secondly, despite millions of Turkmens spanning a region consisting of five countries, there is an urgent need to raise their voices in unison and increasingly conduct awareness-raising activities. This can be achieved by engaging with research organizations and international platforms that will enable the Turkmens not only to present credible and factual realities about situations on the ground to the greater Turkish community, but, I would argue more importantly, to increasingly engage with other nations, and especially other minorities. The purpose here is to increase awareness about the Turkmens, as well as to lay the foundation for an open dialogue that ensures the peaceful coexistence of all peoples, devoid of any ethnic or sectarian undertones.

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