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Response

Iraq: Ansar al-Sunna and security in Tuz Khurmatu

Themes:

- Forced recruitment to Ansar al-Sunna.
- Area of operations for Ansar al-Sunna.
- The security situation in Tuz Khurmatu.

Forced recruitment to Islamist groups like Ansar al-Sunna

As stated in Landinfo's report from 18th August 2008, we have no indications of forced recruitment to Ansar al-Sunna. Ansar al-Sunna was established in 2003 and its stated goal is to establish an Islamic state in Iraq and to end foreign influence in the country (Wikipedia n.d.; Milne 2007; Gregory 2008). The group has recruited Kurdish and Arab Sunni Muslims, Iraqi and foreign. Due to a relatively large pool of volunteers, forced recruitment has not been very likely. One cannot however rule out that this group may have forced people to become informants. In addition, it is not unlikely that teachers of Islam in certain schools that are connected to an Islamist militant group might try to persuade the students to join their cause and help in the struggle to fight the coalition forces, as they see as occupants. Landinfo has not, however, come across any sources that may confirm these assumptions.

Area of operations for Ansar al-Sunna

Ansar al-Sunna is based in northern and central Iraq (Wikipedia n.d.). Their operations are mainly in Sunni-Muslim dominated areas in north and central Iraq.

In 2005 the Turkmen fraction of Ansar al-Sunna claimed responsibility of a bomb explosion outside a mosque in Tuz Khurmatu that killed 12 Shia Turkmen and wounded 20 (Taylor 2008).

During the years, the victims of targeted assassination by Ansar have included government officials, politicians, judges, journalists, humanitarian aid workers, doctors, professors, and individuals thought to be collaborating with foreign forces in Iraq, including translators, cleaners, and others who perform civilian jobs for the U.S.-led Multi-National Force in Iraq (Gregory 2008). Insurgents have directed suicide and car bomb attacks at Shia mosques,

Christian churches, and Kurdish political parties with the purpose of killing civilians (Gregory 2008).

The security situation in Tuz Khurmatu

Tuz Khurmatu is situated in the Tooz district in the Salah al-Din province. The town has a predominantly Kurdish and Turkmen population. The area is disputed and claimed by both the Kurds and the Turkmen, in addition to the Arabs.

The town is controlled by the Kurds and patrolled by the Iraqi local police. The distribution of Kurds, Turkmen and Arabs in the local police force is unknown to Landinfo, but the appointed chief of police is Kurdish (Williams 2003). Reports also indicate the police force constitutes mainly of Kurds (Williams 2003; SOITM 2007). The mayor is also a Kurd (Williams 2003). To illustrate Kurdish authority in the town, the authorities in Sulemaniya, one of the Kurdish self-ruled provinces, sent a Peshmerga¹ battalion to help protect the polling stations when police officers in Tuz Khurmatu were targeted during the latest elections in January 2009 (ITC 2009). This happened apparently despite the fact that a battalion from the Governorate of Salah al-Din had arrived immediately after the attack (ITC 2009). The local branch of the Iraqi Turkmen Front, an umbrella organizations of several parties, objected to having Peshmergas outside the polling stations and asked the government to intervene to ensure transparency and impartiality of the elections (ITC 2009).

Long before the 2009 elections, tensions rose in Tuz Khurmatu as the Kurds demanded that the town be transferred to the Kurdish-majority governorate of Tameem. The area was detached from Kirkuk under the former Bath-party rule (Kurdish Life 2003; Taylor 2005; ICG 2006, p. 12). The Turkmen, as expressed by the Iraqi Turkmen Front, wants the area to remain under the Arab Iraqi authority (Williams 2003).

In addition to the power-struggle along ethnic lines, Tuz Khurmatu has also been a scene of tension and violence along religious conflict-lines. Since there are both Shia and Sunni Turkmen in the area, much of the fighting in this town has been part of the sectarian war (Taylor 2005).

The last big bomb attack in Tuz Khurmatu took place the 7th July 2007 when a truck packed with explosives covered with hay blew up in a crowded market, killing 150 people and wounding 250 (Reuters 2009d).

During 2008 and 2009, however, most of the reported attacks in Tuz Khurmatu have targeted police, *Awakening Council* members or militants (Reuters n.d.; IBC n.d.). The perpetrators are in most cases unknown. They may belong to Sunni-Muslim insurgents like Ansar al-Sunni, Al-Qaeda in Iraq or militants with ties to the old Bath-party, or if the violence is motivated by the power-struggle, it might be Kurdish or Turkmen perpetrators who do not belong to any of these mentioned militant groups.

Illustrative of the pattern of violence that mainly targets state security personnel, a roadside bomb killed two policemen guarding a polling station during the latest provincial elections in late January this year (the incident referred to above) (Reuters 2009b). Earlier that month another police patrol was hit by a roadside bomb (Reuters 2009a).

¹ Kurdish name for the Kurdish army forces.

Although civilians are less targeted today, attacks still occur. The latest reported attack on a civilian took place on 14th May 2009 when a Turkmen shopkeeper was killed in his own shop (Reuters 2009c). This is the only reported attack, known to Landinfo, on a civilian in Tuz Khurmatu this year.

In spite of the power-struggle and violent incidents that have taken place in Tuz Khurmatu even this year, security concerns have dwindled according to a deputy commanding officer in the MNF-I (MNF-I 2009). According to him the security situation is much improved.

A response consists of answers to specific questions presented to Landinfo by case workers working for Norwegian immigration authorities. Responses are not intended to be complete reviews of a topic or theme, but should answer the specific questions posed, and include relevant background information.

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A list, in chronological order, of security incidents in Tuz Khurmatu.

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