

Violations and other threats against Assyrians during pre-election period in Nineveh Plain

Case In Point: Qaraqosh

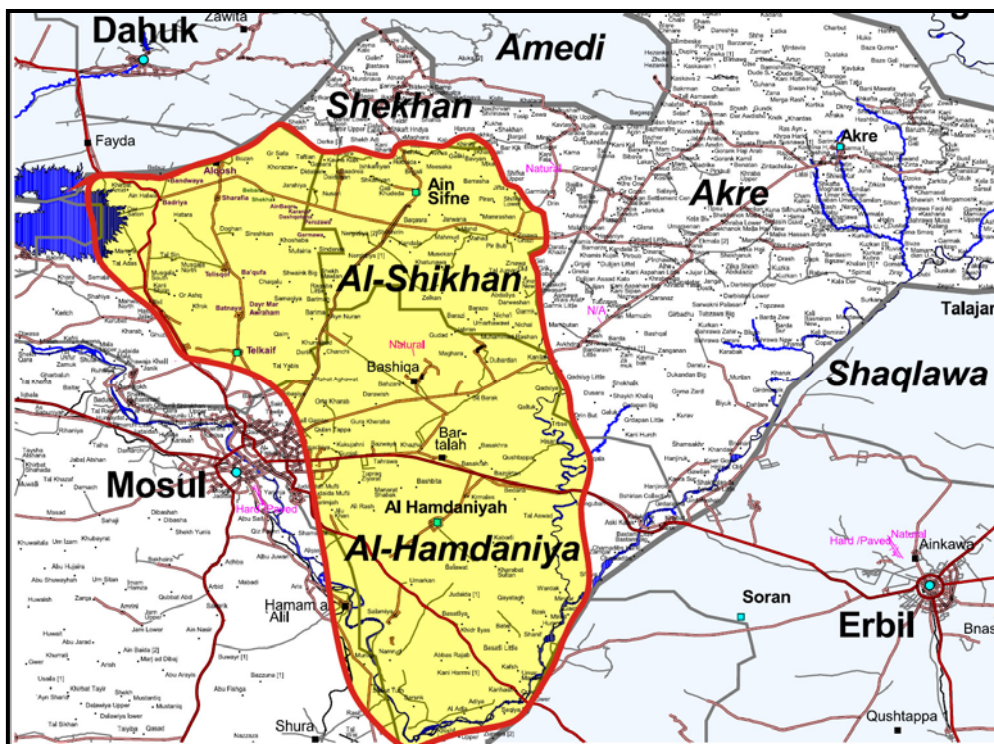


January 2009

Introduction

Between 28th January – 2nd February 2009 three international election observers arrived in northern Iraq's Nineveh plain to observe the provincial elections on the 31st January. The team consisted of Mr. Andrew Swan and Ms. Margaret Murphy from the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) and Mr. Afram Yakoub from the Assyria Council of Europe (ACE). The main report of the Observation Mission (OM) about the election process can be found at www.unpo.org and www.assyriacouncil.eu.

The ACE-UNPO Observation Mission was informed of electoral malpractice prior to arriving in Iraq. The most visible complaints were those of Mr. Ablahad Afram Sawa against the Ishtar slate¹ and Mr. Amin Farhan Jajjos complaint against the Kurdish Nineveh brotherhood slate², both reported by Iraqi media. Whilst in Iraq, the Observation Mission continued to receive information about serious electoral law violations in the run up to the elections. The Observation Mission decided to invest one of its members, Mr Afram Yakoub³, to look into at least some of the many allegations made⁴. The following is the result of what the OM managed to find out about violations during the pre-election period among the Assyrian⁵ minority in the town of Qaraqosh.



The Nineveh plain area marked in yellow. The town of Qaraqosh shown as a green dot under its Arabic name: "Al Hamdaniya"

¹ <http://www.baghdadtimes.net/Arabic/index.php?sid=40648>

² <http://ar.aswataliraq.info/?p=122731>

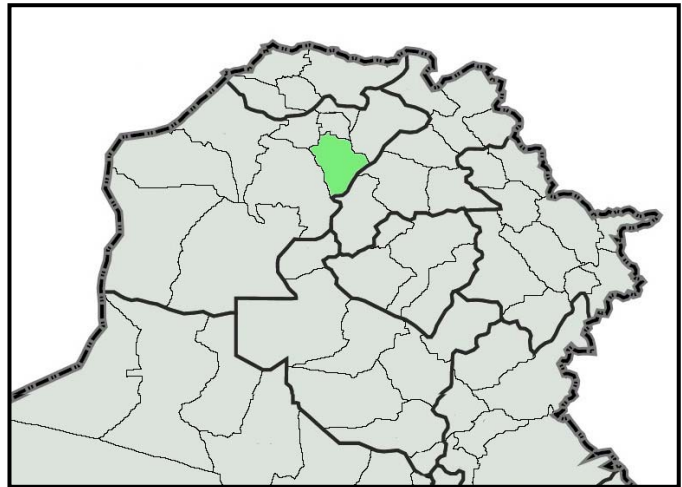
³ Mr. Afram Yakoub was accompanied by a licensed bodyguard who wishes to remain anonymous.

⁴ The other two members of the OM travelled to observe the counting of IDP votes in the University of Dohuk.

⁵ Assyrians are also known under two church denominations as Chaldeans and Syrians.

Case in point: Qaraqosh

The town of Qaraqosh is also known as Baghdede or Al Hamdaniya, and is the capital of the Al Hamdaniya district which lies within the Nineveh province. Its largely uniform population of around 45 000 Assyrians makes it a unique town in Iraq and perhaps in the entire Middle East. Qaraqosh is very important for any Assyrian party during elections. Throughout the visit the Observation Mission heard several accounts of attempts to buy votes as well as threats of economic sanctions made by the group behind the Ishtar slate, one of three Assyrian political entities participating in the provincial elections along with the Al rafidain slate⁶ and the Chaldean Democratic Union slate, each vying to gain the one single quota seat set aside for the Assyrian minority in the council of the Nineveh province.



The Al Hamdaniya district marked in green colour.

The Ishtar slate

The Ishtar slate is made up of a group known in Assyrian as “Maotba Camaya suryaya kaldanaya aturaya” and in Arabic as “Macjlis Al Shabi Al suryani Kaldani Ashuri” which in English translates as “The Popular Council of Syriacs Chaldeans Assyrians”. The group was set up in 2007 in the Arbil suburb Ankawa under the presence of Kurdish finance minister Mr. Sargis Aghajan. The group, which is financially supported and backed by the KRG⁷, is perceived to be pro-Kurdish. It is an opponent of the Assyrian Democratic Movement, which opposes some KRG policies concerning Assyrians. Since its inception the Popular Council of Syriacs Chaldeans Assyrians has implemented several aid projects in Assyrian areas. Part of its work has been to set up militias in Assyrian towns and villages. The members of the militias are



A poster for the Ishtar slate. Photo: ACE

⁶ The Al rafidain slate, in English “The twin rivers slate”, belongs to the Assyrian Democratic Movement.

⁷ <http://www.aina.org/news/20080724130442.htm>

paid a salary of around 300 USD per month, which is a medium salary for Iraqis. Some of the projects of the Popular Council of Syriacs Chaldeans Assyrians are carried out by a council under the name of “Majclis al sho’on al masihiyon”, which translates as “The council for Christian affairs”. Very little is known about this council.



Photo: ACE

One of many buses used during election day to transport Assyrians to polling centres. The text on the paper says: “The office of Christian affairs - Batnaya”. Batnaya is an Assyrian town in the Nineveh plain. Photo: ACE

1. Stopping other political groups from campaigning. Threats against members of other political groups.

Name: Ammar Zeki Karim

Age: 25 years

Other: Came to Qaraqosh 5 years ago.

Member of ADM⁸. Photo: ACE

“I was distributing calendars of the Assyrian Democratic Movement on the 24th January [2009] as part of the election campaign. I was standing close to the elementary school where the polling centre would be on Election Day. Members of the militia came up to me and asked me to stop the distribution. They pointed their guns on me. They told me I should leave the ADM and join them instead. They said they will give me 280 000 Iraqi Dinars⁹ as monthly salary if I leave the ADM. I refused, telling them I would never leave the ADM. They said: “If we see you distribute these again we will arrest you.”



⁸ Assyrian Democratic Movement

⁹ 100 000 Iraqi Dinars is roughly 100 USD.

2. Intimidating and attacking members of other political groups.



Mr. Petrus Mikhael. Photo: ACE



Mr. Firas Josef. Photo: Petrus Mikhael

The following is the testimony of Mr. Petrus Mikhael, responsible for the Al Rafidain slate election campaign in the Al Hamdaniya district:

“On the evening of 27 January [2009] I was visiting the house of my mother in law together with my wife. As I and my wife left we encountered Mr. Firas Josef outside in a miserable condition with blood on his face. He told me some militia members had beaten him because he had stopped by a wall full of election posters to make sure an Al Rafidain poster would not fall from the wall, trying to put it firmly on the wall. He said he looked behind him and saw four men who immediately started to beat him and yell at him at the same time for trying to make sure the Al Rafidain slate poster would not fall of the wall. I took pictures of him and told him we should report everything to the police in the morning. While I was taking the pictures, Fakhri Habib, a militia member, showed up asking why we were taking the pictures. After some exchange of words and pushes Fakhri Habib took out his pistol and fired 4 shots in my direction from circa 20 meters distance. He missed me. I went inside my house. After a few minutes Fakhri Habib came back with 12 other members of the militia outside my house. They started firing in the air with their Kalashnikovs and the sound was very loud. All the residents in the area became afraid, children and women started crying and fear gripped people.”

3. Use of threats of economic sanctions and economic incentives.

The “Aghajan apartments”

A large complex of 350 apartments in Qaraqosh are known as the “Aghajan apartments”. The locals claim the place was built with money provided by KRG finance minister Sargis Aghajan. The maintenance and general administration of the apartments is run by a council attached to the church in Qaraqosh. The Observation Mission heard from different sources that the tenants, mainly poor people and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), had been forced and/or encouraged to vote for the Ishtar slate by economic means. Locals claimed the people in the apartments were promised lower rents if they vote for Ishtar.



The apartment complex in Qaraqosh known as the “Aghajan apartments”. Photo: ACE

First family interviewed

The first family interviewed from the apartment complex consisted of two adults and four children of which one suffered from an illness. The family confirmed their rent went down from 75 000 Iraqi Dinars to 55 000 Iraqi Dinars 10 days prior to the elections. They also proudly showed the two gifts they had received from: “Mr. Sargis Aghajan”, a refrigerator and a heater. They had received the gifts in January, shortly before the elections. They maintained that no one had forced them to vote for a certain slate. They also displayed their inked fingers saying they both had voted for the Ishtar slate. The man in the family has only occasional work as a day labourer. The woman does not have any work outside the home.



The family standing around the new refrigerator. Photo: ACE

Second Family interviewed

The second family interviewed also confirmed their rent was reduced from 75 000 Iraqi Dinars to 55 000 Iraqi Dinars ten days before the elections. They said discussions between the church committee and the tenants concerning the lowering of the rent had taken place since several months, but it was implemented ten days prior to elections. They voted for Ishtar but maintained that no one had forced them to do so. The father in the family said *“I promise you that you will not find one person here who hasn’t voted for Ishtar”*. The only person working in the family is the son in the far left in the picture. He has no permanent job but is a daily labourer, taking jobs for a few days here and there whenever there is an opportunity. The family had fled from Baghdad several years ago.



Photo: ACE

A member of a social organization in Qaraqosh

A local who is engaged in social issues in Qaraqosh and who has lived in the town for decades agreed to talk. The person did not want to appear with his picture or name because he had already been threatened to death by members of the local militia. The person is not a member of any political group. This is the core of what the person had to say:

“The local priest, Alwis Qassab, implements the orders of the Kurds; he is the one directing everything here”.

“They [Ishtar slate group] warned people in Qaraqosh by saying “We have observers in every polling station and we will be able to find out whom you have voted for”.

“They have instilled fear in people”.

“They stopped the buses which take the students to the Mosul University, threatening them they will not be driven to university anymore if they do not vote for the Ishtar slate”.

“They arranged a party for the youth two days before the elections. Everything was for free and many became drunk. In the party they instructed the youth to vote for Ishtar.”

“They warned the families living in the apartments they will be thrown out if they do not vote for Ishtar”.

When the person was informed the two families interviewed did not mention they had been threatened to be thrown out, the person replied:

“Of course they won’t tell you. Iraqis are masters in lying after decades of dictatorship. I live here each day and I know they have been threatened.”

Militia member

After meeting with the two families and the member of a social organization an opportunity presented itself to talk directly with members of the local militia standing at what appeared to be a check point. There were three of them. They said they must first contact their headquarters and ask for permission to answer any questions. I [Afram Yakoub] convinced one of them, whom I had walked with a few meters from the others, not to contact anyone and that I would not let anyone know he had answered any questions. He was very reluctant to speak despite being promised he could remain anonymous. He did however confirm that he himself and the other militia members had received an extra pay of 100 000 Iraqi Dinars a few days before elections. He said it was “takrim”, an Arabic word used when a (public) institution wants to reward its employees for good service. When asked whether he had been pressured to vote for a certain slate he replied “*There are things I cannot say*”. Despite several assurances he could remain completely anonymous he did not answer any questions. The only reply he gave was: “*You know, we have families to feed, there are things I cannot tell you*”.

4. Hindering election observer. Seeking information about people interviewed.

The following is the testimony of Mr. Afram Yakoub on how he was caught and interrogated by the militia in Qaraqosh:

“After speaking to the two families, the charity member and the militia man I received a tip of two other families in the apartment complex who had something to tell. I received the tip from a local with good knowledge about the people in town. As we were driving back to the apartment complex we faced several new guards at the entrance of the complex, now equipped with walkie talkies. I felt they had been waiting to meet us. The guards insisted one of them follows us inside the apartment complex. One of them stepped into our car with his Kalashnikov. I immediately aborted the mission saying that we should visit the old town first. We asked the guard to step outside and asked for directions to the old town to make the situation look credible. We then drove away from the apartment complex. It wouldn’t be a good idea to show up at the family’s house with one of the militia members.”



The church in central Qaraqosh. Photo: ACE

Just a few moments later we were stopped by armed militia members on the main road in Qaraqosh, very close to the church [shown in the picture]. They approached us from different directions with Kalashnikovs in their hands. They did not have any uniforms and they did not present themselves with any form of identification. My bodyguard had his ID card confiscated and I had my International Observer badge confiscated. We were told someone wanted to meet us. Two of them stepped into our car with their Kalashnikovs and told us to follow the car in front of us. They did not reply when we asked who it was that wanted to speak to us. They were obviously not suspecting us for being terrorists as they didn't bother to search us or our car.

We arrived at a house with no sign indicating it to be a public facility. It was an ordinary house in an ordinary neighbourhood in Qaraqosh. As the two militia men stepped out of our car I immediately called Phil Sand, a journalist from The National whom I had been in touch with. I told him I was caught by a militia and asked him to help me by calling me every five minutes and pretend to be an official in Baghdad who was worried for my safety.

As we were about to enter the house the militia confiscated the mobile phone of my bodyguard but I refused to hand in my mobile phone. They gave in when they realised I was determined not give them my mobile. I knew I would need it when Phil Sand would call.

There were five older men sitting in the room and the ID card of my bodyguard and my badge were on the desk in front of them. They started asking questions about our names and origin. They did not want to acknowledge my status as an international observer, saying that the elections ended yesterday. I insisted they read the text on the badge carefully and also insisted on my status as an international observer. I also told them the job of an election observer does not end directly after Election Day. They were very interested in finding out whom I had met with in Qaraqosh and what questions I had been asking. I told them they are not allowed to ask such questions to an international observer or interfere in the work of an international observer. They were upset by my reply and the fact that I was questioning their authority.

When the journalist called me up and I started talking English the men in the room became worried, telling from the expression on their faces. When Phil Sand asked me whether I was in a police office I replied "I don't know if it is a police office". The men directly replied in Arabic: "Yes, tell him it is a police office". My bodyguard immediately shouted: "No, it's not a police office, it's a militia head quarter, if it is a police office then where are your badges?", looking at the men. I replied to Phil that I was in a militia head quarter, which made the men even more worried. Only after I ended the call, leaving them with the impression that I was an important person with connections in Baghdad, did they allow me and my bodyguard to leave. We immediately left town, fearing the militia might try to harm us and also because it would be impossible for me to operate now that they knew what I was doing there. Of course, it's impossible to know what the militia leaders would have done if I hadn't managed to make them believe Baghdad was concerned about my safety.

It's obvious that the militia stopped me only because I was investigating allegations of threats and vote-buying in Qaraqosh. They could have stopped me at the first check point when entering the town or at the several check points we passed inside Qaraqosh, or when I spoke with the militia member. They became interested in me only after a few hours, when their leaders heard a person was investigating what had taken place in Qaraqosh in the run up to the elections.



The front and back side of the international observer badge the militia men did not want to recognize.

Conclusions

In the 2005 elections many Assyrians were unable to cast their votes because polling material was illegally confiscated by members of Kurdish militias and Assyrians therefore did not experience free and fair elections¹⁰. In the 2009 provincial elections all necessary polling material and logistics was present in the Nineveh plain polling centres, but many Assyrians still could not experience free and fair elections. As this short report shows, there are enough indications that thousands of Assyrians who cast their votes on the 31st January 2009 didn't do it out of free will. By using the threat of economic sanctions against mainly poor families who depend on the apartment they live in and a low rent, others who feed an entire family on a salary as a militia member or students fearing they will lose their transportation means to the University, the Ishtar slate managed to gain the majority of votes in Qaraqosh.

Through stopping campaign work of other political groups, intimidating members of other political groups, threaten poor people with economic sanctions and/or giving poor people economic incentives, intimidating and attacking members of other political groups and instilling fear in the local population: the Ishtar slate has violated several important articles of the Iraqi elections law and has deprived thousands of Assyrians the chance to experience free and fair elections.

Given these facts, the Independent High Election Commission of Iraq (IHEC) should immediately act to launch its own investigation into the many formal complaints handed in to it by other slates concerning the acts of the Ishtar slate. IHEC should specifically investigate whether the Ishtar slate has violated the election law which forbids entities with militias attached to them to run in the elections.

Afram Yakoub

Project Director, Assyria Council of Europe

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¹⁰ Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour. U.S. Dep't of State. Iraq: Country report on Human Rights practises – 2005 § 3 (2006), <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2005/61689.htm>