



50 THOUSAND ASSYRIANS

Report On The Flight From Al Hamdaniya

July 2014





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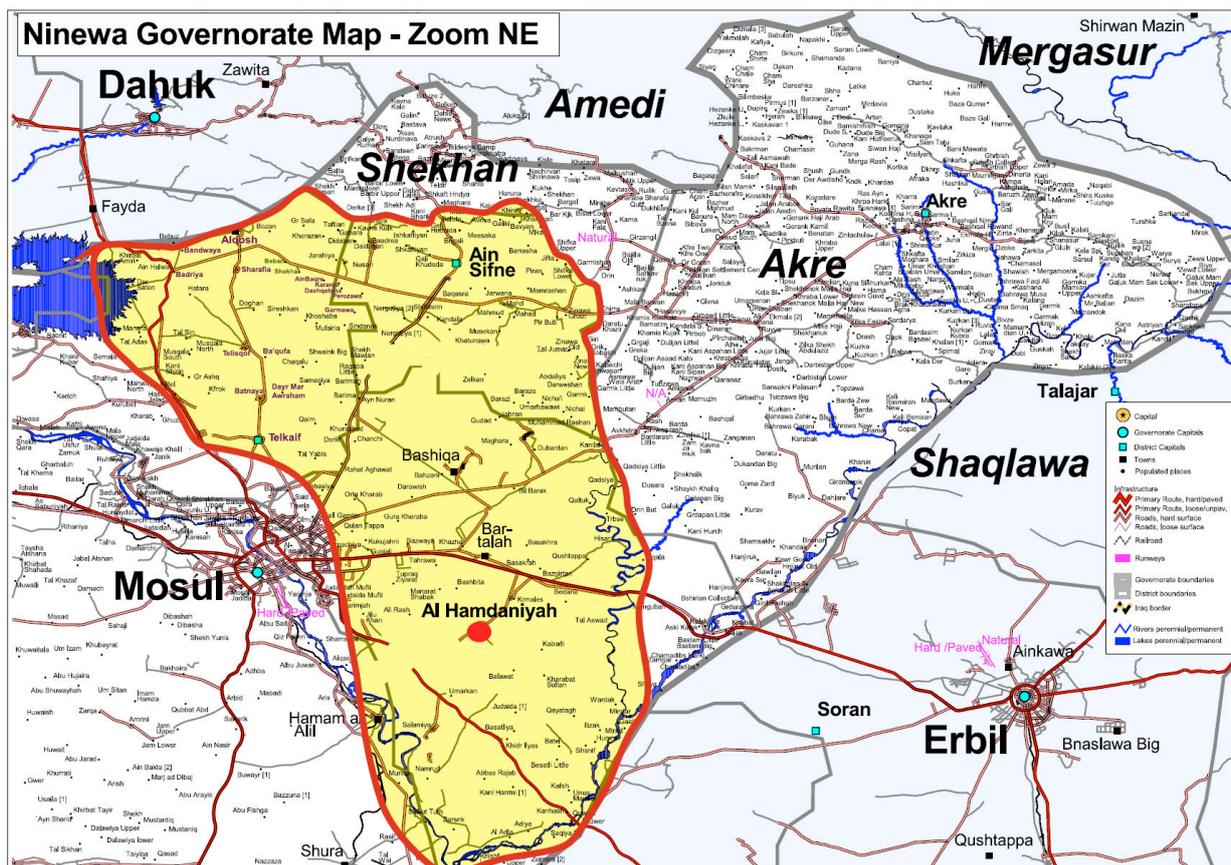
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Cover photo: Assyrians who fled Al Hamdaniya gathered in the Assyrian centre in Ankawa Arbil.
Photo: Radio Ashur.

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Geographic overview



Introduction

On Wednesday, June 25, 2014 at 13:00 a clock clashes broke out between Kurdish militia and armed sunni-arab groups south-west of the Assyrian town Al Hamdaniya in Iraq.

The town is also called Baghdede in Assyrian and Qaraqosh in Turkish; it has approximately 50,000 inhabitants. Al Hamdaniya lies in the southern part of the Nineveh plain, about 20 kilometres southeast of Mosul.

The media coverage of the clashes have conveyed a story in which the Islamic group ISIS have tried to attack the town because the inhabitants are Christians and that Kurdish militia have responded in defence of the civilian population.

The Assyrian Federation of Sweden was informed about the clashes through contacts on the ground one hour after they broke out. Contacts have been ongoing on a daily basis with different sources in the mentioned area in Iraq and in other parts of the country since then in order to gather information. Information obtained from one source has been verified with another independent source. After analysing all the information received the Assyrian Federation draws totally different conclusions about the event than what has been reported in the media.

In order not to expose the sources on the ground their identities are kept secret.

Södertälje, 1 July 2014

The Assyrian Federation of Sweden

Afram Yakoub, President

The Assyrian Federation of Sweden was established 1977 and is an umbrella organisation for 30 Assyrian organisations in Sweden with eight thousand members.

Background

The Nineveh plain is an oval shaped area in the northern part of Iraq with an estimated land area of 3500 square kilometres. It is made up of four administrative units; Al Hamdaniya (named after main town), Tell Keif, Sheikan and Al Shekhan. The area is delineated by the river Tigris to the west, the river Great Zab to the south, a smaller river to the east and a mountain ridge to the north. The fertile plain is part of what is known as the Iraqi breadbasket.

The Nineveh plain is unique in terms of ethnic demographics as two non-Muslim peoples form the majority of the inhabitants. These are Assyrians and Yezidis. Another minority in inhabiting the plain are the Shabak, who are Muslim.

The Nineveh plain is the last area in Iraq where non-Muslims are the majority. It is special also because Assyrians and Yezidis are the indigenous population of Iraq. The ruins of the ancient Assyrian capital Nineveh lie there. In no other middle eastern country (with the exception of the Maronites in Lebanon) has the non-Muslim indigenous population been able to maintain a demographic majority in a coherent area.

Since the American war in Iraq in 2003 the Assyrians and Yezidis have raised demands for the Nineveh plain to become a self-administered area within the federal system of the Iraqi constitution. The purpose is to allow for the minorities living there to have greater influence over their security and administration, and to be able to exercise their religions, cultures and languages freely.

The Kurdish administered region in Northern Iraq was quick to lay claim to the area and sent in its militia when the Saddam regime fell. The Nineveh plain has been designated as a "disputed area" since then as a result of the Kurdish military presence. According to the Iraqi constitution a referendum shall be held in "disputed areas" in order to decide if they will answer to the central government in Baghdad or the KRG. It should be noted that very few Kurds live in the Nineveh plain.

On January 21, 2014 the Iraqi council of ministers took a decision to make the Nineveh plain into a province. An investigation began in order to study the feasibility of the plan, which is supposed to have final approval by the parliament in Baghdad. The decision of the council of ministers made many Assyrians, Yezidis and Shabak hopeful about their future.

On June 10, 2014 year Islamic groups under the leadership of ISIS took over the city of Mosul and the Iraqi army and police collapsed, including on the Nineveh plain. Kurdish militia was suddenly the only armed force in the area.

One of many headlines after the event in Al Hamdaniya which described what happened as an attack by ISIS. Here German news paper Spiegel online.

Course of events

Preparations

Unanimous sources make clear that the number of Kurdish militia known as Zerevani increased in and around the check point area south west of Al Hamdaniya on Tuesday, June 24, one day before any clashes were reported. The first Zerevani militiamen had arrived to the area as soon as Mosul fell to ISIS. During this day, June 24, a rumour made the rounds in town that ISIS would attack the next day. This increased the fear among the already terrified civilians who had witnessed the arrival of ISIS to nearby Mosul some two weeks earlier.

Provocation

The Kurdish militia was digging trenches in the area for several days with the help of bulldozers. Sometime during Wednesday, June 25, the Zerevani militia ordered all armed persons manning the check point to leave the area. Several independent sources have stated clashes broke out sometime around midday when the bulldozers entered lands belonging to a Sunni Arab village. This provoked the villagers and led to armed clashes between the Sunni Arabs and the Kurds.

Clashes

The Sunnis soon called on ISIS and other armed groups in nearby Mosul for support. The fighting escalated into artillery battle. At 13:00 PM the news reached the town of Al Hamdaniya. Given the rumour ISIS has acquired as a ruthless Islamic extremist group the people in the town panicked. The rumour that was spread the day before about an imminent attack by ISIS added fear. The civilians soon began to hear the grenades exploding not far from the town. People began to leave the town immediately. A mass exodus began which led to 50,000 people leaving their homes within 24 hours. Two grenades fell only a few meters from the houses on the outskirts of the town. Heavily armed Kurdish militia was sent to the area and it positioned itself around the town.

Negotiations

The Assyrian Catholic bishop, Youhana Boutros Moshe refused to leave Al Hamdaniya. He stayed, along with his secretary, and a dozen young men who wanted to defend the churches. The relations between the Assyrians and the Sunni Arab tribes in the area are good and the two sides know each other well. That is why the Arabs initiated contact with the bishop and his secretary. The Sunnis offered the Kurds a truce through the bishop. They assured the bishop that they were not targeting the Assyrians but the Kurds who have provoked them by entering their lands.

The commanders of the Kurdish militia said they would not accept a truce. They informed the bishop to tell the Sunni Arabs that they must leave Al Hamdaniya district in order for the shelling to stop.

Conclusions

The conclusions drawn by the Assyrian federation based upon the facts the organisation has gathered offer a totally different picture from the one presented by the media.

Not an Attack by ISIS

What the sources reveal first and foremost is that this was not an attack by ISIS against the city of Al Hamdaniya or the Nineveh plain. Neither ISIS or any of the armed groups who have taken over Mosul were behind the attack. The information points however to involvement by ISIS or other armed groups aiding the Sunni Arab tribes shortly after the clashes broke out.

Intentional Provocation

Sources on the ground reveal the attack was provoked by the Kurdish militia. Given the situation in the area after the takeover of ISIS and the chaos in the entire country, the Kurdish militia leaders must have known that their actions would provoke a resistance by the Sunni Arabs who live in that area.

Intelligence point to the Kurds knowing the consequences and indeed preparing for them by increasing the number of Zerevani militia in the mentioned area south west of Al Hamdaniya the day before clashes broke out. Sending away the men manning the check points in the area shortly before the fight could be interpreted as a way to avoid direct witnesses. Many of the men in charge of the check points were inhabitants of Al Hamdaniya.

Intended Evacuation

The positioning of Kurdish militia and artillery around the town of Al Hamdaniya points to a conscious strategy to scare the inhabitants of the town. By deploying their units close to the town the Kurds effectively made Al Hamdaniya a target of enemy shelling. Common military sense is to engage the enemy as far away as possible from a town with tens of thousands of civilians. This conduct by the Kurdish militia has been openly critiqued by Mr. Yonadam Kanna, secretary general of the Assyrian Democratic Movement and head of the Al Rafidain slate in the Iraqi parliament. The following is an excerpt from a news item in Iraqi Media Network on 28 June.¹

"The leader of the Al Rafidain slate Yonadam Kanna said today that the areas of the minorities in Mosul have been transformed into a battle field between Peshmerga, the tribes and the terrorist gangs of ISIS. He urges

¹ www.alakhbaar.org/home/2014/6/171350.html

the KRG to pull back the Peshmerga so that the areas of the minorities will not become targets for the terrorist gangs of ISIS.”

The rumour spread the day before clashes broke out about an imminent attack by ISIS is yet another indication of an intentional strategy aimed at scaring away the civilian population.

Another prominent member of the Assyrian community has hinted at Kurdish manipulation. Gevara Zaya, deputy general secretary of the Assyrian Democratic Movement, was quoted on June 28 in the online magazine ankawa.com under the headline: "Military strategy by Zerevani forces contributes to general exodus from Al Hamdaniya and Karamlesh."²



Smoke rising after a grenade touched down only a few meters from the town of Al Hamdaniya.
Photo: Ishtar TV



Assyrians fleeing the town of Al Hamdaniya caused massive queues on the roads.
Photo: Radio Ashur

² http://www.ankawa.com/index.php?option=com_jfusion&Itemid=139&jfile=index.php&topic=743850.0

Plausible motives

The Assyrian Federation of Sweden has identified several plausible motives for the Kurdish action.

Establish Tigris as Border

The Kurdish leadership in Northern Iraq has for long openly declared that it is intent on occupation of the Nineveh plain, Kirkuk and other so called "disputed areas." On official maps on the homepage of the KRG one can see the entire Nineveh plain is marked as part of the KRG. The area where the clashes broke out lies within the Nineveh plain. The problem, seen from the point of view of the Kurds, is that several Sunni Arab tribes with a population of well over 100 000 inhabit the stretch of land along the Tigris eastern bank. Most of the Arabs in this area reject Kurdish occupation of the area. The Arabs constitute thus an obstacle for the Kurdish objective. The provocation and the armed fighting which followed on the June 25, 2014 should be understood in light of this fact.

The main motive of the Kurdish leadership seems to have been to establish a foothold closer to the eastern bank of the Tigris River, which is the desired borderline between Iraq and the Kurdish state in the making. This explains why the Kurds looked to provoke the Arab tribes and also why they were reluctant to accept a cease fire offered by the Arabs. The Kurdish demand that Arabs leave the entire district of Al Hamdaniya, as conveyed to the Arabs through the Assyrian bishop, is the most revealing evidence for this motive. The KRG has been able to expand its armed reach and deployment in the south-eastern part of the Nineveh plain with the armed fighting as an excuse.

Change of demographics

Another motive seems to be to weaken the demands for autonomy or local self-rule for Assyrians and other minorities in the Nineveh plain. By provoking armed fighting with Sunni Arabs in the vicinity of the largest town in the Nineveh plain, and making the inhabitants flee, the demands for self-rule are severely weakened. The deployment of Kurdish artillery close to the town of Al Hamdaniya, and the spreading of rumours about an imminent attack by ISIS, cannot be interpreted as anything else than a conscious strategy to instil fear. Although many of the civilians will return to their homes, a sense of fear and insecurity has surfaced. It is highly likely that some of the residents will decide to leave the area for good as it is difficult for people to regain a sense of security after such violent events. The motive of demographic change is plausible in the light of outspoken Kurdish plans to annex the Nineveh plain.

Weaken political resistance

A natural consequence of the events described in this report is the spread of fear among the inhabitants of the Nineveh plain. An atmosphere of

uncertainty and anxiety has been created. Even for those who reject Kurdish occupation, most feel they are unwillingly forced to accept such an occupation. The alternative in their mind is far worse with blood thirsty Islamists of ISIS prepared to rape the women and crucify the men. Fear is a powerful tool used to make the population acquiescent and yielding. The armed clashes contribute, therefore, to weaken political resistance against the occupation.

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Days of Terror: Iraqi Christians Live in Fear of ISIS

By Katrin Kuntz in Qaraqosh, Iraq



Photo Gallery: Religious War

Photos ▶

Christian Werner/ DER SPIEGEL

Some 40,000 Christians live in Qaraqosh, a town near Mosul, Iraq. Residents have been gathering daily in 12 local churches as ISIS jihadists advance towards the community. Their existence is a precarious one.

One of many headlines after the event in Al Hamdaniya which described what happened as an attack by ISIS. Here German news paper Spiegel online.

Other factors

- ▶ Despite alarming reports, the Assyrian Federation has not been able to find proof that ISIS has tried or showed tendencies to attack the Nineveh plain so far. This is corroborated by sources on the ground.
- ▶ On June 13, 2014 the district council leader of the town of Alqosh, Mr Faiz Abed Jahwareh, who is Assyrian, was removed from his seat and replaced by a man who is a member of the KDP party of Kurdish President Massoud Barzani. The attempt was foiled only when the inhabitants of the town held demonstrations. Alqosh is a strategically situated town on the northern edge of the Nineveh plain, with an exclusively Assyrian population.
- ▶ The Kurdish flag has been raised on official buildings in the Nineveh plain by Kurdish forces since June 9, when the Iraqi army in the area collapsed.
- ▶ The Kurdish administration and especially the KDP party has actively and purposely worked to thwart and undermine all attempts to establish a formal defence force composed of Assyrians in the Nineveh plain. This has been ongoing since the U.S led war that toppled the Saddam regime in 2003. (See recommended reports on the last page)

Recommendations

To the KRG government:

- Allow an independent and impartial investigation into the armed clashes in Al Hamdaniya
- Allow an independent and impartial investigation into the attempted removal of Mr Faiz Abed Jahwreh from his position as head of the district of Alqosh.
- Order Kurdish forces to remove the Kurdish flags raised on official buildings in the Nineveh plain.
- Issue written support for the creation of independent security forces on the Nineveh plain.
- Issue written support for the right of the inhabitants of the Nineveh plain to decide themselves on the future status of the Nineveh plain.
- Commence a withdrawal of all military forces belonging to the KRG from the Nineveh plain in consultation with local leaders and representatives.

To governments, MR-Organisations, the EU and U.S:

- Initiate a fact finding mission to the Nineveh plain to investigate the event in Al Hamdaniya
- Initiate a fact finding mission to investigate the attempt to unseat Mr Faiz Abed Jahwreh, the city council leader of Alqosh.
- Issue statements in support of the right of the people of the Nineveh plain to decide upon the future political status without external meddling.

Recommended reading

The Assyrian Federation recommends the following reports for further details about the situation on the Nineveh plain:

- On Vulnerable Ground; Violence against Minority Communities in Nineveh Province's Disputed Territories. 2009. Human Rights Watch. The report is available on the organisations homepage and is recommended as an independent source of information on the issue of the Nineveh plain.
- Preventing the De-Christianization of Iraq: How to stop the exodus of Iraq's indigenous ChaldoAssyrian Christians. 2007. Iraqi Sustainable Democracy Project. The report is available on the organisations homepage: iraqidemocracyproject.org.
- Ethnic Discrimination in the Iraqi police force: The case of the Assyrians in the Nineveh plain of Northern Iraq. Assyria Council of Europe 2010. The report is available on the organisations homepage: assyriacouncil.eu.