

## The Fate of the Circassian Community in Iraq between the Struggle for Survival and Formal Recognition

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**Abstract:** The Circassian community in Iraq has been threatened for decades because of the political and socio-economic situation and changes in the country. The fall of Saddam Hussein's regime due to the United States' military campaign, the conflict between the international military forces led by the USA and the local Islamist militants, and finally the rise of the Islamic State have threatened the fragile Iraqi status quo and affected the recent living conditions of the Circassians. This paper will attempt to examine the current situation of the Circassians focusing the attention on the effect which the recent Iraqi conflict and the war against Daesh have had on this community. Furthermore, this research aims at describing the efforts of the Circassian community to promote their social and political activities and defend the community's identity, the historical and linguistic background, and the traditions.

**Keywords:** Middle East, Iraq, North Caucasus, ethnic minorities, Circassians

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Iraq is a complex and multi-ethnic country that has been affected by geopolitical and sociocultural problems which have their origin in the post-colonial process, the decades of Saddam Hussein's regime, the US military campaign, the affirmation of the Shi'ah government supported by Washington, and the rise of Islamist groups as Al-Qā'ida and Daesh (also well-known in the West as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant or ISIS).

Even though the North Caucasian Diaspora is part of the Iraqi melting pot, currently the Circassians, the Chechens and the Dagestanis are not formally recognised as ethnic minorities under the Iraqi Constitution, and they do not have any member who could represent their needs and requests inside the Iraqi Parliament. For decades the North Caucasian tribes have been affected by repression under the Saddam Hussein's regime, and the situation has not changed with the Shi'ah government imposed by the United States and got worse after the rise of the Islamic State in 2014. Although the Islamic State has been almost wholly defeated in Iraq by the international coalition in collaboration with the Kurdish *peshmerga* and the Iraqi military forces, the situation for ethnic minorities has not improved.

As written in the report *Crossroads: the future of Iraq's minorities after ISIS* [1] ethnic minorities continue to diminish in Iraq because of the lack of precise security measures to protect, rebuild and encourage returns. The current uncertain Iraqi situation is due to the inability of the Iraqi government, the Kurdish authorities and the international community to support the reconstruction and peace process after the defeat of the Islamic State and guarantee standard living conditions and access to the political environment for ethnic and religious minorities.

In this paper, the author aims at analysing the current situation of the Circassian community in Iraq whose destiny is linked to the fate of the Middle East and conditioned by the geopolitical challenges that the Iraqi government is trying to manage. As a minority, the Circassians have been facing discrimination and repression, and in many cases, they were assimilated by the society adopting their languages and traditions. Among the different goals of this research, there is not only the desire to examine how these ethnic minorities are preserving their identity, tradition and cultural roots in connection with the regional development but also the attempt of understanding what is the self-perception that the Circassians have of themselves.

### II. MATERIAL AND METHODS

Albeit the academic world and media agencies have studied the Circassian Genocide and the following Circassian Diaspora in the Middle East [2–9] until nowadays the living conditions of the Iraqi Circassians have not been deeply analysed. Therefore, one of the leading problems of this investigation is represented by the lack of sources and updated information as it was ascertained through the review of scholarly literature and books,

reports of NGOs, articles released in English, Russian and Arabic in the last ten years. In addition, since the Circassian community is not considered an ethnic minority in Iraq, the majority of reports released by international organisations and institutions mostly consider Christians, Kaka'i, Shabak, Turkmens, and Yezidis as Iraqi minorities without taking into account the North Caucasian tribes [10–12].

The latest updated report on the Circassian community in Iraq dated back in 2012 and was published by the *Markaz Dirāsāt al-Sharq al-Awsat ORSAM* [13], a think tank based in Ankara. The authors of the report wanted to analyse the living conditions of Chechens, Dagestani and Circassians in Iraq briefly describing the historical roots of the North Caucasian tribes in the Middle Eastern country and giving some information regarding their villages, communities, traditions and cultural heritage.<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of this study the publication *al-Tadāmun* (Solidarity) written in Arabic and released by the organisation *Jami'āt al-Tadāmun al-Khyriyalil-ShishānwaDaghestānwaShirkas al-'Iraq* (Solidarity Association of Chechnya and Dagestan and Circassians of Iraq, hereinafter "al-Tadāmun Society") was identified as the source which could have filled the lack of information regarding the Iraqi Circassians. *Al-Tadāmun* is a magazine whose purpose is to engage the North Caucasian tribes in Iraq and promote their traditions, history, culture and languages. Unfortunately, during the investigation, it was possible to find only two volumes among the 22 published since 2004 on the website "kafkasiraq.do.am" [14].

Regarding the media world, Saad Salloum,<sup>2</sup> journalist and researcher based in Iraq specialised in human rights and ethnic minorities, has shown his interests in the condition of the North Caucasian tribes in Iraq reporting on the newspaper al-Monitor their will to create an organisation or political party in order to be recognised as an ethnic minority under the Iraqi Constitution [15]. Besides, a few Arabic newspapers published articles which described the life of North Caucasian tribes in Iraq and discussed the condition of the Circassian community underlining the problem of recognition as a vital step for the Circassians' survival [16,17].

As highlighted in this paper, the analysis of the Circassian community's condition in Iraq has faced several problems represented by the lack of information and the unstable Iraqi situation which is an obstacle for field research. Furthermore, it should be highlighted that there is a general confusion between the terms "Circassian" and "North Caucasian" in the Middle Eastern region because these two words are frequently used interchangeably to indicate either the Circassians or the member of the North Caucasian Diaspora composed by the Chechens, Dagestani, and Circassians.

### **III. HISTORY OF THE CIRCASSIAN COMMUNITY IN IRAQ: FROM THE END OF THE CAUCASIAN WAR TO THE RISE OF THE ISLAMIC STATE**

The Circassians arrived in the Middle East after the end of the Caucasian War in 1864 when the Tsarist Empire managed to subjugate the North Caucasian tribes in the region fighting a prolonged war in the eastern parts against the Chechens and the Dagestani and in the western part against the Circassians. The Caucasian War (1817 – 1864) caused around 600,000 victims among the Circassians and an exodus toward the near Ottoman Empire, hence to Iraq, with some 500,000 forcibly deported in what it is considered the first ethnic cleansing in history [18].

Their migration continued until early 1920, and the Circassian community played an influential role in the social, cultural and political life of Iraq during the end of the XIX century and the beginning of the XX century (fall of the Ottoman Empire and first years of Iraq's independence). As a matter of fact, during the Ottoman Empire, the Circassians emerged as strong supporters of the central government and thanks to their ability as warriors, traders, and farmers they reached prominent positions in the Ottoman Iraqi society. According to ORSAM's report, the Circassians emigrated to Iraq from the North Caucasus and the Balkans and contributed to the cultural, economic and social development of the country and also increased the number of Muslim people [13]. An example of this influence and importance inside the Ottoman Empire is the affirmation of Circassian *divans*<sup>3</sup> in Baghdad such as Al-Kashtini Divan, Aziz Aga Divan, Dervish Beh Divan.

Since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the Circassians have been experimenting a period of weakening inside the Iraqi society. During Saddam Hussein's regime, their decline was transformed into persecution

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<sup>1</sup>The author of this paper contacted BilgayDuman in January 2019 asking for more information about his report and the Circassian community in Iraq. Duman stated that he did not have any update on this topic.

<sup>2</sup>Salloum is also the coordinator of MASARAT - Foundation for Cultural and Media Development (MCMD) and one of the founder of the Iraqi Council for the Interfaith Dialogue (ICID). In August 2017 he confirmed to the author that Ahmet Katav (or Kataw) was in 2017 the leader of the Iraqi Circassian community and one of the members of al-Tadamon Society.

<sup>3</sup>The term *divan* o *diwan* is a Persian loan-word in Arabic and has several meanings such as archive, register, chancery, government office and also collected works. It might indicate a high governmental body inside the Islamic State or in the case of Iraq during the Ottoman Empire a cultural center created by influential families of the region which attracted and gather the local people. For further information about the etymology and use of the term *divan* it is possible to consult: De Blois, Ehsan, 1996. *Divan. EncyclopaediaIranica*. 1996. Vol. VII, no. 4, p. 432–438.

because they were accused of being an extension of the past government and a threat to the central authority. Consequently, with the intention of escaping from the regime's oppression, the Circassians began to be assimilated inside the Iraqi society adopting the local languages and customs and being exposed at "Arabisation", "Kurdification", and "Turkmenisation".

Due to the linguistic and cultural assimilation, nowadays the Circassians speak Arabic, Kurdish and Turkmen in those areas where the majority of the population speaks these languages. Therefore, the risk is that after the death of the Circassian elders the community could lose its identity because the young generations do not have shown interest in learning their ancestors' language and prefer local idioms which give them the opportunity to have access to the education and labour market. If the language's survival is in danger, the tradition seems to be still respected because the majority of the Circassians families continue to stay loyal to *Khabze* rules (Adyghe Laws) particularly in wedding ceremonies, birth, special days, holidays, and food [13,16].

It is hard to determine the exact number of Circassian population in Iraq because of the lack of an accurate census and the assimilation process. It is possible to estimate that the number of Circassian is between 30 to 50 thousand people whose largest communities are in Baghdad, Sulaymaniyah, Diyala, Kirkuk, and Fallujah. Al-Tadāmun Society conducted a fieldwork in the provinces to estimate the number of Circassian families in Iraq: even if the data recorded by the organisation identified as "Circassians" both Chechen, Dagestani and Adyghe families, and for this reason their results cannot be completely accepted, it is interesting to note that around 1,890 "Circassian families" live in Iraq. Among these families, the majority are settled in Baghdad (500), Sulaymaniyah (630), Diyala (250), Kirkuk (190) and Anbar (150).

After the collapse of the Saddam Hussein's regime and the military campaign of the international coalition led by the United States the Circassians had the possibility to promote their rights as a minority and together with the Chechens and the Dagestani tribes they founded Al-Tadāmun Society based in Kirkuk with offices in Baghdad, Mosul, Tikrit, Diyala and Anbar. The organisation started to publish the magazine *Al-Tadāmun* in 2004 in the Arabic language.

In 2010 also the Russian government got acquainted with the dangerous situation of the Circassian community in Iraq when during the IV Regional Conference of Russian Compatriots Living in the Countries of the Middle East and Africa hosted in Amman, M. 'Abd el-Kāder informed the participants and the Russian authorities about the plight of the North Caucasus immigrants in the country [19].

Since the rise of the Islamic State, the condition of the Circassian community has worsened because of the instability of Iraq. Some Circassians have decided to migrate towards the safest areas of the country as the Kurdistan Autonomous Region, and nowadays they constitute part of refugees and IDPs under Erbil's administration and control. Others have tried to relocate to their homeland in the North Caucasus facing discrimination by the local population because they speak only Arabic, Kurdish or Turkmen and they cannot be integrated into a community where Russian is the official language and Adyghe is the cultural-traditional one. Also the Kremlin has seen the Circassians' relocation in the North Caucasus as a problem and a threat for the delicate regional stability because the Russian government has perceived the Iraqi Circassians as possible promoters of political Islām and *jihadi* propaganda among the locals also considering the fact that a significant number of North Caucasian fighters moved from their motherland to Iraq and Syria to join the Islamic State [20–23].

#### **IV. AL-TADĀMUN SOCIETY AND THE CIRCASSIANS' ACTIVITIES**

In 2016 the Circassians together with the Chechens and the Dagestani unified their communities and formalised the creation of the organisation *Jamī'āt al-Tadāmun al-Khyriyalil-ShishānwaDaghestānwaShirkas al-'Iraq* (Al-Tadāmun Society) with the aim of seeking formal recognition in the Iraqi constitution to guarantee equal rights and legal protection from violence against minorities. The creation of this organisation followed the path of the Iraqi Christians who formed the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council political party in 2007. The Caucasus tribes were late presenting their demands to *Masārātilil-tanmiyya al-thaqāfiyyawa al-alāmiyya* (Foundation for Cultural and Media Development, from now on "MCMD") because they were unable to form a political party to represent themselves at the official level, and there were also disagreements about selecting leaders to convey these demands [15,24].

The organisation has an official website "kafkasiraq.do.am" which on the one hand promotes the culture, history and languages of the North Caucasian tribes and on the other hand, tries to organise the political activities. Since its foundation, Al-Tadāmun Society has coordinated several events and has paid official visits to the Middle East and the Caucasus. Among these activities it is possible to mention:

- A visit to Maikop, the capital of the Republic of Adyghea, where members of Al-Tadāmun Society signed an agreement on education which allowed Iraqi Circassian students to study in Adyghea [25].
- The establishment of training courses to inform the participants about their native language, history and culture.

- The support with food and money of those Circassian families with low-income. This activity has been possible thanks to Al-Tadāmun Society's financial funds and the donations collected among the members of the Circassian community.
- Members of Al-Tadāmun Society paid visits to the Circassian Charity Association in Jordan and the Circassian Charity Association in Syria before the civil war and the rise of the Islamic State.
- In January 2017, during an exhibition organised as part of a campaign to protect the political rights of women, a Circassian woman attended the event with the traditional dress called "sae" as part of the recognition process and the promotion of the Circassian community in Iraq [26].

The analysis of the official website "kafkasiraq.do.am" underlines the creation of an Arabic – Adyghe vocabulary which aims at teaching the Adyghe language to the Circassians who live in Iraq and in general in the Middle East.<sup>4</sup> Also, there are some webpages dedicated to the Circassian holidays, clothes, traditions, and historical characters.<sup>5</sup>

According to the open sources, the leader of the Circassian community in Iraq is Ahmed Katav (Kataw), a native of Kirkuk who has also lived in Sulaymaniyah and was awarded by the International Council of Human Rights, Arbitration, Politics & Strategic Studies for his efforts and contribution in the humanitarian field. Katav, as Circassian, is the vice-president of the Al-Tadāmun Society while a Chechen is appointed as president and the secretary general is a Dagestani. Four hundred fifty members compose the organisation and vote during the general meeting, but the lack of security conditions in Iraq and the risk to fall under the influence of major political movements prevented Al-Tadāmun Society from becoming a political body [27]. Katav stated that it is almost impossible that the Circassian community and in general the North Caucasian tribes will be recognised as ethnic minorities in Iraq without any external support which can come from the near Turkish government where the Circassian Diaspora has proven its ability to influence Ankara's domestic and foreign policy [28–30].

## V. CONCLUSION

This investigation is a preliminary work which should be followed by field research to understand the current situation of the Circassian community in Iraq. Unfortunately, the current political and security situation in Iraq characterised by the confrontation between Baghdad and Erbil regarding the Kurdish autonomy and the geopolitical influence of Iran and Saudi Arabia with consequences in the regional balances create a significant obstacle. The field research might even help to better distinguish between those who are members of the Circassian community and can be called "Circassians", and those who relate to other North Caucasian tribes such as the Chechens and the Dagestani.

The Circassian community strongly needs to be recognised as an ethnic minority to be represented in the Iraqi Parliament and overcome the problem of repression. After the Kurdish referendum, the Iraqi government has strengthened its control on the minorities to avoid any attempt of autonomy and independence. Therefore, the official recognition of the Circassian community might face several problems because of the State's opposition.

Till nowadays the academic world, international think tanks and institutions have ignored the condition of the Circassians in Iraq because of several factors such as the lack of information, the inaccessibility of the Iraqi territory and institutions, and the problem of the Circassian self-conscience. Therefore, it is desirable to sensitise scholars, journalists, analysts and members of international institutions to highlight the condition and the problems which the Circassian community is facing in Iraq with the aim at engaging the Iraqi authorities and elaborating possible solutions.

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<sup>4</sup>It is possible to study the Arabic – Adyghe dictionary at the following link: <http://kafkasiraq.do.am/www/aggsd.html#.Wo2jz1TOXIU>

<sup>5</sup>The website "kafkasiraq.do.am" of al-Tadāmun Society is completely written in Arabic. The homepage is characterised by the picture of the members and representatives of the organization in their traditional dresses, the flags of the North Caucasian republics and those historical figures of the North Caucasus considered by the community as the most important and influential such as Imam Mansur, Imam Ghazi Muhammad, Imam Shamil from the Caucasian War and Dzhokar Dudayev from the Chechen conflict.

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