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## **Kurdish regional government illegally seizing Assyrian lands in North Iraq**

AINA (03.10.2012) - The Assyrian Universal Alliance-Australian Chapter received some ominous news from Assyrians living in the village of Kori Gavana regarding the Kurdish Regional Government's violation that has been instituted against their village.

The village of Kori Gavana is an Assyrian Christian village located on the outskirts of Dohuk, North of Iraq, and has been in existence since the establishment of the State of Iraq in 1920s. During Saddam's reign, 500 government houses were built in this village and given to Kurdish families that were relocated from Sulaymania. This was part of Saddam's bigger scheme to forcefully change the demographic and the Christian characteristic of this village. As a result, the Christians in this village were threatened and intimidated, left feeling frightened and defenseless against the Kurds. Assyrians even ceased from sowing their rich agricultural lands (their only source of income), for the reason that they were warned by the Kurds that if anyone attempted to produce a crop, their farm and houses would be burned to the ground. This threatening menace was the fundamental reason why hundreds of Christian families left their homes in the village and migrated to neighbouring countries.

On 17 September 2012, the Assyrian Universal Alliance -- Australian Chapter, were informed that the Department of Municipalities had notified all the Christian families in the village to meet with the head of the Municipality of Dohuk, at 10:00 am. In this meeting, the head of Dohuk Municipality informed all the people from the village who attended the meeting that the Government has decided to appropriate 88% of their lands and transfer the title to the government. The people of this village are being violated and victimized by the government and feel powerless and helpless against the KRG.

These land grabs are achieved by terrorism and violence. The result is serious for the Assyrians. Firstly, they are deprived of their livelihood.

Secondly, they are driven out of their ancestral lands. Thirdly they undermine the Assyrian entitlement to land reclaim and inflate the Kurdish claims.

This unjustifiable act of confiscation is seen by the Assyrians as a blatant measure to "Kurdify" lands and properties and to claim rights thereon, albeit fraudulently and improperly.

The Assyrian Universal Alliance-Australian Chapter condemns in the strongest terms possible these treacherous acts against the indigenous Assyrian people of Iraq by the Kurdish Regional Government which is engaging in discriminatory behaviour against Assyrians by illegally occupying and transferring Assyrian owned lands to Kurdish squatters. It raises concern that these acts are contrary to the obligations of national unity and civil peace that the faithful citizens of Iraq are seeking.

This situation also poses a critical challenge for the international community, including the Australian Federal Government, which has been and will continue to be a targeted government for the settlement of refugees.

We therefore call on the Australian Government and the international community to take immediate steps in reversing and preventing any further violations and abuse and demand that the Kurdish Regional Government immediately cease its unlawful aggression against the Assyrian Christian inhabitants of Kori Gavan and return the lands to their rightful owners.

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## **Military beard edict stirs religion debate**

By Raheem Salman

Reuters (21.06.2012) - An Iraqi government decree banning soldiers and police from wearing beards on duty has revived a debate over religious practices in a country where sectarian divisions between Shi'ite and Sunni still fester close to the surface.

Iraq has long allowed police and soldiers to wear beards to a certain length, but in April the interior ministry began ordering that they must be clean-shaven in the name of the "public interest".

Wearing a beard is seen in many parts of the Muslim world as a sign of piety or a symbol of radical Islamism, depending on its style. In Iraq, beards are sometimes associated with militias from both the Sunni and Shi'ite communities, which fought against each other, the security forces and foreign troops after the U.S.-led invasion in 2003.

For police mechanic Abu Haider, the ban quashed his hopes for greater religious freedom after Saddam Hussein was deposed.

"When I saw the letter saying the ministry won't allow us to wear beards, I was resentful," he said in Basra, a Shi'ite stronghold.

Iraq's Shi'ite majority was oppressed and their religious activities banned under Saddam's mostly secular rule as the Sunni dictator sought to maintain tight control under his Baath organization's one-party rule.

"It is interference in the personal freedoms we started to taste after the toppling of the regime," Haider said.

The issue is sensitive across the Middle East, where Sunni Salafists, wearing the heavy beards many people associate with hardline Islamists, have made gains in the aftermath of the Arab Spring revolutions in Libya, Tunisia and Egypt.

### ***Treading carefully***

In Iraq, the need to tread carefully is particularly acute.

The country is less religiously conservative than many of its neighbors, such as Sunni Saudi Arabia and predominately Shi'ite Iran, mainly because its religious, ethnic and sectarian mix makes it difficult to impose one-size-fits-all strictures.

But with Saddam's departure, hardline Islamic political parties on both sides of the divide sought to impose more strict interpretations of religion on Iraqi life and politics.

In the aftermath of the 2003 invasion, illegal armed Shi'ite militias and Sunni Islamists ruled many parts of Baghdad and enforced a strict religious conservatism. Militia leaders and insurgent chieftains from both sects were often seen wearing beards associated with their beliefs.

Women - Christians as well as both Sunnis and Shi'ites - were forced to wear the traditional headcovering, or hijab, to ward off suspicion, and barber shops and beauty salons were closed or threatened just for showing pictures of women without it.

The worst of the sectarian violence is now past, but many Iraqis are still hesitant to express themselves in ways that draw the attention of those with more religiously conservative attitudes.

Although women often go without the hijab in Baghdad, they wear scarves in areas that are more mixed or more conservative.

Spas, hair-dressing salons and even gyms for women are opening up in some Baghdad neighborhoods where extremist militias once enforced strict dress codes with the gun. But in recent months posters have appeared around a Shi'ite shrine urging women to reject Western-style clothes and wear the hijab.

### ***Competing forces***

The responses to the beard order shows the competing forces at play.

Many Iraqis believe a well-dressed, cleanly shaven security force will show soldiers and police officers are free of any political and religious affiliation.

"Having a beard can give the impression that security forces are connected to a religious party, or have political leanings, and that we don't want for our security men," said Hamid Mutlaq, a member of parliament's security committee and a leader in the secularist but mainly Sunni-backed Iraqiya bloc.

But Moqtada al-Sadr, the radical Shi'ite cleric whose militia once fought American troops but who now forms part of a coalition government of Shi'ites, Sunnis and Kurds, called the order a "sin" and a religious offence.

One group of Iraqi armed forces officers are sending a written complaint to the government, arguing their personal freedoms have been violated by the order.

"Why such restrictions? Having a beard doesn't harm anyone," said Hadi Ghali Awad, a policeman. "It is also a part of our individual freedoms and also part of Islamic teachings."

The comments point up a simmering undercurrent of religious conservatism. While the sectarian slaughter that killed tens of thousands every year has largely stopped, insurgents still stage attacks, especially Sunnis striking against police. Shi'ite militias are still making threats, too.

Earlier this year, Shi'ite militants killed at least 14 youths in what appeared to be a campaign against wearing Western punk-style clothing and haircuts. Nightclubs and stores selling alcohol have been bombed.

The interior ministry earlier this year labeled the punk-ish "Emo" teen subculture as "satanism" and ordered the police to stamp it out, and Baghdad provincial council has also routinely shuttered some bars and liquor stores.

Most Baghdad residents remain more concerned with jobs and blackouts, however.

"Did we solve our country's problems like corruption, basic services, unemployment?" asked Haider Flaih, 29, a policeman and also a barber in the capital's poor Shi'ite district Sadr city.

"No. Instead we keep ourselves busy worrying about beards and scarves."

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## **Iraqi sectarianism needs reporting, but not like Associated Press did**

By Hayder al-Khoei

The Guardian (10.04.2012) - Sunni Muslims in Iraq are being locked out of key jobs in universities and government, the Associated Press reported last week – adding that Shia banners can now be seen everywhere in Baghdad.

"Now that US forces are gone, Iraq's ruling Shiites are moving quickly to keep the two Muslim sects separate – and unequal."

While it is true, as the article states, that formerly mixed neighbourhoods of Baghdad, such as Hurriyah, have become predominantly Shia, it is a mistake to portray this as a result of the American withdrawal or to blame any particular party or sect. It is a remnant of the civil war that plagued the country and has nothing to do with the current government's domestic policy.

In reality, Iraq's Shia and Sunni elite, along with the Kurds and other groups, agreed to form a coalition government based on ethno-sectarian quotas. The result was Lebanese-style confessionalism. It was a collective decision by power-seeking politicians on all sides.

While the Associated Press report talks about Shia domination in some areas, it fails to mention that the reverse also applies: previously mixed areas, such as Ghazaliya, Doura and Ameriya are now Sunni-dominated.

The really disappointing aspect of this article is that it touches on a genuine problem – sectarian marginalisation in Iraqi society – yet it reads like scaremongering.

The article even quotes Grand Ayatollah Sistani, Iraq's most prominent Shia cleric, as saying "one Shiite from Baghdad is worth five Shiites like me from Najaf" and "you are the majority and your enemies are trying to reduce your numbers".

The quote is attributed to an anonymous group of men who allegedly met him in November last year, but it is grossly uncharacteristic of Sistani, a man who carefully measures each and every word. Sistani has been consistently cautious in his political stances in Iraq, especially when it comes to sectarian tensions.

During the height of the civil war, for example, Sistani told Shia Iraqis that the Sunnis are "ourselves, not [only] our brothers" in attempt to pacify angry groups who wanted nothing but revenge.

Had Sistani merely kept silent when Shia tribes asked him for permission to march north and "cleanse" Iraq, the country would look very different today. Whole cities, not just neighbourhoods, would have been ethnically cleansed. Sistani rejected outright their proposal and urged everyone to calm down.

The article also says: "Sunnis have long maintained that Shiite authorities use Baath ties as an excuse to purge the civil service and academic institutions of members of their community." This is true, but the article doesn't mention that the de-Baathification policy has been used against Shia Baathists too. Nor does it explain that many of these academics had been given their jobs precisely because of their political ties during Saddam's reign.

In Iraq, such appointments have long been politicised and the current government's policy (which I am not seeking to justify here) is merely a continuation of US post-invasion "peacemaking" policy. The Coalition Provisional Authority established Iraq's de-Baathification law in the summer of 2003.

It's worrying to find one of the world's major news agencies giving such an unbalanced picture of post-US Iraq. At one point it even portrays the Americans as the "protectors" of Sunnis in Iraq. I wonder if the people of Fallujah would agree about that.

There is certainly a need for sectarianism in Iraq to be reported and investigated – and I have written about it myself in the past. But it doesn't help anyone's understanding of the situation when western news agencies get caught up in sensationalist mudslinging.

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