

Kurdistan, Religious Freedom and the Survival of Middle Eastern Religious Minorities

Kurdistan, the northern province of Iraq, provides a unique geopolitical opportunity for permanent and indigenous religious pluralism and freedom of conscience in the middle east. Kurdistan also provides a role model for the survival and potential flourishing of religious diversity for other Muslim majority countries. Due to current political circumstances, the Kurdish people, a nation without a country, lead a regional government. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is a modern political anomaly in an area dominated by ethnic Arabs, Turks, and Iranians. The Kurds are intimately familiar with the tragedy of being a minority in the near and middle east.

Kurds are a unique non-Arab ethnic-religiously diverse group. Ethnically Kurdish Sunnis, Shia, Zoroastrians, and Christians, as well as other populations exist side by side. Although not without a history marred by religious persecution, the Sunni Muslim Kurds have shown a very different expression of Sunni Muslim hospitality and generosity in relationships with other non-Muslim groups. Most notably in western medieval history are two Kurdish Sunni Muslim figures who embody the potential Kurdish difference in religious co-existence. These two people are Salah ad-Din Yusuf, known as Saladin in the west, and Malik Al-Kamil, formerly known as Meledin in the West.

Saladin is known both for his military prowess and for his extraordinary acts of humanity towards non-Muslim people and populations. Among these were Jews, Orthodox Christians, and Latin Christians. Saladin's actions took place during a time when Western/Latin Christianity could be unnecessarily and cruelly lethal towards Jews, non-Latin Christians, and others.

Malik Al Kamil was the nephew of Saladin. Malik Al-Kamil, then with the title Sultan and as the Grand Vizier of Egypt, is known for his graciousness and hospitality towards two unknown and uninvited Latin Christian visitors. Sultan Kamil Al-Malik received these visitors and treated them with honor and dignity during defensive combat operations in the Latin Fifth Crusade. These unexpected visitors were John (Francesco) Bernadone, now known as Saint Francis of Assisi, and his companion, Brother Illuminato. Against the best advice of his expert religious and political advisors, Malik Al-Kamil did not execute Francis and Illuminato. Instead, Malik Al-Kamil received the message the visitors brought with them and then returned them safely and with honor to the safety of their military lines.

According to KRG authorities, an example of the Kurd's commitment to building a platform for a stable and diverse population in Kurdistan is in Barzan. The local Kurdish community of Barzan took it upon themselves to rebuild a synagogue demolished by Saddam's forces after the Jews there had to flee Iraq. Simultaneously, the people of Barzan are rebuilding the Church in Barzan destroyed by DAESH/ISIL. Christians are reportedly now returning in small numbers to Barzan. The future of a Jewish population there is unknown.

The KRG governs an area with the most ancient and diverse religious population in the middle east. Religious minorities in Kurdistan and elsewhere are still reeling from the devastating genocidal terrorism of ISIL. However, very significant communities of Yazidi,

Zoroastrian, and over a dozen types of Christians, to name just a few of the many religious groups, remain a diverse and hopeful cornerstone for a new paradigm in the middle east. Although different in style and approach to western models of "religious freedom roundtables," the KRG and the Kurdish people are trying to build a path to a stable future with a multifaith, multi-ethnic population. While maintaining a proper focus, with incentives and momentum, Kurdistan can lead the way to a middle east, which becomes a place of thriving religious and ethnic tolerance. Kurdistan can be a political cornerstone for such a future middle eastern paradigm.

Short-sighted western middle eastern policy foci are the result of overwhelmingly economic interests. An example of such lethal economic myopia is modern China. China is a country with a booming economic environment but devoid of other beneficial advanced goals, such as freedom of conscience, belief, religious tolerance, or freedom of speech, to name but a few.

The KRG struggles with corruption, partisan division, and a lack of long-term governing experience. Yet, the KRG contrasts significantly in many beneficial ways from the "federal" Iraq government headquartered in Baghdad. The KRG difference is one that provides an opportunity for democratic values and goals beyond short and mid-term economic interests. The foremost among these being an environment that can be fertile ground for the flourishing of freedom of conscience and religious belief.

Permanent stabilization, as well as the growth of religious minorities, freedom of conscience, and culturally normalized acceptance of diverse ideas, are essential for peace and growth in the middle east and throughout the rest of the world. The KRG and the Kurdish people have the strength to look beyond the common group think of much of the middle eastern political and religious thought. However, the openness to ancient, diverse beliefs and behaviors versus the current failed middle eastern political and social paradigms is fragile. The KRG stands alone in these areas of thought leadership in this region.

Kurdistan and its political leadership in KRG will need specific and distinct support in strengthening the indigenous religious diversity that is native to the region. Other regional powers and ideologies are hostile to the reality of a KRG, the Kurds, and any religious diversity other than either a Sunni or Shia (Twelver) Muslim identity for the local populations. Foreign governments must target and strengthen these fragile areas to provide specific incentives to the KRG and the people of Kurdistan to solidify, codify and concretize these values in their political as well as societal thought and action. Kurdistan and the KRG remain the best allies for a future in the middle east where a human being is not targeted for discrimination or extermination because they differ in their belief of conscience or religion.