Iraq's Yazidis Choose Georgia

The war in Iraq has resonated in the South Caucasus, as shown by the arrival of the first refugees from the region in Georgia. About 30 Yazidis, including women and children, managed to escape to Turkey and cross the border shared by Turkey and Georgia.

The people fleeing their homeland were initially helped by Yezidi House of Georgia, which provided them with temporary housing on the outskirts of Tbilisi. The head of the Spiritual Board of Yezidis in Georgia, Pir Dima, met with them. Along with the director of Yezidi House, Agit Mirzoev, he helped the newcomers make the requisite appeals to Georgian authorities for refugee status. Irakli Kokaia, a spokesman for the Georgian Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation, told reporters that all documents will be considered, but he added that certain procedures have to be followed and that a defined time period is necessary for authorities to render a decision.

"According to Georgian law on humanitarian and refugee status, a person who was forced to leave his homeland will receive a monthly stipend of 45 lari, is eligible to obtain a basic education, and has the right to a package of insurance coverage," Kokaia said.

That amount, 45 lari, is worth about 30 U.S. dollars. It is impossible to make ends meet in Georgia on such a sum. But the realities there are that poverty was present before the refugees and displaced persons arrived, and that despite the transition of power in the government and the big promises, the situation has not changed much for the better. "Our ministry is working jointly with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), money is also being allocated for housing rental," Kokaia said, but he struggled to specify exactly how much.

Agit Mirzoev met with Gunther Bechler, a Swiss diplomat to Georgia, regarding the refugees from Iraq. Bechler will pass along an aid request to the EU. Mirzoev also spoke with representatives of the embassies of the United States, Poland and Turkey, and he said those countries will likewise consider providing aid to Yezidis who left Iraq out of concern for their safety. Georgia is likely to offer the refugees asylum, he said, in addition to refugee status, a monthly stipend and an extra $240 a month per person from the UNHCR. "But it is difficult to expect any more than that," Mirzoev said, so more attention from the global community is needed. Mirzayev added that "in the days ahead, we anticipate the arrival of 100 more refugees who have already asked us for help."

One of the Yezidi refugees 38-year-old Sabah, who arrived in Georgia with her three children and a pregnant wife out of town Ba`shiqah-Barzan, told reporters through a hell of flour and had to go, until I realized that he was safe. "The last few months, the militants of the terrorist organization" Islamic state "pursue Yezidi men tortured, raped women, and children turning to Islam," - he said. According to him, Ba`shiqah-Barzan is located a few dozen kilometers from Mosul, and when Mosul was captured terrorists in his hometown quickly learned that non-Muslims they put before a choice: to change their faith, to pay a fee or die.

"Of course, we did not want to leave Iraq, to leave our homes, and all the way up until the last minute we held out
hope that the army would stop the extremists' attacks. But as it turned out, we had to abandon all of our belongings and flee," said Sabah. He said the militants' ranks included not only local fighters but also many people who came from as far away as Europe. "We came to Georgia through Turkey. We could have stayed there, but Turkey is a Muslim country, and it's much easier for us to find things in common with Christians. They accept us as we are and don't broach the subject of religion. I think a lot of our compatriots will follow us. That's because Yezidis have been living in Tbilisi for a long time," Sabah stated.

Meanwhile, the self-proclaimed Nagorno-Karabakh Republic announced its willingness to accept Yazidi refugees from Iraq. Baku's reaction was swift. Officials in Azerbaijan declared that settlement in "ancient Azerbaijani lands without permission of a legitimate authority" is not allowed. The also called attention to the expulsion of local Azerbaijanis, who have been waiting many years for resolution of the conflict so they can return to their homes.

"The authorities of Azerbaijan once again outlined the essence of their nationalistic policy," said David Babayan, a representative of the Nagorno-Karabakh government. "Their position in relation to the Yezidis is further proof that for Artsakh (original name of Nagorno-Karabakh) there is no way back to Azerbaijan. We will not come back, and Baku needs to come to grips with that."

"The resettlement of Iraqi Yazidis in occupied territories is eloquent testimony to the failure of the policy of Armenization in Azerbaijani occupied territory," said Ilgar Velizade, head of the South Caucasus Political Science Club in Baku. According to him, the Armenian population in the region is in no hurry to occupy settlements where Azerbaijanis once lived and have been vacant for 20 years. "Even the vast majority of Syrian Armenians fleeing the terror and the war at home prefer to live in neighboring Lebanon and other countries," Velizade remarked to a correspondent for NVO. "Now the Armenian government is trying to settle this land with Yezidis and with Kurds, who a century ago were settled in eastern Turkey, which was once inhabited by Armenians, so they're creating a problem for themselves. As for Azerbaijan's reaction, it is absolutely fair because the world rightly considers that Azerbaijani land." According to the analyst, by artificially altering the ethnic balance in the region, Armenia is creating new risks that threaten to destabilize the already fragile security construct.

Commenting on the situation for the New Eastern Outlook, Alexey Martynov, the director of the Moscow Institute of New States, said: "Nagorno-Karabakh's willingness to take in Yazidi refugees from the war in Iraq speaks of the profound government humanitarianism of Karabakh. The government itself is not in the best position. However, because it understands and remembers what war is, and in fact survived the humanitarian catastrophe in the early 90's by building its own independent (albeit unrecognized yet) state, while maintaining that the most valuable thing is the people, their children, Nagorno-Karabakh is willing to help the refugees. What's wrong with that? Who could be opposed in this situation? Nobody except people who want war, destruction and bloodshed. Despite the typical idle threats from Baku, Nagorno-Karabakh is sure to accept the Iraqi Yazidis. And in Nagorno-Karabakh there is plenty to go around for everyone. I think the assistance Nagorno-Karabagh gives to Iraqi refugees will not go unnoticed in the international arena."

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