

# A Minority at the Intersection of Religious and Ethnic Identities in Iraq: Shabaks

Kêmeteweyek li Hevberdana Nasnameyên Dînî û Etnîkî li Iraqê: Şebek

Irak'ta Dinî ve Etnik Kimliklerin Kesişiminde Bir Azınlık: Şebekler

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### Abstract

The purpose of this research is to examine the social and political life of the Shabak community, which is a minority group living in Iraq. Shabaks are an ethno-religious group residing in Iraq, distinguished primarily by their religious characteristics rather than their ethnic background. Like other non-Arab ethnic and religious communities in Iraq, Shabaks have been subjected to discrimination, oppression, and forced migration. The study explores how the historical narratives of the Shabak community have been constructed and transmitted over time. It sheds light on how Shabaks have managed to preserve their religious and ethnic identity within the complex social structure of their region in which they live. Additionally, the challenges faced by the Shabaks during the ISIS attacks, which began in 2014, are examined in broad terms. In conclusion, the Shabak community has struggled to achieve its political aspirations due to being perpetually overshadowed by ongoing ethnic and religious conflicts. The data for this research were collected through a literature review, and a general analysis of the Shabak community was conducted based on the findings obtained from the literature studies.

**Keywords:** Political sociology, Iraq, Shabaks, minority, ethnic and religious identity.

### Highlights:

Iraq has multiple ethnic and religious communities, and the ways they integrate into the state vary.

Before 2003, Sunnis were dominant in Iraq, with other ethnic affiliations being secondary.

Shabaks were marginalized by the Baath regime due to their religious affiliation.

After 2003, Shabaks, like other ethnic and religious groups, became strongly attached to their affiliation.

### Kurte

Armanca vê lêkolînê ew e ku jiyana civakî û siyasî ya civaka Şebek, ku komeke kêmnîeteweyî ye li Iraqê dijî, lêkolîn bike. Şebek komeke etno-dînî ne ku li Iraqê dijîn, û bi giranî bi taybetmendiyên xwe yên dînî, ne bi paşxaneyê xwe ya etnîkî tene cudakirin. Mîna civakên etnîkî û dînî yên ne-Ereb ên din ên li Iraqê, Şebek rastî cudakarî, zext û koçberiya bi zorê hatine. Lêkolîn vedikole ka vegotinên dîrokî yên civaka Şebek çawa bi demê re hatine avakirin û veguheztin. Gotar, ronî dike ka Şebek çawa karîne nasnameya xwe ya dînî û etnîkî di nav avahiya civakî ya tevlihev a herêma ku lê dijîn biparêzin. Wekî din, zehmetiyên ku Şebek di dema êrişên DAÎŞê de ku di sala 2014an de dest pê kirin, bi awayekî berfireh di gotarê da hatine nîrxandin. Di encamê de, civaka Şebek ji ber ku her tim di bin siya pevçûnên etnîkî û dînî yên berdewam de ye, ji bo bidestxistina armancên xwe yên siyasî têkoşiyaye. Daneyên ji bo vê lêkolînê bi rêya nîrxandîneke lîteratûrî hatine berhevkerin, û analîzek giştî ya civaka Şebek li hatiye kirin.

**Peyvên Sereke:** Sosyolojîya sîyasî, Iraq, Şebek, kêmnîetewe, nasnameya etnîkî û dîn.

### Xalên Sereke:

Iraq xwedî gelek civakên etnîkî û olî ye, û rêbazên entegrebûna wan bi dewletê re diguherin.

Berî sala 2003an, Sunnî li Iraqê serdest bûn, û girêdanên din ên etnîkî di rêza duyemîn de bûn.

Şebek ji ber girêdana xwe ya olî ji aliyê rejîma Baas ve hatin marjînalîzekirin.

Piştî sala 2003an, Şebek, mîna komên din ên etnîkî û olî, bi tundî bi girêdana xwe ve girêdayî bûn.

## Öz

Bu araştırma, Irak'ta yaşayan dinî bir grup olarak Şebeklerin sosyal ve siyasal yaşamına yönelik bir çalışmayı esas almıştır. Şebekler, Irak'ta yaşayan etno-dinsel bir gruptur. Bu grubun en belirleyici yönü, etnik yapılarından çok dinî yönleri ile ön plana çıkmalarıdır. Şebekler de Irak'ta yaşayan ve Araplar dışındaki diğer etnik ve dinî gruplar gibi ayrımcılığa, baskıya ve göçe maruz kalmışlardır. Araştırmada, Şebek toplumunun tarih kurgularının nasıl inşa edildiği ve aktarıldığı tartışılmıştır. Ayrıca, Şebeklerin yaşadığı bölgedeki karmaşık yapısı içinde dinî ve etnik kimliklerini nasıl koruduklarına ışık tutulmuştur. Bunun yanında araştırmada, Şebeklerin 2014'te başlayan IŞİD saldırılarında karşılaştıkları problemler genel hatları ile ele alınmıştır. Sonuç olarak Şebek toplumu, devamlı etnik ve dini çatışmaların gölgesinde kalarak siyasal taleplerine ulaşamamıştır. Araştırmanın verileri alan yazın okuması ile toplanmıştır. Ulaşılan bulgulara göre Şebekler üzerinde genel bir analiz yapılmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Siyaset sosyolojisi, Irak, Şebek, azınlık, etnik ve dinî kimlik.

## Öne Çıkanlar

Irak'ta birden çok etnik ve dinî yapı mevcuttur ve bunların devlete entegre olma biçimleri farklılık arzeder.

2003'ten önce Irak'ta Sünniler baskındı ve diğer etnik aidiyetler ikinci planda olmuştur.

Şebekler, dinî aidiyetlerinden dolayı Baas Rejimi tarafından dışlanmıştır

2003'ten sonra Şebekler de diğer etnik ve dinî unsurlar gibi aidiyetlerine güçlü bir şekilde bağlanmışlardır.

## Introduction

Iraq is home to ethnic groups such as Arabs, Kurds, Turks, Armenians, Assyrians and religious groups such as Yazidis, Kakeyi, Sabii Mandeyi, Shabak, Bahayi and Fayli. The majority of these groups live in the culturally rich Mosul Plain and its surrounding areas. From time to time, conflicts have arisen between these groups over differences in ethnicity and beliefs. In general, most of these conflicts were between Sunni and Shia Muslims. While Sunni Arabs and Arab nationalism were at the forefront during the Saddam Hussein era, after Saddam Hussein was overthrown power shifted to the Shiites, and the Sunni Arabs were pushed into the background.

The Kurd on the other hand long fought against the Iraqi regime, demanding political status, which they eventually gained political status after 1991. However, this development created an even more chaotic situation in Iraq. After 2003, a series of conflicts broke out in Iraq between radical religious groups. When the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) invaded parts of Iraq in 2014, an intolerant policy was adopted towards religious groups such as the Yazidis and Shabaks. Before 2003, Arab nationalism dominated in Iraq, and many ethnic and religious minorities were ignored, oppressed, or even exterminated by the governments of the time. Iraq is the cradle of many religious groups, with many sects affiliated with these religions. Many of these religions and sects are regarded as heterodox by the dominant Sunni majority. Some of these groups also incorporate elements of Shia Islam that even some Shia Muslims may consider unacceptable. As a result, heterodox communities often face persecution or social exclusion in different parts of the country. Within this context, the Shabaks stand out as a religious group closely associated with Shia Islam and, historically, they have frequently been marginalized (Mallon, 2017). Similar to other minorities such as the Mandaean and Yazidis, the Shabaks have often been forced to conceal their practices and traditions in order to survive.

This study analyses the social and political lives of the Shabaks who live in Iraq. The data for the study were collected from the literature and subjected to evaluation. According to the findings of the research, Shabaks living in Iraq, like other ethnic and religious groups in the country, have been subjected to a series of oppressive and discriminatory policies.

## 1. Shabaks in Historical Context

In Iraq, there are three major ethnic communities, namely Arabs, Kurds and Turkoman, and ethno-religious groups such as Yazidis, Christians, Shabaks, Sabeian-Mandaeans (Zoonen & Wirya, 2017). Among ethnic and religious groups, the Shabaks are a minority with their language and traditions. Today, the population of the Shabaks, almost all of whom live in and around Mosul, is estimated to be between 200,000 and 500,000 (Al Lami, 2014; Zoonen & Wirya, 2017). The name Shabaks is believed to be derived from the Arabic word “Shabaka”, meaning “to intertwine” (Zoonen & Wirya, 2017). According to an interview conducted by the Enabling Peace in Iraq Center (EPIC) with Hussein al-Shabaki, head of the Free Shabaks Movement, the word “Shabak” does not define an ethnicity. The Shabaks are a religious community that has been living in Iraq for a long time and comprises several tribes. The Shabak tribes include Bajellahn, Ismailihan, Be Jiwan, Gargari, Hariri, Rozhbayan and Zarar. The Shabaks speak a dialect that is a mixture of Turkish, Kurdish, and Persian. Religiously, the Shabaks are generally Muslim. Approximately 65% of them are Shia, while the other 35% are Sunni. The Shabaks live in the Mosul Plain, which extends *from the northwestern to the southeastern outskirts of Mosul*. The Shabaks are concentrated in three regions: Tilkif, Mosul City and Qaraqosh (Hamdaniyah). Bashiqa, Bartella and Nimrud sub-districts are also inhabited by the Shabaks (EPIC, 2019; Al Lami, 2014; Omarkhali, 2014, p. 31). Many Shabaks define their group identity in terms of ‘territory’ (mantika) (Kreyenbroek & Omarkhali, 2021, p. 572). There are various views on the ethnic structure of the Shabaks. According to these views, the Shabaks comprise individuals from various ethnic groups, including Kurdish, Turkish, and Arabic. However, before Iraq came under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, the Shabaks were already

residing in the region. According to Mark Sykes, some groups argue that the Shabaks are Shiite, while others believe they have a secret religion (Sykes, 1908, p. 455-456). The most assertive view of the ethnic origin of the Shabaks comes from Seyed Shamsettin (1967), himself a Shabak. According to Seyed Shamsettin, the Shabaks *are a people of Turkoman origin who migrated from Turkey to Iraq*. Shabaks are also Shiite Bektashis (quoted by Taşğın, 2009, p. 132-134). According to author Matti Moosa (1987:26), the Shabaks are a people originally from the south of Iran. As can be seen in the map below, the Shabaks live in the areas indicated by the blue stripe.

**Map 1:** Live areas of Shabaks in Iraq.



Source: (Zoonen and Wirya, 2017:5).

Although the Shabaks are multilingual, the most widely spoken language is the Gorani dialect of Kurdish. The language of the Shabaks is also closely related to Zazaki (Bruinessen, 2005, p. 241-252). Some groups among the Shabaks speak Zazaki and Kurmanji Kurdish. From a linguistic perspective, the local language called “Shabekî” is more closely related to the language known as “Gorani” in the academic literature, though it also shows similarities with Zazaki. In terms of grammar, Shabekî has many similarities with Macho (or Mako), spoken by the Kakayi in the Kirkuk region, and Hawrami, spoken in the Shahrizor region on the Iraq-Iran border. These theological and linguistic affinities have not been satisfactorily explained. It is most likely that the Shabaks are descendants of the Kizilbash troops loyal to Shah Ismail during the sixteenth-century conflict between the Ottomans and the rising Safavid Empire in eastern Anatolia. In the late Ottoman Empire and Iraq under the monarchy, the Shabaks had lost their military capacity. This may have been due to other factors, such as resisting Ottoman and later Iraqi attempts at conscription and religious conversion. Under Iraq’s republican regime, a large number of Shabaks joined the state military units (Vinogradov, 1974, p. 209; Leezenberg, 2018, p. 241).

## 2. Shabaks in Ethnic and Religious Perspective

The Shabaks living in Iraq constitute a controversial community in terms of ethnic and cultural origin. There are different views on this issue in the academic literature. Some researchers view the Shabak as a Kurdish community (Leezenberg, 1994). Khanna Omarkhali, citing Michel Leezenberg, has argued that some Shabaks may be Turkmen (Omarkhali, 2014). Muhammad Emin Zeki Beg states that three communities - 'Sarli', 'Bacuran' and 'Shabak' - lived in Mosul Liva and were Kurds. The delegation of the League of Nations also confirmed this claim noting that these communities spoke a crude and unintelligible form of Kurdish and followed the belief in Ali Ilahi (Zeki Beg, 2018, p. 50-51). Khanna Omarkhali (2014:30-31) further noted that some Shabaks are also divided into Shiite and Sunni sects. Historically, the Shabaks have been associated with Turkoman, Kurdish, and Arab identities, adopting different ones depending on the context. Both Kurds and Turkomans consider the Shabaks to be a minority within their communities. According to Cecil J. Edmonds (1967), the Shabaks are Kurdish Kizilbash and are therefore called "Sharli or Sharlu". According to another source, the Shabaks are ethnically Turkish. They are Turkoman tribes who settled in Iraq during the Mongol period. The Shabaks were followers of the Bektâshî sect and joined this sect under the leadership of Hadîr bin Hafîd during the Safavid period. Some of the Shabaks were known as "Kizilbash" and were ordered to wear a 12-fold red turban (Abdulhadi, 2017, p. 10). The diverse elements of Shabak identity make it difficult to classify them as a single ethnic group. Displaying a hybrid identity in terms of language, belief, and culture, the Shabaks are generally considered a community with Kurdish, Turkish, and Iranian roots. In this context, it is difficult to make a precise determination about the ethnic origin of the Shabaks.

Michiel Leezenberg notes that until the 1990s, there were debates over whether the Shabaks were Kurdish, Arab or Turkoman. The diversity of their language allowed the Shabaks to use their multilingualism in the context of nationalist rivalries. Following the 2003 war and the increasing attacks by radical Sunni groups on religious minorities in Iraq, the perception of Shabak identity has shifted. In this new approach, the Shabak emphasized their religious identity over their ethno-linguistic identity. It has also been observed that the Shabak have sought to emphasize the orthodox nature of their religious views by aligning with more established religious groups, such as Twelver Shia Islam (Leezenberg, 2014).

According to Al-Karmali, the Shabaks believe in the oneness of God and revere the caliph Imam Ali to such an extent that they refer to him as 'Ah Rush' (the lord of light). However, the nickname 'Ah Rush' is also attributed by the Shabak to his grandson, Imam Zayn al-Abidin (the ornament of worshippers), due to his humility, asceticism, and preference for wearing black (quoted by Moosa, 1987: 25). Although the Shabaks in Iraq share similar historical and theological roots with Alawites and have experienced similar processes of urbanization, education, and upward social mobility, these processes appear to have had different consequences for them. The loss of prestige and authority among the Shabaks - both religious authorities such as pîrs and dede (grandfathers), as well as secular leaders like the urban sâda - has not resulted in a more scriptural redefinition of the diverse heterodox Shiite or gulât beliefs that characterize the Shabak. Instead, it has led to a significant conversion to the Kakai faith, a lesser conversion to orthodox Twelver Shiism, and, to a more limited extent, other local variations. While the Shabaks are more easily accepted or assimilated into the Kakai community, the transition to Twelver Shiism appears to be more difficult or problematic (Leezenberg, 2018, p. 245).

Although the Shabaks, as a religious community, make much less use of holy books than the Yazidis, they do possess a religious text of their own. The key religious text of the Shabak is the Buyruk or Kitâb al-Manâqib, reprinted by al-Sarraf in 1954, and is considered to be original. However, this book appears to have been read by only a limited number of Shabaks and played a role in a



small number of their rituals. Other texts written by Shabak clerics include an Arabic refutation and a mawlid (biography of the Prophet) written in Shabak, though these texts are not widely circulated (Bruinessen, 2005; Dehqan, 2008; Kakei, 2014).

The Shabaks see themselves as Bektashis, particularly through their Pirs connected to Hacı Bektas. Shabaks call the clergy members descended from the twelve imams as Pır, and all rituals, especially cem's are carried out by the Pır (Taşgın, 2009, p. 127). Upward social mobility, combined with the dissolution of traditional inter-communal power relations, seems to have led the Shabaks to adopt a more orthodox religious identity, primarily following Shiism (Vinogradov, 1974). Unlike other orthodox Muslims, the Shabak do not practice daily prayers; instead, they follow religious rituals similar to the Yazidi Kurds and visit Yazidi places of worship (Moosa, 1987: 25). A pır or dede guides every Shabak adult. The Shabaks regularly make pilgrimages to local shrines, particularly those of Ali Ras and Abbas. However, al-Sarraf notes that since the 1950s, the Shabaks have increasingly journeyed to Shiite shrines in the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf in southern Iraq (Leezenberg, 2018, p. 242). The Sayyids, descended from Ahl al-Bayt<sup>2</sup>, mediate between the Shabaks and the state, earning political respect from Shabaks (Bruinessen, 2005, p. 242).

Shabaks in their prayers and poems (known as nefes), remember Hacı Bektas, Shah Ismail and the Alevi great Pır Sultan Abdal. Additionally, Allah, Muhammad, and Ali form the holy trinity that characterizes the Shabak religious doctrine. Imam Ali is glorified in Shabak's poetry. According to El-Sarraf, who has done significant work on the Shabaks, the Shabaks do not pray, fast during Ramadan, pay zakat or perform the pilgrimage to Mecca. However, they do have alternative prayers. Instead of prayers, Shabaks recite several religious poems (Gülbank) from memory. The Shabaks take the fundamental Muslim belief that there is no God but Allah, the Muslim reverence for the Prophet Muhammad, and the Shiite reverence for the Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, Hazrat Ali, and unusually combine them. While all Muslims revere the Prophet Muhammad, Shia Muslims place particular emphasis on Ali and his son Hussein. This belief alone is enough to provoke the anger of the dominant Muslim population. The three major festivals of the year each require 12 officials to participate in the ceremonies. The first is the New Year, celebrated in December, the second is Ashura, the Shiite holiday commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, and the third is the Night of Forgiveness. On the Night of Forgiveness, Shabaks confess their sins. The third practice is common in Christianity but unknown in Islam. In fact, public confession of sins, alcohol consumption and pilgrimages to the shrines of saints are practices that sharply distinguish the Shabaks from Islam (Mallon, 2017).

Based on the academic studies mentioned above, it can be said that the ethnic structure of the Shabak community has been attributed to different groups including Kurdish, Iranian and Turk; nevertheless, the general opinion is that the Shabaks are of Kurdish origin. More importantly, they have emphasized their religious and sectarian identity rather than their ethnic belonging. Although the Shabaks belong to the Shiite sect of Islam, their religious perceptions align more closely with those of the Anatolian Alevi. In addition, the Shabak community has traditions and rituals similar to the Yazidi community living in different parts of the world, especially in Iraq.

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1 Some religious meeting

2 Ahl al-Bayt is a concept used for the wives, children, grandchildren and Muslim uncles of the Islamic Prophet Hz. Muhammad.

### 3. Shabaks in Social and Political Context

The Shabaks live in northern Iraq, in a few villages east of Mosul. Religiously and ethnically distinct from the rest of Iraq's inhabitants, the Shabaks speak a language mixed with Persian, Kurdish, and Arabic, which many outsiders find difficult to understand. Like other groups in northern Iraq, most Shabaks work as farmers, shepherds, and small shopkeepers. The only visible evidence of modern life among the Shabaks is the television antennae hanging from most roofs (Moosa, 1987: 1). Although historically recognized as a specific ethno-religious group, the Shabaks have long faced pressure from both Arab and Kurdish nationalist movements, each attempting to sway the community to their side. Caught between Sunni and Shia factions in Iraq, the Shabaks were excluded by the Ba'ath regime due to their Shi'a faith. Anthropologists note that the process of 'Shiification' began mainly during the Republican Period, following the major land reforms of 1958 and 1963 (Leezenberg, 2018; Vinogradov, 1974). Theologically, the Shabak's beliefs are similar to those of the heterodox Shia Alevis (Kizilbash) in Central and Eastern Anatolia (Vinogradov, 1974; Leezenberg, 2018). Some extremist Sunnis accuse the majority Shia Shabaks of being an "apostate" branch of Islam, which has occasionally led to violent attacks against them. Situated in disputed territories between Kurds and Arabs in Iraq (actually between Kurds and Turkomans), the Shabaks have been subjected to assimilation as well as frequent persecution by both Arabs and Kurds (Al Lami, 2014). Particularly in the 1970s, the Shabaks were targeted by Arab nationalist policies aiming to assimilate them into Arab culture. They found themselves caught between Arab nationalism and Kurdish identity. The Shabaks endured their most devastating and traumatic period beginning in 1988. During the Ba'athist regime's Anfal<sup>3</sup> Attacks against the Kurds, many Shabak villages were burned and destroyed and the Shabaks were subjected to forced migration (Leezenberg, 2018, p. 243).

The Shabaks have been embroiled in Arab and Kurdish nationalism and conflicts since the 1970s. While they have consistently remained neutral, the community suffered heavily during Saddam Hussein's Arabization campaigns in the 1980s (Zoonen & Wirya, 2017). The Shabaks were also subjected to the genocide and assimilation policies of the Ba'ath regime. Hundreds of Shabaks lost their lives in the Anfal campaign, and many others were forced to migrate (Human Rights Watch, 1995). In 1988, the Ba'athist regime used chemical weapons in mass killings targeting the Kurds. The Shabaks, along with other communities such as the Yazidis, Assyrians, and Turkomans, were also victims. In this context, the Shabaks were forced to flee their villages in southern Iraq and relocate to northern Iraq. At that time, the Shabak lived in 60 villages across regions such as Bashiqa, Bertela, Nemrud, Kelek, and Tilkif, among others (Omarkhali, 2014, p. 29-30).

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3 Anfal was an act of genocide carried out against the Kurds based on the decision of the Iraqi government after the end of the Iraq-Iran war between 1980 and 1988. The term 'Anfal' is derived from the Quran and refers to 'spoils of war'. The reason for using this word is to confer religious legitimacy upon the act. Anfal was carried out by Ali Hassan al-Majid (Chemical Ali). This person was Saddam's cousin and worked as the secretary general of the Ba'ath Socialist Party's Northern Iraq Bureau. Chemical Ali was given powers equivalent to a head of state. The actions carried out against the Kurds under Saddam's orders included mass killings, destruction of Kurdish villages, the disappearance of civilians (including women and children), the closure of essential institutions such as schools and mosques, environmental destruction (such as filling lakes with soil and drying springs), forced migration, and most notably, executions without trial (MEW, 2003:31-196).



During the 1987 population census, the Shabaks faced with two options for ethnic registration, Kurdish or Arab. As they were not recognized as a separate nation, they were forced to either register as Arabs, which often meant being sent to the front lines of the ongoing Iran/Iraq War, or register as Kurds and face other consequences. This policy deepened divisions within the community, as some chose to register as Arabs, while others registered as Kurds. The Ba'ath regime expelled the Shabaks who registered as Kurds to the forbidden Peshmerga-controlled areas and destroyed around 20 Shabak villages. A few years later, after a prominent Shabak leader officially declared all Shabaks to be Arabs, the expelled Shabaks were allowed to return to their former homes (Bruinessen, 1998, p. 8-9).

The most important problem that the Shabaks have faced in their history has been the ISIS attacks. During the ISIS attacks that started in 2014, the Shabak community living in Mosul have been forced to flee the city due to kidnappings, killings and bombings. After capturing Mosul, ISIS distributed leaflets targeting the Shabaks, calling for their killing and displacement. As a result of ISIS attacks, 1,500 Shabak families fled Mosul. On August 11, 2014, ISIS issued a decree to kill Shia Shabaks and confiscate their property. As of August 22, according to an estimate reported by the Iraqi Press Agency, at least 3,000 Shabaks have lost their homes and hundreds have been killed (Human Rights Watch, 2009:37; Zoonen & Wirya, 2017). When Mosul, the main homeland of the Shabaks, was occupied by ISIS, the Shabaks sought refuge in Dohuk, Sulaymaniyah and Erbil. An estimated 1/3 of the Shabaks have been displaced (EPIC, 2019). The Shabaks estimate that around 1,500 Shabaks were killed in ISIS attacks, and hundreds more were held captive by ISIS. In addition, a small number of Sunni Shabaks appear to have joined ISIS. The Shabak community knows the identity of the Shabaks who joined ISIS. A large number of Shabaks have migrated outside Iraq due to ISIS attacks; however, they did not make mass migrations compared to other groups in Iraq, such as Christians and Yazidis. At most 200 families migrated during the ISIS attacks. The main reason why the Shabaks have not migrated is that they are not a community that is well accepted outside Iraq due to their beliefs (CRPME, 2016: 30).

The Shabaks suffered greatly under ISIS, who massacred them because they were not considered People of the Book. Because their ethnic identity (Turkoman, Arab, or Kurdish) was unclear, they became victims in regional ethnic conflicts (Mallon, 2017).

The Shabak community has also pursued political organization. The Free Shabaks Movement, established following the 2015 Iraqi law on political parties, represents the most prominent civil organization. In 2013, the Shabaks won one seat in the Ninewa Provincial Council. The Shabaks have 7,000 votes in Ninewa alone (EPIC, 2019). In the 2018 parliamentary elections in Mosul, one seat was reserved for the Shabaks, and three parties competed for this seat. These are: Free Shabak Movement, Democratic Shabak Assembly and an independent candidate named Qusai Abbas Mohammed. Qusai Abbas Mohammed received more than 14,000 votes, the Free Shabak Movement secured 7,000 votes and the Democratic Shabak Assembly around 6,900 votes. The winner, Qusai Abbas Mohammed, was supported by Hadi al-Ameri, the leader of the Badr Organisation, as well as a cleric named Hassan Sultan Fattah, who claims to be the representative of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in the region. The links with the Badr Organisation and the cleric helped Qusai Abbas Mohammed win votes from the Shabaks as they appealed to Shia religious sentiments (EPIC, 2019).

Today, there are still sectarian (Shia-Sunni) divisions and polarisations within the Shabak community. Politically, Sunni Shabaks support the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq (KRG), while Shia Shabaks support the central government. Nevertheless, according to Shabak figures such as Dr. Hunain Mahmood Al-Qaddo and Husein Z. Ali al-Shabake, living in the KRG is more advantageous for the Shabak community in terms of freedom and democracy. Indeed, many Shabak families migrated to the KRG after 2014. The tendency toward militarisation within the Shabak community has led to the formation of autonomous militias due to the polarisation between the KRG and pro-Baghdad factions,

paving the way for inter-communal conflict and revenge crimes (CRPME, 2016:30-31).

The governance discussions for the Shabak community are carried out in three scenarios. The first is the establishment of an independent Shabak region; however, the Shabaks disapprove of this scenario. The second is the establishment of an autonomous Shabak region affiliated with the central Iraqi government; however, it is thought that this situation will increase the tension between Erbil and Baghdad and is economically unsustainable. The other proposal is autonomy under the management of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which is considered the most suitable option due to geographical harmony and past everyday experiences. However, this option does not guarantee peaceful living among the communities. In particular, the bitter experiences with ISIS make these initiatives impossible (CRPME, 2016:31-32).

#### 4. Analysis and Evaluation

From a broader perspective, the Shabaks have historically found themselves at the intersection of major power struggles in Iraq due to both their geographic location and their religious-ethnic composition. Their presence in Mosul and surrounding areas has exposed them to challenges ranging from the Ottoman-Safavid conflicts to modern threats such as the Ba'ath regime and ISIS. Claims of a historical connection with the Qizilbash units loyal to Shah Ismail suggest that the Shabaks' identity was shaped, in part, by the religious tensions between the Ottomans and Safavids. In this context, historical analysis requires understanding the reasons behind transformations such as the Shabaks losing their military identity and their religious rituals adopting a more heterodox character over time. The post-Ottoman Iraqi monarchy and the Republican era caused the Shabaks to develop a tense relationship with the central authority. Traumatic events such as the Anfal operations and Arabization policies reshaped the demographic composition and settlement patterns of the Shabaks. The Shabaks possess a diverse linguistic and religious identity. An obvious indicator of their linguistic hybridity is the influence of Kurdish (Gorani or Hawramani dialect), Persian, Turkish and Arabic. In addition, the similarities between the Shabaki dialect and Zazaki and Hawrami are striking. In terms of religious beliefs, the Shabaks have rituals that blend Twelver Shi'ism and Bektâshî traditions. Practices such as observing the Muharram fast instead of the Ramadan fast and reciting Gûlbank prayers with spiritual leaders (pîrs) instead of performing formal prayers indicate similarities between Anatolian Alevism and the Shabaks' belief system. This distinction is a significant factor that sets the Shabaks apart from orthodox interpretations of Islam.

There are different theses about ethnic identity, such as the Shabaks being of Kurdish, Turkoman or even Iranian origin. This uncertainty has been exploited as a political tool by regional nationalist groups. The contested nature of their identity affiliations has paved the way for the Shabaks being marginalized and subjected to periodic assimilation efforts. The Shabak community faced severe oppression under the Ba'ath regime, one of the most challenging periods in Iraq's history. Under Saddam Hussein's Arabization policies, the Shabaks were subjected to systematic pressure to abandon their ethnic identity. The 1987 census serves as the most concrete example of this oppression, as the Shabaks were only given the option to register as either Kurds or Arabs. Those identifying as Kurds were exiled to Peshmerga-controlled zones, while several Shabak villages were burned and destroyed. The Anfal Operations in Iraq in 1988, which involved the use of chemical weapons, witnessed large-scale human rights violations. Alongside Kurds, Assyrians, and Turkomans, the Shabaks were also

targeted in this genocidal campaign. This period left deep socio-psychological scars on the Shabak community. The Shabaks have been compelled to navigate shifting political allegiances in modern Iraqi history. The Arabization policies of the Ba'ath regime and the genocidal attempts of ISIS have exacerbated the Shabak's struggle to survive. The hardships faced by thousands of Shabak families forced to flee Mosul during the 2014 ISIS attacks in particular reveal the impact of Iraq's security and stability problems on the Shabak.

The 2014 ISIS occupation of Mosul marked the beginning of another devastating period for the Shabak. Shia Shabaks were specifically targeted and subjected to kidnapping, killing and forced migration. In the threatening leaflets distributed by ISIS, the Shabaks were described as "apostates" and threatened with death. During this period, more than a thousand Shabak families were forced to flee Mosul, hundreds of Shabaks were killed, and hundreds were taken captive. The claim that some Sunni Shabak joined ISIS further divided the community. However, these participations were ostracised and condemned by the Shabak community. The Shabak's reluctance to migrate stems from their lack of acceptance by societies outside Iraq and the challenges posed by their religious differences in new environments.

In an attempt to overcome issues with political representation, the Shabaks have sought to participate in the Iraqi Parliament by establishing political parties since 2015. Nevertheless, sectarian divisions and Kurdish-Arab tensions have further fragmented the community. Notably, Sunni Shabaks support the KRG, while Shiite Shabaks back the central government. One prominent proposal for Shabak autonomy is an administration under the KRG. However, this situation carries the potential for conflict due to the competition for territory and population in the region.

On the other hand, while the Shabaks had limited political representation in the past, they have become more politically active since 2015. The Sunni Shabaks' alignment with the KRG has prompted Shia Shabaks to back the central government, intensifying political polarisation. Sunni Shabak's pro-KRG stance has forced the Shiite Shabaks to back the central government, deepening political polarisation within the community.

## Conclusion

This research, grounded in the literature review, examines the Shabaks as an ethno-religious community in Iraq. A holistic evaluation of the research data indicates that like other Iraqi minority groups such as Assyrians, Armenians, Kakeyi, and Fayli, the Shabaks strive to sustain their existence primarily through their religious beliefs. The Shabak community has endured attacks, massacres, and forced migrations under periods of political instability in Iraqi state. Although precise information regarding their initial settlement in Iraq and their ethnic origins remains unclear, existing evidence suggests that the Shabaks may have Kurdish, Turkish, or Iranian roots. More than their ethnic background, it is their religious identity religious that unites the Shabak community and serves as the primary source of cohesion. The Shabaks follow variants of the Shiite sect of Islam, including Kizilbash and Alevi. Although their beliefs led the Shabaks to be perceived as the 'other' during the Ba'ath regime, they endeavoured to preserve their religious identity. Following the collapse of the Ba'ath regime, Shabaks residing both within the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and under the central Iraqi government have increasingly gained political visibility. Despite enduring numerous adversities, the Shabak community continues to survive within Iraq's complex religious and ethnic landscape, striving to transmit this heritage to future generations.

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