



Human Rights Report on Assyrians in Iraq  
Assyria Council of EU and Assyria Foundation

2013





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## Summary

The Assyrians are an ethno-linguistic minority in the Middle East. Most Assyrians are Christians, and they accepted Christianity as their religion in the first century AD. Throughout the ages the Assyrian people have been constantly oppressed, murdered and discriminated. In 1980 they were 8% to 10% of the Iraqi population. Now they are 2% of the total population. In the early nineteenth century, thousands of Assyrians were killed under Kurdish warlords. During the Iraqi-Kurdish rebellion war between 1961 and 1970, many Assyrians left their lands and their homes in the north and fled to the southern cities. During the Iraq-Iran war between 1980 and 1988, as many as 60,000 Assyrians were killed – 6,000 of them from the Assyrian town of Bakhdida (Qaraqosh). During this period many Assyrians fled the country. Since the regime change in 2003, there has been a constant outflow of Assyrians leaving the country because of unprecedented sectarian violence and discrimination. The lack of state protection and application of the law causes sectarian violence and discrimination because perpetrators are not punished for what they do.

## Political rights

Although Iraq has operated as a “democracy” since 2005, the Assyrians are not fully represented in this freedom. Each ethnic and religious group within Iraq is supported by other related groups who are abroad, except for the Assyrians. On the other hand, if the Assyrians want to stay strong by banding together and start their own council or political party, they are threatened and stopped. The Assyrians are not allowed to speak out critically in public, in demonstrations and throughout the media. Many Assyrians want their own area where they can protect their people but this request was not taken seriously and many of those who publicly speak out on this topic, are in fear for their own lives.

## Work and education

The Assyrians are discriminated in the field of work in the Iraqi Kurdistan region. They get less prestigious jobs assigned in comparison with the Kurds and are often placed in positions which they are not trained for. Assyrian children in schools feel discriminated because that is how others behave towards them. For young people, the future does not look good because they have no guarantees in the area of work. Christian Assyrians currently work jobs as sales people in liquor shops or beauticians in beauty salons and are therefore targets for Muslim extremists. Muslims don't apply for such jobs because of religious restrictions. Many Assyrian shops were burned in 2011. Assyrians are also not allowed in professions such as the following: policemen, soldiers, officers, journalists for major newspapers and TV stations, judges and senior positions within educational institutions.

## Assyrian heritage not recognized

Under the regime of Saddam Hussein, Iraq underwent Arabization. People were taught that the entire civilization of Mesopotamia is Arabic. In the KRG-area history repeats itself, and the local Assyrian history is seen as Kurdish history. City names are changed to Kurdish names. Assyrian heritage is ruined and Assyrian history is not recognised in school books, museums and during memorial days.

### **Lack of safety**

Assyrians severely lack safety. They say that their people are not be protected and that the application of the law is missing. Therefore extremist groups continue to kidnapp, kill and send threatening letters to local Assyrians. This is why many Assyrians flee abroad or to the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, and often flee from there to the west or neighboring countries. Due to the expansion of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is the chance of an all-out civil war in the future. Thus the view on the future of Assyrians in this area is pessimistic. History proves that this group of people will pay a disproportionate price.

### **Land deprived and not respected**

Land that is owned by Assyrians is taken from them or is not respected. In the time of Saddam Hussein, many churches, properties, buildings and settlements were destroyed in the areas where the Assyrians already lived for centuries. Today there are mosques placed in Assyrian villages so that Muslims establish themselves there and land is requisitioned for the government's large-scale projects.

### **Forced into prostitution**

A number of Assyrian girls are forced by Kurdish criminal organizations to work in prostitution. If they refuse, they are threatened with death. Many of them are vulnerable refugees from the south with little family in the north. The organizations have ties with political leaders. Therefore it is easy to quickly provide these girls with passports, and to send them to EU countries to work there.

### **Region for Assyrians**

Because of the above reasons, the Assyrians want their own area where they can protect their people. Centuries of persecution, discrimination and lack of recognition have given them reason to ask for their own administrative area. This request was presented as early as 1934 to the League of Nations. The request was also raised after the fall of Saddam Hussein. No one, however, has taken the claims of the Assyrians seriously.

### **Assyrian refugees from Syria**

Iraq houses Assyrian refugees from Syria who fled to Ira. Many of their ancestors fled to Syria around 1933 because of massacres in Iraq. There are now about 300 Assyrians from Syria in Iraq. They receive help at the border.

## Foreword

*This report was written on behalf of Assyria Foundation and Assyria Council of EU to outline the situation of the Assyrians in Iraq with the goal to make clear what should be done to improve their living conditions .*

*In writing this report, I have spoken to many people during my visit to northern Iraq in the spring of 2013. Because I went there alone, I was unable to speak with everyone that I wanted to, in order to gain all the information needed to write a truthful and factual report. This was because of the security situation. I filled in these gaps with the many news items about the Assyrians, stories told personally to me and information from other reports. I think I can give a relatively good description of the situation of the Assyrians in Iraq because I have had contact with them since 2010. First I would like to thank the people who helped me organize the trip. Secondly, I would like to thank the people who have shared their stories and opinions with me and who have showed me their living conditions. Finally, I thank the people who have contributed to improving and translating this report.*

*(Name of the author is not displayed because of safety reasons)*

*May 13, 2013*



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## Prologue

The main question of this report is the following: "What is the current situation of the Assyrians in Iraq since 2012?"

This report will thus describe the situation of the Assyrians in Iraq. We look at the situation in 2011 and draw conclusions on the situation in 2012, compared to previous years.

Specifically the following points will be discussed:

First, general information about the Assyrians will be given. The political rights of the people will be explored secondly. Thirdly, the report describes how it is to work and study as Assyrians in Iraq. Fourthly, the Kurdification process will be described. Fifth, the problems of safety of the Assyrians will be explained. Then land grabs and forced prostitution will be detailed. Also, the effects of the conflict in Iraq's neighboring country, Syria, on the Assyrians will be described and this report will briefly mention the situation of Assyrian refugees who have come from Syria to Iraq. Furthermore Assyrian refugees from Iraq, who had previously fled to Syria and have now returned to Iraq will be mentioned. Finally, recommendations will be made.

Most of the information was gained from a trip to northern Iraq (Erbil and Ankawa) in the spring of 2013. At least 25 persons, including Assyrians who are very politically involved, NGOs, doctors and other professional Assyrians who live in the KRG area have shared their stories and opinions. Some of them have come to the KRG area from the south. Also many young people shared their stories. Other information has been obtained from news and related reports, such as the religious freedom reports by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), AINA, Assyria Council of EU and UNPO.

### List of Abbreviations Used:

AAS-I: Assyrian Aid Society - Iraq

AINA: Assyrian International News Agency

KDP: Kurdistan Democratic Party

KRG: Kurdistan Regional Government

PUK: Patriotic Union of Kurdistan

UNPO: Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation

USCIRF: United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

ACE : Assyria Council of EU



# 1. General background information

## §1.1 The Assyrian people

The Assyrian people have lived for thousands of years in Iraq, Syria, Iran, Lebanon and Turkey. They are a mostly Christian ethnic group with a unique culture amongst largely Muslim ethnic groups in the Middle East. The Assyrians are also called Assyro-Chaldeans, Chaldeans, Nestorians, Jacobites, Syrian Orthodox and Syrian Catholics.<sup>1</sup> They are often named according to their religious denomination (Church) rather than their ethnicity, which means that the information regarding this minority in Iraq, which reaches the media, NGO's and political circles, is fragmentary. This is why their situation isn't given enough attention. The majority regards the Assyrians as a Christian group that is relatively small in numbers.

## §1.2 Oldest inhabitants of Iraq ask for help

The Assyrians are the oldest inhabitants of Iraq. In the past they have had attention of the media (see appendices). Their country was called Assyria with Nineveh as its capital in the past. The Assyrians have frequently knocked on the doors of the EU and the USA and asked for help. History repeats itself. Upon the establishment of the Iraqi state, after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Assyrians were attacked by the new Iraqi army in 1933 and their political rights were systematically deprived from that moment on. The Assyrians in Iraq call the attention of the Dutch politicians and media. There is a difference with the call for help in 1933 because there are more than 40,000 Assyrians living in the Netherlands at the moment.

## §1.3 Assyrians through the ages

The Assyrians accepted Christianity as their new religion in the first century after Christ. Throughout the ages, this people has constantly been oppressed, massacred and discriminated against. The Assyrian language is also known as Syriac, Assyro-Chaldean or Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus. Over time the Assyrians have been oppressed in many different ways. Therefore a number of Assyrians adopted Arabic as their native tongue, to avoid the fact that they stood out. This is the reason why they are sometimes called Arab Christians. This is wrong and is often regarded by Assyrians as a very hurtful misconception.

## §1.4 The fate of Assyrians in the 20th and 21st centuries

The ethnic groups in Iraq includes Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, Assyrians (constituting the largest Christian minority), Yazidis and Shabaks. In 1980 Assyrians comprised 8% to 10% of the Iraqi population. They are now 2% of the total population. In the 19th century many Assyrians were massacred by the new arrival and domination of the Muslim Kurds. Badr-Khan Beg, the Kurdish Emir of Bohtan, massacred tens of thousands of Assyrians in the 1840s. In 1918, Simko Agha Shekaki assassinated the Assyrian spiritual leader Mar Benjamin Shimun, catholicos-Patriarch of the Church of the East, because he stood up for his people. Simko Agha Shekaki is regarded as one of the national heroes of the Kurds. In the KRG area the books used in schools don't inform of this man's murderous deeds, but only the good things which he allegedly did (see appendices). Assyrian students are thus made to recognize him as a hero during their history lessons. During the first Iraqi-Kurdish rebellion between 1961 and 1970, many Assyrians left their land and their homes in northern Iraq and went to big cities in the south such as Baghdad and Basra. In the time of the Iran-Iraq war between 1980 and 1988, up to 60 000 Assyrians lost their lives. Of this

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<sup>1</sup> "Assyrians in Iraq," *AINA*, <http://www.aina.org/articles/assyriansiniraq.pdf>.

number, at least 6,000 were killed from the Assyrian town of Bakhdida (Qaraqosh)<sup>2</sup>. In proportion, more Assyrians died than people from other Iraqi ethnic groups. During this time, many Assyrians fled Iraq because they were not recognized as Assyrians and were forced to accept either Arabic or Kurdish nationality.

After the removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003, many Assyrians began to either return to the north of Iraq or flee the country. In 2002 there were roughly 1.5-2 million Assyrian Christians in Iraq, On the other hand, it was reported that there were only 500,000 Christians left in Iraq in 2011<sup>3</sup>. Now, in 2013, there are still about 200,000 Christians remaining in Iraq, according to Andrew White, pastor of the Anglican Church in Baghdad<sup>4</sup>. Official numbers are not available. Most Iraqi Assyrian Christians live now in Sweden, and the US cities of Detroit, San Diego and Chicago. One of the main reasons that causes the Assyrians to flee is sectarianism<sup>5</sup>. The stories shared during this most recent visit confirm that. There are many Assyrian Christians that have been kidnapped, tortured and slain by extremist groups. The USCIRF reported in 2012 that systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom are allowed by the Iraqi government. The minorities are discriminated, killed, excluded, neglected and their settlements consciously subordinated<sup>6</sup>. This is visible for Assyrian Christians in all layers of Iraqi society. The Assyrians express concerns about their future in Iraq. Many of them expect a new war to break out between the Kurds and the Arabs because of the Iraqi Kurdistan region, and disputed areas such as the Nineveh plains (most villages and towns in this region are of Christian origin and it is mainly inhabited by Assyrians) and Kirkuk, as well as oil. As a result of the past war and instability the Assyrians have paid a high price. Lack of protection by the state and law enforcement has caused Assyrians to flee Iraq. Assyrians are held back, because of coalition building between Arabs and Kurds, in creating their own political power to protect their people, their villages and towns from attacks and kidnappings by terrorists. Democracy is even misused to deprive the Assyrians of their rights, allowing them to live without protection. All they receive is the "protection" of Kurdish and Arab militias.

## 2. Political rights

Since 2005 there is "democracy" in Iraq. The Assyrians are represented by five politicians out of 325 members in the Iraqi parliament. The parliament of the KRG has 125 representatives, five of whom are Assyrian. Of these, 3 actually represent an Assyrian political party. The other two Assyrians are members of the KDP and thus represent Kurdish interests. The other representatives within the KRG are primarily Muslim. The Islamist parties in the Kurdish region, according to Assyrians, are fanatic and separate themselves from others, like in the rest of Iraq. The Sunnis are mainly financed by Saudi Arabia, the Shiites are supported by Iran, and the Kurds are supported by their own oil revenues and by Turkey, which also supports the Turkmen minority. The Assyrian parties have no support and are thus left to fend for themselves.

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Report on Assyrians in Iraq 2011- Assyrian Council of Europe.

<sup>4</sup> David Blair, "Iraq invasion anniversary: the last Christians in Baghdad," *The Telegraph*, 17 March 2013 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/9935960/Iraq-invasion-anniversary-the-last-Christians-in-Baghdad.html>.

<sup>5</sup> "Aantal christenen in Irak nog 200.000," *Reformatisch Dagblad*, 12 April 2013, [http://refdag.nl/kerkplein/christenvervolging/irak/aantal\\_christenen\\_in\\_irak\\_nog\\_200\\_000\\_1\\_730089](http://refdag.nl/kerkplein/christenvervolging/irak/aantal_christenen_in_irak_nog_200_000_1_730089).

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom 2012 Annual Report, p. 95.

## §2.1 Assyrian parties under pressure

The Iraqi Kurdistan Region has its own government (the KRG) but is not entirely free to do as it wishes. The Iraqi government and the USA influence the choices made by the KRG. All political parties in the KRG are under the domination of the Kurds. There are 11 Assyrian parties, but these are not allowed use the name "Suraye" ("Assyrian" in the Aramaic language) as a political name, for this name binds all Assyrian groups together. There is clear divide and rule policy espoused by the KRG. If Assyrians dare to speak out about their situation and rights, or their opinion regarding this, they fear for their lives. Even the Assyrians (the common man and woman on the street) who speak out critically are threatened by politicians from amongst their own people. These politicians are more often members of Kurdish movements. On the street they are called by the Assyrians “accomplices of the KDP.”

## §2.2 Church leaders murdered, Bishop Faraj Rahho

Many Assyrians believe that they should have their own province, like the Kurds, where they can protect their own people. It's not about autonomy, but a province that is part of the Iraqi state, society and under the control of the government in Baghdad. The Assyrians absolutely do not want to be not controlled by the KRG because they fear Kurdish political parties.

Since the regime change, many well-known persons have been murdered after speaking out about this. The renowned of these was Assyrian Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho of the Chaldean Catholic Church in Mosul. He was an influential religious leader of the Catholic Assyrians, and he was murdered after being kidnapped in 2008. According to the bodyguard, who survived the attack, the kidnappers spoke Kurdish. Based on the witness statements, many Assyrians in Iraq drew the conclusion that Kurdish political parties / movements were behind the murder of this influential Assyrian Christian leader, especially because he very clearly advocated their own region where security would be paramount. Church leaders do not speak out regarding the wish for an Assyrian region after so many many brutal murders

## §2.3 Assyrian parties silenced

The Assyrian-Chaldean Council, a collaboration of almost all political parties in Iraq, was founded in 2007 and has asked for an autonomous Assyrian administrative area in Iraqi. A lot of lobbying work has been done for this cause both inside and outside Iraq, but this project was stopped and eventually banned two years ago. The Assyrian political parties do not dare to speak out in public because the Kurds have threatened Assyrian leaders. The people we spoke to demonstrated fear for their lives, as well as the lives of their children. So it is clear that the Assyrians have been threatened.

## §2.4 Administrative area

Assyrians say that Kurdish parties choose to compromise with Islamic parties more than with Christians. The Christians in the Kurdistan Regional Government are more loyal to the Kurds and threaten other Christians who speak out. The only solution the Assyrians see is an administrative area on the land where they have lived for millennia: the Nineveh Plain, in the former Assyria. But neither the Arabs nor the Kurds want to lose this area because of the potential oil fields under the ground. If the EU and USA do not help Assyrians to have their own region, the Assyrians will leave their homeland for good.

## §2.5 No symbols and critical expressions allowed

The Assyrian flag is not allowed to be used in towns and villages where only Assyrians live . Inside and outside the KRG area Assyrians may not use their own political symbols. During the parade on April 1, the

Assyrian New Year, they may not use banners with slogans that are politically sensitive. Often they may only use phrases such as "democracy, peace, brotherhood, etc.". Everything is discussed in advance with the KDP and everything is checked in advance. Most Assyrian villages must demonstrate loyalty to the Kurds by showing the Kurdish flag and pictures of Kurdish political leaders in public buildings. They do not do this because they want to, and certainly not out of sympathy for the Kurdish parties, but mostly out of fear and oppression. The pictures of Saddam Hussein displayed in church buildings during his rule are plain indication that this has happened before. Now the picture of the leader of the KDP, Masoud Barzani is shown. A statement which was often mentioned by informants was "Saddam has been swapped for Barzani" and "the Ba'ath party for the KDP". These comparisons show the feelings of average Assyrians toward the Kurdish political elite.

## §2.6 Media

Assyrian newspapers and the Satellite channel "Ishtar TV" are absolutely not allowed to post political articles or broadcast politically-related programs. If a church is bombed no images are broadcast and victims may not express their emotions. People who do not feel safe, or lost their land in the KRG area, may not be interviewed. This is a lot of discontent amongst the Assyrian people about their own media. They are not free and are constantly controlled.





### 3. Work and education

Assyrians feel like second or even third-class citizens. The reason why they feel this way can be traced back to how they have been treated at work. Major assignments and work with prestige and high levels of responsibility are given, within the KRG, to Kurds from their own country or Kurds from neighboring countries. Christians are often assigned to other jobs unrelated to the professions they are trained in, and they often get lower level functions assigned to them. Unemployment amongst Assyrians is also higher than amongst other populations. There are currently thousands of unemployed Assyrians.

#### §3.1 Discrimination in education

Children and young people who attend schools also notice that they are discriminated against, said a father of two. They feel somehow less respected than the Kurds and are treated as such, in some cases, by their teachers. This is possible because there is lack of a sound educational system. It is thus possible for them to get lower grades from a teacher with a different ethnic background, says a 13-year-old student in Erbil. The students and teachers describe the educational system as corrupt, outdated and demotivating.

### §3.2 No future

Young people leave Iraq because they see no future in the country. They see no opportunities to develop themselves and young men feel pressured to support their families while they have no certainty in their field of work and income, according to the sister of a 23 year old man in the KRG area. Many of these young people thus marry and flee to the west to escape the situation.

### §3.3 Jobs

Assyrians work within professional sectors where Muslims, because of their religious beliefs, do not work. These mainly include liquor stores and beauty salons. In these positions, the Assyrians are vulnerable because such businesses are not accepted by many Muslims. In 2011 many liquor stores, department stores and salons owned by Christians in Zakho were burned in broad daylight, without any reaction from the police or army. As a result, Christians do not feel protected. Other jobs that Assyrians are not allowed to have in the KRG area are jobs as police and soldiers, because Kurds and Arabs do not trust them.

Assyrians are not well-represented in any of the following jobs: Civil servant, journalist at major newspapers and TV stations, judges and senior positions within educational institutions. The Assyrians who have these jobs often have to admit that they are loyal to the Kurdish parties – i.e., the KDP and PUK.

## 4. Kurdification

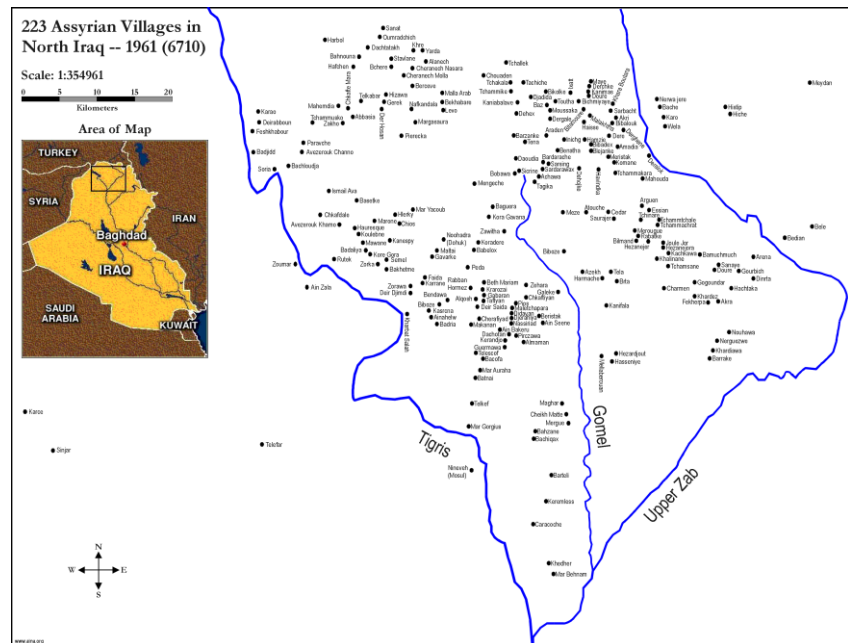
Iraq experienced Arabization under the regime of Saddam Hussein. All schoolbooks taught that the country's entire civilization was Arabic and, as a result, the significance of Assyrian history was denied. A lot of this history is still not recognized today. In the KRG-area history repeats itself, and Assyrian history is not recognized, but is rather seen as Kurdish history. If a part of Assyrian history is not seen as Kurdish history then there is no attention given to it in museums, books, during memorial days and on special days overall. According to Assyrians, there have been excavations in northern Iraq where objects and buildings were found dating from BC times. These are labeled by authorities as Kurdish while, in those times, Assyrians lived in that area – not Kurds. These excavations are thus portrayed as Kurdish in textbooks and media - even when researchers and archaeologists say that the remains found are Assyrian.



### §4.1 Name changing of towns and villages

Many of the towns and villages in the Iraqi Kurdistan region were originally Assyrian. Since Iraq created a Kurdish autonomous region, many of these names have since been changed to Kurdish names.

Assyrian	Kurdish
Arbel	Hawler
Ba'shiqa	Bashik
'Ayn-Nune	Kani Mase
'Ayn-Sifne	Shekhan
Shiyez	Sheze
Diyana	Soran
'Aqrah	Akre
Araden	Aradina
Beth-Murdni	Bamarne
Bishmiyaye	Shmayela
Iyyat	Yatee
Peshabor	Peshkhabur
Bebedeh	Bebad
Alqoshta	Alkishke
Shalmath	Sharmen
Beth-Karmane	Bakirman



Assyrian names and Kurdish names for villages and cities (picture: [www.aina.org](http://www.aina.org))

### §4.2 Ruin of Assyrian heritage

Another example of changing the culture in northern Iraq to a Kurdish one is an archaeological site near Khinis (also called the Gomel Gorge). This cultural heritage site was built around 700 BC by the Assyrian king Sennacherib. On the cliff-faces are reliefs, inscriptions and sculptures which date from that era. A few years ago the ruins were blown up. Observers have indicated that Kurdish militias regularly used to practice their shooting on this important cultural heritage site.<sup>7</sup>



A sculpture of the Assyrian Lamassu, a winged bull, lies neglected on the riverbank after being blown up



The winged Lamassu. Bullet holes can clearly be seen.

<sup>7</sup> "Treasures of ancient civilization in North Iraq are threatened –Modification of historical landscape must stop," Assyrian Council of Europe press release, 07 July 2012

#### §4.3 Request for monument in commemoration of the genocide

In 1933 there was a genocidal massacre of Assyrians on the northern Iraqi border with Syria. On August 22, 1933, Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun stated to the League of Nations that 235 Assyrian men, women and children were killed in Simmele and 500 Assyrians were killed in other places in Iraq by the Iraqi army. One of the reasons given was that the Assyrians fought together with the British army during the First World War.<sup>8</sup> Many Assyrians fled to Syria at the time. This event is commemorated by the Assyrians each year. Assyrian political parties have asked for a monument to their people to commemorate this genocide. Commitments have been made but no monument has been erected so far.

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<sup>8</sup> "Hulp aan Assyriërs," *De Tijd* (godsdienstig-staatkundig dagblad), 22 augustus 1933.



## 5. Safety

The Assyrians do not feel safe. They can be attacked or threatened for many reasons. During the most recent visit it became clear that Assyrians are afraid to speak out because they are afraid of the risk that they must leave the country. Assyrians look for many references before they contact a person, then ask a lot of questions and make observations before finally telling their story in an indirect way. The information they give leaves a lot of gaps for one to read between the lines. They speak like this in order to protect themselves. This demonstrates the fear that Assyrians currently live with. Several times they asked for us to never publish and say names out loud, never give contact information to others and to not share specific information.

### §5.1 Persecution

They say that the main reasons for persecution are lack of protection for the Assyrians and the lack of application of the law. In the past year, two Christians were kidnapped, at least two Christians slain and 20 Christians in Mosul have received threatening letters with the message that they must leave Iraq immediately. In 2013 Shadha Elias was murdered in the same city. This Assyrian (Chaldean) teacher was found dead with her throat slit.<sup>9</sup> Also this year an 82 year old Assyrian man from Kirkuk was kidnapped by Islamic extremists. He was first given the option of converting to Islam and, after the man refused, he was trapped underground for a month while the kidnappers negotiated about the ransom. They requested USD\$700,000. The family, however, could not pay this amount. Ultimately, they paid USD\$300,000 and the man released. Kirkuk and Mosul are both cities outside the KRG.

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<sup>9</sup> USCIRF 2013 Annual Report.



## §5.2 Fatwa

A fatwa was also issued in December 2012, regarding the Christians in Iraq, by the Shiite Ayatollah Ahmad al-Hassani al-Baghdadi. This Ayatollah said that remaining Christians have the choice to either convert to Islam or accept death. He said in the same fatwa that Christian women and girls should be considered as legitimate wives for Muslims.<sup>10</sup> These events may happen without major consequences for the culprits. The men who want to protect their people and apply for employment with a police force, are not stationed in their own area, but in Mosul, where they risk their lives and they are not accepted.

## §5.3 Government reaction

The government should protect them, and tries to do this more and more often, but the result is not effective enough. The television channel that broadcasted fatwas, such as the one already mentioned, is blocked by the Iraqi government. Churches are being rebuilt by the government, but there aren't enough Christians to worship in them. Assyrians are angry about the fact that the KRG did not intervene during the robbery and the burning down of at least 20 businesses, owned mainly by Christians, in Zakho on 2 December 2011. The attackers were mobilized by an Imam who preached that the businesses and property of Christians should be attacked. Still no one has been arrested.

<sup>10</sup> "Fatwa over christenen in Irak niet onschuldig," *Reformatisch Dagblad*, 19 December 2012.

## §5.4 Escape

Due to lack of protection in insecure areas, Assyrians flee to the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. They go there because they originally came from northern Iraq. In the past they sought their safety in the anonymity of the big cities, but now it is unsafe for Christians in the big cities, so they return to the villages where their ancestors had lived for thousands of years. Often they still possess houses in those villages. Because fear reigns, even in the KRG area, many have fled to other countries. According to a contact from AAS-I, 70% of the Christians in Sulaymaniyah fled there from Baghdad, Kirkuk and Mosul. Roughly, 1,000 Assyrian families lived in Kirkuk in 2002, but 400 families remain today. Out of the 600 refugee families, 50% has fled to other countries and 50% of them are in the KRG area.

## §5.5 KRG's expansion plans

There is an ongoing conflict between the KRG and the Iraqi Government on the situation in northern Iraq. The Kurdish leaders indicate that they are willing to start a war over ownership of areas on the frontier between the Iraqi Kurdistan Region and those districts controlled by the Iraqi Government. The Kurds wish to expand their territory and, for example, attach the Nineveh Plain to their region. Minorities make up the majority in this area, and only 5% of the population is ethnically Kurdish. To succeed in this endeavour campaigns have been launched in which Yazidis and Shabaks are portrayed as Kurds. The Kurdish Peshmerga militia is used to enforce “order” in these areas and to create fear among the minorities. The minorities, on the other hand, indicate that the Kurds are their new rulers. Because of the pressure from the Kurds on minority groups, any elections that are held are not fair since those belonging to minorities are afraid to speak out. Although the security situation seems to have calmed down in Iraq, the KRG's expansion plans render it even more fragile. Therefore, the future of Assyrians is unsure. Another civil war means, as history has proven, that the Assyrians will pay a disproportionately higher price.

## **6. Land grab in KRG-area and other parts of Iraq**

The Assyrian people lived in many towns and villages in northern Iraq in 1970. Many Assyrians call this area “Assyria”. This is also the country that was populated by Assyrians for many centuries. The north of Iraq is the former southern Assyria. Before 1970 there were 15,000 Christians in the town of Bartillah (in the Nineveh Plain), according to AAS-I. At that time, they comprised 90% of the town’s population. Under the regime of Saddam Hussein many Christians moved to the south of the country because of government policy. Saddam destroyed many Christian churches, properties, buildings, towns and villages in the north and promised the land to Arabs as a part of the ‘Anfall’ military campaign. Christian villages close to Erbil and Dohuk like Bedyan, Shyoz, Kani Masi, Fishkhabour and Aradin were destroyed. 70% of the original inhabitants never received any compensation. Only 30% got their land back after 2003 because financial minister Sarkis Aghajan started to rebuild those villages and gave them for free to their owners. Roughly 50% of Bartillah’s inhabitants are now Christian.

### **§6.1 Disrespect against Assyrian land**

In villages where only Christians used to live, mosques are being built so that Muslims settle in those areas. Assyrians report that there are plans to construct new main roads that go through these villages. An Assyrian man recounted that many building projects around the Assyrian district of ‘Ankawa are strategically funded by Islamic financiers so that Muslims would settle there. It was also indicated that many large plots of land, which belonged to Assyrians, has been appropriated by the government for projects. A prime example is Erbil Airport. This airport was built on land that is part of ‘Ankawa, which is inhabited almost exclusively by Assyrians. It has also been said that if Christian families want to leave Mosul, real estate agents refuse to sell their properties because they fear for their own lives. This is because of the militias that keep an eye on them and don’t allow them to help Christians. This means that Christians’ houses are sold for 70% less than their actual worth.

### **§6.2 Attack on Rabatki**

An example of Kurdification is the attack on Rabatki in June 2013. Rabatki is a village in the Iraqi Kurdistan region. This village was attacked by General Aref al-Zebari and his brother Habib al-Hares Zabari, a political officer from the nearby town of ‘Aqrah. General Aref al-Zebari said during his attack: "We are the authority in this area and take what we want." The Assyrians in the village of Rabatki indicate that most of the attackers were armed Peshmerga soldiers in civilian clothes. The Peshmerga is the police force of the KRG, charged with the task of protecting the region’s three provinces. The Peshmerga is funded by the Iraqi national budget. Assyrians are not allowed in these units to protect their people, as mentioned earlier. No one was arrested after the attack on Rabatki and the villagers do not expect this to even occur in the future because the victims are Assyrians.

The Dutch politician Joel Voordewind of the Christian Union has condemned this attack on Assyrians and other attacks on the indigenous people of northern Iraq. He has asked the KRG to show that they do not accept this by conducting an investigation into the attack. The Swedish politician Yilmaz Kerimo of the Social Democrats also condemned this attack on Rabatki and all attempts to undermine the Assyrian community in northern Iraq. “The people responsible for this attack must face justice,” he said, according to AINA.



### §6.3 Request for own province is not new

Due to centuries of persecution, discrimination and lack of recognition, Assyrians advocate for their own area where they can protect their heritage and their people. In 1934 this request was presented to the League of Nations (now the UN). One of the plans was to give the Assyrians land in Brazil. Money was also requested from the countries in the League of Nations to contribute towards establishing a fortress for Assyrians in the French mandated territory of the Levant. Because this request was during the crisis years, there were no funds to make it possible.<sup>11</sup> This issue has also been raised since the fall of Saddam Hussein. It has cost many lives over the ages, but they have not received a response from either the League of Nations, the Arabs or the Kurds.

## 7. Prostitution

Many Assyrian girls are forced into prostitution by Kurdish criminal organizations, according to several informants. The families of these girls, and the girls themselves, have been threatened with murder, so they don't dare to do anything in opposition. Many young women who fled from Baghdad to the KRG-area or to the Nineveh Plain, and have little family there, are forced to work in prostitution. Their passports are taken from them so they cannot flee. There are indications that some of these girls are sent to work in Germany and the Netherlands. The criminal organization has links with political leaders so the girls can get passports and visas quickly for them to work for three months in EU countries. The girls have told this to nuns and priests of various Churches in the KRG area. The Churches do not dare to make this information public because they fear the KRG police.

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<sup>11</sup> "Assyriërs moeten gaan verhuizen," *De Tijd* (godsdienst-staatkundig dagblad), 5 August 1935.

## 8. Assyrian refugees from Syria in Iraq

### §8.1 Assyrian refugees from Iraq to Syria

After 1933 many Assyrians fled from Iraq to Syria because of the massacres by the Iraqi army, led by a Kurdish general named Bakr Sidqi.

A number of the Assyrians who settled in Syria now return to Iraq because it is no longer safe in their country. These people have mostly lived on the banks of the Khabour, a river in Syrian Mesopotamia, and have always kept contact with the Assyrians in Iraq.

### §8.2 Assyrian refugees to Iraq

In previous years, many Assyrians fled from Iraq to Lebanon via Syria, or they fled straight to Syria. Many of them were planning to flee from there to the west.

Due to the ongoing civil war in neighboring Syria, 260 to 270 Assyrians returned to Iraq according to AAS-I. They are spread across the provinces of Sulaymaniyah, Erbil and Dohuk and have moved in by family. AAS-I also reports that there are about 30 to 40 Assyrians, who originally fled from Syria to Iraq. They were collected at the border between the two countries.



## 9. Recommendations

The Iraqi Government, Kurdistan Regional Government, international organisations and other countries could do the following to solve the problems of the Assyrians:

The Iraqi Government should:

- Support the establishment of a regional university within the Nineveh Plains area to stem the current brain-drain, permit continuation of study amongst IDPs, and support economic development;
- Promote the economic potential of northern Iraq through greater international outreach, including but not limited to, the websites of its embassies and ministries;
- Facilitate international exchanges of elected representatives and their staffs, to build capacity within local, regional, and national governance structures;
- Facilitate feasibility discussions into the application of Article 125 of the Iraqi Constitution in the context of establishing an autonomous regional administration in the Nineveh Plains; and
- Take measures to restore, maintain, and safeguard the urban fabric and monuments reflecting the country's Assyrian history and culture.

The Kurdistan Regional Government should:

- Promote, without amendment, the adoption of Article 35 of the draft constitution of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and its provision for the formation of autonomous regions within the Iraqi Kurdistan Region;
- Work to ensure fair, transparent, and equitable hiring practices are observed, particularly in the education sector;
- Ensure the cultural and historical heterogeneity of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region is appropriately reflected in the use of Assyrian names for towns, and landmarks, and that Assyrian contribution to the history of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region is reflected in public collections and historical sites and discourse;
- Revise current land restitution procedures to allow faster and more equitable adjudication and compensation; and
- Recognise the 1933 Simele Massacre and support construction of a monument as an important commemorative and educational initiative.

The Assyrian coalition should:

- Establish committees capable of working collaboratively to inform and support initiatives to address insecurity, unemployment, and human rights contraventions;
- Support local investment assessments to augment the existing but limited information available from the National Investment Commission and other governmental bodies;
- Provide and publicise confidence-building measures to discourage emigration and encourage long-term investment in Northern Iraq; and
- Facilitate youth programmes that aim to strengthen civil society, promote active citizenship, support job creation and develop skills.

The international community, and in particular the European Union and its member states should:

- Act immediately to halt the ethno-religiously motivated discrimination, intimidation and violence against the Assyrian community of Iraq;
- Re-evaluate asylum policies that facilitate the large-scale exodus of Assyrians from Iraq without addressing the root causes of emigration that also prevent many Assyrians from returning to their homeland;
- Promote investment by local and international companies and raise awareness of economic opportunities, such as micro-credit schemes, among both established communities and IDPs within Northern Iraq as a means of stemming the flows of asylum seekers to the EU;
- Manifest their support for local sustainable income generation and reconstruction by extending financial, academic, and moral support for the construction of a Nineveh Plains University; and
- Support initiatives to safeguard, preserve, and protect for the future ancient Assyrian archaeological, historic, and cultural sites, particularly those that are thousands of years old.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Report: *The last generation? The situation of Assyrians in Northern Iraq, 2011.*



## Conclusion

The main question of this report is: "How is the current situation of the Assyrians in Iraq from 2012 onwards?" This report has thus described that the situation of Assyrians in Iraq has remained the same. They are oppressed, persecuted and discriminated against in the country where they have been located for thousands of years. The reason for this is that they are a minority Christian ethnic group in a Islamic country where is no system that protects them. The people get little chance to enter politics, cannot speak up and are not allowed to say anything critical of the *status quo*. The Assyrians are discriminated against in the fields of work and education, which means that they have fewer opportunities than others. Also, the history and culture of the Assyrians are not recognized. Finally, Assyrians are attacked, kidnapped, and killed, and girls are forced into prostitution by Muslim extremists. This is allowed to happen because these people are not protected and are not given the chance to protect themselves. Nothing has changed in recent years. The only stability that seems appear is fragile because of unrest in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, oil and other matters. Another war seems closeby and, as history shows, the Assyrian people will undoubtedly pay a higher price (as Christian minority) than other groups. This perspective causes Assyrians to flee the country. People are afraid that no Assyrian Christians will remain in Iraq while they are indigenous to the country!

# Apendices:

## 1. Dutch newspapers concerning the fate of Assyrians in the 1930s



"Help for the Assyrians: Patriarch Mar Shimoen will appeal to the League of Nations," *De Tijd* (religious-political newspaper), August 22, 1933. This patriarch's uncle and predecessor was killed by Simko Aga Shikaki. This murder is not recognized by Kurdish political leaders, since Kurds perceive Simko Aga as a hero.



"Assyrians have to move but the Netherlands has no money to help," from *De Tijd* (religious-political newspaper) August 5, 1935.



"Settlement of the Assyrians in Iraq," from *Het Vaderland* (state and literary newspaper), May 18, 1934



"Assyrian Christians are threatened. Many are killed and wounded in a clash with the army at border of Iraq," *Nieuwsblad uit het Noorden*, August 9, 1933. This border area is now called Derabon.

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"Fights with Assyrians at the border of Iraq," in *Het Vaderland* (state and literary newspaper), August 9, 1933.

<sup>13</sup> Koninklijke Bibliotheek – Historische kranten

## 2. Denial of Assyrian history in Kurdish school books:

غير أن القوات البريطانية لم تقف عند خط الهدنة بل زحفت بقيادة الجنرال وليام مارشال نحو الموصل التي احتلتها في ١٨ من تشرين الثاني ١٩١٨ ودخلت الموصل و أكملت احتلال ولاية الموصل كلها ماعدا منطقة

السليمانية . هكذا تم الاستيلاء على مركز الولاية و اطرافها دون حرب، وقد احتجت الحكومة العثمانية على ذلك اعتبرتها مخالفة للهدنة الموقعة بينهما . وبالرغم من أن إتفاقية سايكس بيكو قد منحت الولاية للفرنسيين مما أدى إلى خلق المشاكل بين بريطانيا و العثمانيين و بعدها بين العراق و تركيا حيث عرفت بـ مشكلة الموصل ( مشكلة ولاية الموصل) . وبعد أن زالت العقبان الخارجية و الداخلية أمام الكمالين، أصر ممثلهم في معاهدة لوزان في ٢٤ من تموز ١٩٢٣م على أن ولاية الموصل جزء من الأراضي التركية بحجج باطلة منها( أن الكورد و الترك من أصل واحد ، و اعتبار عدد من عشائر الولاية على أنهم أتراك، و أعلنوا أن المصالح الاقتصادية و العلاقات الاجتماعية لولاية الموصل تنسجم مع الأناضول أكثر من غيره)، و دون شك فإن هذه الحجج كانت باطلة و غير حقيقية، لأن الأطراف المتنازعة عليها ليس لها صلة بهذه الولاية. بل إن أكثر سكان هذه الولاية كان من الكورد (سواء أكان مسلماً أو مسيحياً أو أيزيدياً أو شبيكياً) و عرب و تركمان هم الذين يمتلكون الحق في تحديد مصير ولايتهم. و حينما قاموا بضمها إلى العراق لم يستشر أبناءها في وقت

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This page talks about the conflict between Britain and the Ottoman Empire over the province of Mosul in 1923. Assyrians are not mentioned here but are portrayed as Kurdish Christians. Whilst Kurds, Arabs and Turkmen are mentioned, "Muslims, Christians, Yazidis and Shabaks" are made out to be Kurdish religious denominations.

### ٢ - ثورة سمكو الشكاك



اصبح إسماعيل آغا (سمكو الشكاك) رئيساً لعشيرة الشكاك بعد وفاة والده، يعتبر سمكو الشكاك من أشهر القادة الكورد قبل الحرب العالمية الأولى والذي حارب السلطة القاجارية في إيران وكان في كفاح مستمر بعد الحرب لتحقيق حقوق الكورد في شرق كوردستان. إتسع سلطة سمكو بشكل كبير في مناطق غرب بحيرة أورمية (الموقع الرئيسي لعشيرة الشكاك)، إضافة إلى أن الشيخ عبد السلام البارزاني الذي هرب من العثمانيين بقي فترة بين ظهرائي العشيرة ثم نهب مع سمكو لمقاومة معاون القنصلية الروسية في قفقاس ليطلبوا مساندة و معاونته للحركة التحررية الكردية، إضافة على ذلك أن سمكو تزوج إحدى بنات الشيخ محمد صديق، كان الشيخ محمد صديق ابن الشيخ عبيدالله النهري ووالد (السيد طه النهري) حيث كان أحد السياسيين وثور تلك الحقبة، هذه القرابة أدت إلى توثيق العلاقة بين عائلة شمزينان بالأخص السيد

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Simko Agha Shekaki is seen as one of the greatest Kurdish leaders of World War I because he "fought for the rights of the Kurds." The fact that he also killed many Assyrians, including his assassination of the head of the Assyrian Church of the East, is not mentioned.