

No, The Assyrians are Not Refugees from Turkey who Settled in Iraq

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In recent years, some Kurdish and Arab politicians and wanna-be historians have been making statements that the Assyrians of Iraq were refugees from Hakkari, Turkey and that the British brought them to Iraq. This absurd and misleading statement spread as Assyrians were trying to find their place in the new Iraq post 2003 US invasion.

On October 3, 1932 Iraq became the 57th member of the League of Nations (replaced by the United Nations on October 24, 1945 post World War II). On December 15, 1932, an article titled "Iraq and the Assyrians" was published in the periodical *The Near East and India*. The article addressed the settlement of the Assyrians in Iraq. The Assyrian leaders have been pleading to solve the settlement issue before ending the British mandate over Iraq and before admitting Iraq into the League of Nations as a sovereign and independent state. The Assyrian leaders warned the West that Iraqi leaders could not be trusted and that Assyrians are not safe under the rule of Arabs and Kurds.

Before going further into the article aforementioned there is an important point that the readers must understand. The Assyrians did not fall from Mars onto northern Iraq. The Assyrians have been living in Northern Mesopotamia from time immemorial and their dynasties established one of the greatest civilization and empire in the Near East. The fall of the last Assyrian dynasty, i.e., the Neo-Assyrian Empire, in 612 BC and the last capital in Harran in 609 BC did not mean the disappearance of the people. This is similar to the fall of the Roman, Greek, Persian and many other empires. The people of those empires survived. The Assyrians continued to live in and around the historic Assyrian capitals of Ashur (Qal'at Sharqat), Kalhu (Nimrud), Dur Sharukin (Khursabad), Nineveh (Nebi Yunis) and Harran in upper Mesopotamia or lived in new settlements near by those capitals, such as Mosul, Arbil, Kirkuk, Urfa (Urhai or Edessa), Nisibin, etc. that were centers of the Assyrians' Christianity.

Assyria was occupied by several nations including the Medes, Greeks, Parthians, Romans, Sassanids, Arabs, Mongolians, Ottoman Turks and others in between. The Assyrians adopted Christianity during the time of the Apostles and remained Christians ever since. The Christological controversies that followed the Council of Ephesus (431) and the Council of Chalcedon (451) isolated these Assyrian denominational communities from each others. As the Church established further structure and hierarchy, the Churches of the Assyrians kept the various Assyrian communities together, each under its leader, the patriarchs. The Assyrian denominational terms Nestorian and Jacobite were born. Later, in 1681 in Diyar Bekir (Turkey) and in 1830 in northern Iraq (Alqosh) the conversion of Assyrians to Catholicism isolated more [Assyrians](#) as the term Chaldean was given to these converts.

With the clear establishment of these denominations, a clear distribution of the Assyrian population was shaped. The Nestorian Assyrians lived as a concentrated region of the Hakkari Mountains (Van Province) and Urmia region in Persia, Jacobite Assyrians in the Tur Abdin/Diyar Bekir region (Sandschak Zor and Diyar Bekir Provinces) and Chaldean Assyrians in Nineveh region/Arbil/Kirkuk (Mosul Province); however, these various denominational groups were intermixed in some locations. Despite this denominational separation, they all continued to refer to themselves as Suraye, which is Asuraye or Assuraye, meaning Assyrians.



Map of the Ottoman Empire divided by provinces Before its Fall in 1922

The [genocide](#) of World War I (1914-1918) committed against the Assyrians by Turks and Kurds in Hakkari and Tur Abdin forced the Assyrians out. One escape route ended the Assyrians in the camps of Baquba (1918 near Baghdad) and then Mindan (1920 near Mosul) via Urmia, Persia. The other route ended up in Qamishli and Aleppo as genocide continued even after the Ottoman Empire had collapsed and the Turkish State was created in 1922. Therefore, the Assyrians were basically displaced because of genocide from one province to another within the same Ottoman Empire, i.e., from Hakkari to Mosul and from Diyar Bekir/Tur Abdin to Qamishli/Aleppo. Those displaced refugees from Hakkari and Urmia joined their Catholic brethren, the Chaldean Assyrians, in Mosul Province. Therefore, the Assyrians did not migrate from some foreign planet to Mosul Province considering also that there were Assyrians in Mosul region since the fall of the Assyrian Empire and these Assyrians after converting to Catholicism became known as Chaldeans.

Another important issue is the similarity in the geographical terrain. One of the principle Assyrian regions was the highlands that starts from Mosul (today in Iraq) and extends all the way to southern Lake Van (today in Turkey). The Assyrian people lived throughout these highlands. This continuation of topography was not divided politically until the official fall of the Ottoman Empire in November 1, 1922. After many disagreements, protests and negotiations, the British and the Turks finally signed the Treaty of Ankara on June 5, 1926 by which both states recognized the Brussels line (with some minor modifications) as the frontier between the two new created states of Iraq and Turkey. Even if we consider this new frontier, we need to understand that the large Assyrian region of Lower Barwar was always part of the Ottoman's Mosul Province (Iraq) – the Assyrians of Lower Barwar did not migrate from Turkey to Iraq per se, unlike those of Upper Barwar.

During World War I, British and French representatives, Sir Mark Sykes and Francois Georges Picot, authored a secret agreement (concluded on May 19, 1916) regarding the future spoils of the Ottoman Empire that was expected to lose the war. After few modifications and incidents, the Hashemite Kingdom of Iraq was created from the three Ottoman provinces of Mosul, Baghdad and Basra and immediately placed it under the British mandate. Modern Turkey, Iraq, Syria and other states in the region did not exist before 1921/22. Therefore, we cannot say that in 1918 people moved from Turkey to Iraq because Turkey and Iraq did not exist at the time.

Now back to the December 5, 1932 *The Near East and India* article, which stated that the Council of the League of Nations considered the question of the settlement of the 40,000 [Nestorian] Assyrians in Iraq. At the council meeting, Nuri al-Said, the prime minister of Iraq stated: *“The government of Iraq is determined to assure the prosperity, the happiness and the tranquility of all inhabitants of Iraq. It is following the best and most practical path to this end, allowing itself to be guided by the most human principles, by considerations of the general interest and by respect for existing laws.”*

It took only few months later from the promise of the Iraqi prime minister that 3,000 Assyrians were massacred in the state-sponsored [Simele Genocide](#) in August 1933. The [Assyrians continue to be persecuted and oppressed in Iraq](#) by the Arab and the Kurdish authorities as the leaders and historians of Arabs and Kurds continue to claim that the Assyrians were refugees from Turkey and Persia (later Iran) and needed to be relocated or settled outside Iraq, if they had any conditions or hard to meet conditions, regardless how reasonable.

Education empowers people – it enables them to understand. When they understand, they discuss issues affecting them with confidence, logically and accurately. Assyrians must participate in this great battle of survival armed with education, because they must not let the murderers and oppressors write the history. The Assyrians are the indigenous people of Iraq – history and archaeology proves that. Throughout history, many Assyrians were forced to flee their homes and lands of northern Iraq (occupied [Assyria](#)) because of massacres and persecution.