

Will Assyrians Become Strictly a Religious Minority in Occupied Assyria?

Fred Aprim
October 9, 2022

Many Assyrians describe the silence by most Assyrian political groups and many nationalists, since the outcome of the 2018 Iraqi elections, mysterious. For the first time since 2005 Iraqi elections, not a single independent Assyrian group secured a seat in the Iraqi Parliament. Yes, the Shi'a Arabs and the Kurdish political groups stole the parliamentary seats assigned for the Christians by picking up puppet candidates and then had non-Christians vote for them. It was a dirty and unfair game played by the Shi'a Arab and the Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), but Assyrians did not react to the foul play enough or appropriately. Have Assyrians given up on Assyria? Have they succumbed to being good Christians who accepted Kurds as their saviors and representatives?

Did Assyrians forget what the Kurds committed in 2014 when ISIS attacked Mosul, the Nineveh Plain and Khabor regions? First, the Kurdish peshmerga disarmed the Assyrians and then fled when ISIS attacked, leaving the Assyrians to face yet another genocide. Since this is true, why do Assyrian patriarchs and majority of the bishops claim that Kurds are Assyrians' brothers? These claims are full of fallacy – they are unequivocally misleading and untruthful. These claims perplex and confuse the various Assyrian congregations. To insinuate that the martyred Patriarch Mar Benyamin Shimun and Abd al-Salam Barzani were close friends who respected and admired each other is idiotic.¹ Did the Assyrians forget how Simko, the murderer of Mar Benyamin Shimun, is still treated as a Kurdish national hero and is forced as such on the Assyrians students in the Kurdish region's history curriculum? Such overtly and regularly repeated claims about the so-called brotherly Kurds began to spread considerably by the Chicago based late Patriarch Mar Dinkha who visited Arbil few times. One would expect that these complimentary claims about the Kurds by the various church leaders and the cooperation or complete submission of most of the Assyrian political groups that are headquartered in northern Iraq should have led the Kurdish leaders to genuinely forge a fair, just and admirable policies towards the indigenous Assyrians (and Yezidis), still, the Kurds did not. The Kurdish leaders have proved that they were only delaying, because they know that instability, lack of opportunities and insecurity were forcing more and more Assyrians to flee Iraq. The Kurdish leaders and their conspirators accelerated the process of emptying the Assyrian lands and dispersing the indigenous Assyrians by not having any serious clashes with ISIS to stop or delay the invasion of the last strongholds of the concentrated Assyrian regions of Nineveh Plain (Iraq) and Khabor (Syria) regions. Some Assyrians argue that in fact the Kurds conspired in the creation of ISIS.

The Kurdish leaders have continued to bet on time in their plans to control more Assyrian lands. They have done it since the Kurds began their revolt in the 1960s. The revolt caused instability and in time has slowly forced the Assyrians to leave their villages. Even during times of peace between the Kurds and the Iraqi government, the Kurdish leaders encroached on Assyrian lands one meter at a time, under different pretexts.²

1 The claim came on Sept 12, 2022 during the opening of the new Assyrian Church of the East patriarchate in Arbil.

2 Assyrian Federation of Sweden report titled: "Demographic Changes in Assyrian Villages in Northern Iraq"
<https://www.atour.com/news/assyria/20130701a.html>

The Kurdish leaders understand that the essence of the struggle between the Assyrians and the Kurds is land. If they just keep forcing the Assyrians out, those vacated lands become Kurdish subsequently. They have expanded the Kurdish region systematically by the kurdification of Assyrian villages and towns one village and one town at a time.

To have a better picture of what goes on, let's consider these examples. In 1996, the Kurdish authorities stated that they were going to move a number of displaced Kurdish families from the Iraqi borders region and settle them temporarily as guests on lands on the outskirts of Sarsink. Until the 1960s, the Assyrian owners were using those lands for agriculture and pastures but have stopped using them due to the Kurdish revolt. The Kurdish government had promised that those displaced Kurdish families will be relocated as soon as the security conditions improved. However, that temporary housing has turned today into the large Kurdish city of Azadi. As if that was not enough, the encroachment and Kurdish settlements began to take place in the village of Sarsink itself. Under false pretexts, the Assyrians of Sarsink are not permitted to build houses on their vast nearby meadows and vineyards that they owned and inherited since the creation of the Iraqi Republic in 1921. They do however have the permission to build on fields that are directly adjacent to their residences. Meanwhile, the Kurds can build whatever they desire on those Assyrian vineyards and meadows.³

Badarish is part of the subdistrict (ناحية nahiya) of Sarsink, which in turn is part of the district (قضاء qadha') of Amadiya. The Assyrians have lived in Badarish before Iraq was officially created in 1921. Today, the Kurdish harassment of the Assyrians of Badarish and their encroachment on the town continue principally in similar manner followed in Sarsink.

The problem the Assyrians have faced repeatedly is that a group of Kurds would build few homes nearby the Assyrian villages, expand with time, begin to harass the local Assyrians, force them to leave and finally take over the village. In other cases, a Kurd will appear out of nowhere, uses the privilege of having the government backing, obtains a fake document claiming that the land belongs to him, he then settles in and with time more people arrive and take over.

Consider also the situation in the Assyrian village of Rabadke in Nahla region. In 1992 a decision from a committee with the highest agricultural court in the KRG and the governor of Dohuk gave the ownership of the village to the Assyrian owners. Even today, half of the village is not planted because the Kurds have not allowed the Assyrians to plant them.⁴

Even when Assyrians win court decisions regarding Kurdish encroachments or illegal seizure of Assyrian lands, those court decisions rarely get implemented. For example, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) issued a decision on May 12, 2012 about the Assyrian village of Qarawula. Around 1200 sq meters had been planted by a Kurd who claims that the land belongs to him and he refuses to vacate. The court decision gave the ownership of the land to the local Assyrians. Even today, after 10 years of the decision, the order to vacate has not been executed. More than 70 Assyrian locations face the same problem. Kurdish clan leaders, politicians, Islamic leaders, business men have power that the KRG does not confront. Have we forgotten the Kurdish cleric who issued a fatwa to destroy Assyrian properties or businesses and the local

3 Thanks to notes by Farouk Giwargis

4 Read about the Assyrian villages in northern Iraq in the valuable study by Majed Eshoo
<https://www.atour.com/news/assyria/20080813a.html>

In Arabic <https://www.atour.com/news/assyria/20040523a.html>

government did not prosecute anyone? This non-action is in fact an encouragement for others to do the same.⁵ The KRG does sometimes issue a ruling in favor of the Assyrians based on a court order but it comes short from executing those orders.

Assyrians must refuse to see their history and existence in northern Iraq transforming into a simple footnote in the Kurdish self-rule region. The Kurdish leaders need to understand that Assyrians are the indigenous people of Iraq and the heirs of Assyria (northern Iraq).⁶ Even if one Assyrian remained in northern Iraq, the Kurdish leaders will in time have to deal with the indigenous status of Assyrians as an ethnic group, original owners of the land and not just a Christian minority. On August 22, 2022, five members of US Congress addressed the US Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom Rashad Hussain about the illegal seizures of Assyrian lands in Iraq that has continued for decades.⁷

The Kurdish encroachments on, and illegal grabbing of, Assyrian lands are in reality a well planned scheme that lead to demographic change in occupied Assyria. The plan aims in principle to eliminate Assyrians on two fronts: One, undermine their presence as an indigenous ethnic group by presenting them as a Christian (نصاری) minority. Two, eliminate any dense Assyrian presence in any particular region. Barzani's plan is to leave Assyrians weak and scattered throughout northern Iraq (Occupied Assyria), living under a reinvented Ottoman dhimmi status with a Kurdish twist. The latest village sign below erected recently is a good example where it does not indicate that the village is Assyrian rather a "Christian".



The Assyrians must fight so that they are recognized as Assyrians and their lands, villages and towns as Assyrian and not simply Christians.

5 Kurdish cleric incites people to burn Assyrian businesses. <https://www.atour.com/news/assyria/20111205a.html>

6 <https://www.atour.com/media/files/forums/20221006094706.pdf>

7 <https://www.assyrianpolicy.org/post/api-welcomes-congressional-letter-raising-concerns-about-theft-of-assyrian-lands-in-iraq>