

The Assyrians: A Brief History

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The Assyrians are the indigenous people of historic Assyria, an empire that began with the establishment of the first settlements in and around the city of Aššur (Ashur), northern Mesopotamia, around 5000 BC. Aššur, Nineveh, and Arbela (Arbil) constituted the heartland of a state that subsequently governed much of the Middle East. The Assyrians and the Babylonians are the heirs of Akkadians, who succeeded the Sumerian civilization.

The Assyrians are neither Arabs nor Kurds nor Turks nor Jews. The Assyrians are not to be confused with Syrians (citizens of Syria) even though some citizens of Syria are ethnically Assyrians. While the name of [Syria was directly derived from Assyria](#) by ancient Greeks and Syria was an integral part of Assyrian empire and civilization; however, most of the people of Syria today maintain a separate Arabic and Islamic identity.

The Assyrians have [maintained a continuous and distinct ethnic identity, language and culture](#) that predates the presence of the Arabs, Turks and Kurds in Mesopotamia.¹ The Assyrians obviously do not refer to themselves by using the Greek derived English “Assyrians”, but use their own language and say Ashurayeh (i.e. belonging to Ashur). It is similar to how Assyrians refer to other people like Misr (Egypt) and Misrayeh (Egyptians) and Iran (Iran) and Iranayeh (Iranians), etc. With the use of the Aramaic alphabet and the spread of Aramaic loanwords into the Akkadian language with time, the Assyrians used other words to refer to themselves, such as Athurayeh and Aturayeh, especially after converting to Christianity. The “sh” was replaced with “th” and later “t”. All these words mean the same thing.

In November 1997, a late Hittite style statue representing the Storm-god Tarhunza was found buried in a farm at the Çine village of Adana province, in modern Turkey. The god figure is standing upright on a cart pulled by two bulls. The statue is about 2.5 meters high standing on a base. There is a Phoenician and Hieroglyphic Luwian [bilingual inscription on the base](#).

The Çineköy Inscriptions became a subject of an October 2006 paper published in the fourth issue Journal of Near Eastern Studies, in which Prof. Robert Rollinger lends support to the age-old debate of the name "Syria" being derived from "Assyria". It also sheds new light on today's Assyrian identity and the relation between the terms Suroyo, Suryoyo and Asuroyo. According to Prof. Rollinger the question has finally been solved. "[Suroye or Suryoye means nothing else but Assyrians](#)".

The Assyrians have maintained also a religious continuity since the birth of Christianity.

¹ The Arabs arrived in Mesopotamia after the 7th Century Islamic conquest. The Turks (Seljuks) settled in Anatolia from Central Asia after winning the Battle of Manzikert of 1071 against the Byzantine Empire. Meanwhile, the Kurds arrived from Central Asia and settled first in the Zagros Mountains of western Iran and from there after the 1514 Battle of Chaldiran were permitted to settle in Anatolia, modern Turkey.

The Assyrians speak the Assyrian language and use the Aramaic alphabet as their writing system. However, in ancient times, the Assyrians used the cuneiform script for writing, but it was replaced in the 8th Century BC during the Neo-Assyrian Empire as the Assyrians expanded from Armenia to Arabia and from Egypt to Persia and they needed a more effective way to communicate with the various people within the empire. The Aramaic script was spreading at the time and the Assyrians decided to adopt it for writing since the alphabet was an easier manner of communication. The Assyrians made Aramaic a second language (became the lingua franca of the Near East), but the [Assyrians did not drop their original Assyrian Akkadian spoken language](#). Today's language is a mixture of Assyrian Akkadian and Aramaic.

The Assyrian Empire, being one of the base roots of Mesopotamia, encouraged urbanization, building of permanent dwellings and great cities. The Assyrians also developed agriculture and improved methods of irrigation using [systems of canals and aqueducts](#). They enhanced and encouraged trade and built safe [trade routes](#) from the capitals of Ashur and Nineveh to trading centers in Cappadocia, modern Turkey. Many excavated cuneiform records about these [Assyrian trading colonies](#) dating from the first part of the second millennium BC,² were found in a site called Kültepe.

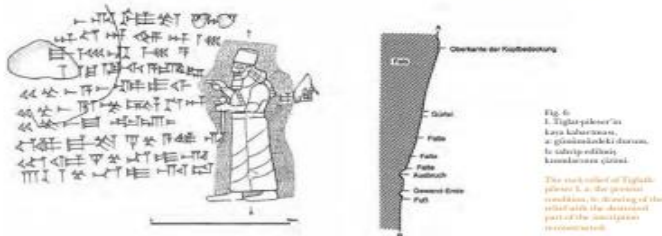


Fig. 6:
I. Tigris-palace in
Kulpe, Kultepe, in
the first millennium BC.
The rock tablet of Tigris-
palace I, as the general
reconstruction, is showing of the
tablet with the decorated
part of the inscription
reconstructed.

² ANDREAS SCHACHNER. The Anatolian Interests of the Middle Assyrian Kings. In "The Middle Assyrian Kingdom and Anatolia". Edited by Kemalettin Köroğlu – Selim Ferruh Adalı. Yapi Kredi Yayilari. pp 108-123

The Assyrians excelled in administration, documented their performance and royal achievements, depicting their culture in different art forms. They built libraries and the well-known Ashurbanipal Library is one example. The Assyrians archived their recorded deeds for posterity. They accumulated wealth and knowledge; raised armies in disciplined formation of infantry, cavalry and war-chariot troops with logistics to defend the empire that developed in time into one of the world's first civilizations, besides Sumerian, Akkadian, and Babylonian.

Although the Assyrian Empire fell in 612/609 BC; however, the Assyrian people continued to live in and around their main ancient capitals of Ashur (Aššur), Khorsabd (Dur Sharukin), Nimrod (Calah), Nineveh and Harran. This [Assyrian continuity is well documented](#) through many undisputed historical and archeological facts.

The Assyrians, as a nation, converted to Christianity during the time of the Apostles. They built monasteries, churches and religious centers in and around their ancient capitals, including in Nineveh region (Mosul), Arbela (Arbil), Arrapha or later Karka d' Bet Slokh (Kirkuk)³ and others. This Assyrian region became a center of Christianity, which was known as Adiabene (Hidyab). Adiabene was a petty kingdom and a vassal state of the Parthian Empire (247 BC–AD 224) in northern Mesopotamia with its capital Arbela. In the 1st century AD its royal family and queen Helena embraced Judaism. Ammianus Marcellinus was a fourth-century Roman soldier and historian. In book 23 of his Res Gestae (Achievements), Marcellinus explains that Adiabene was "*called Assyria in ancient times, but by long custom changed to this name Adiabene.*"

Despite the subsequent Islamic conquest of the region in the seventh century, the church of the Assyrians flourished and its adherents numbered as much as 80 million. The church flourished in Assyria and [spread to all regions of Arabia](#), including Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates. The zeal of the Assyrian missionary was unmatched and led to the first Christian missions to China, Japan, and the Philippines. The Church of the East [stele in Xian, China](#), bears testament to a thriving Church of the East (known mistakenly as Nestorian) as early as in the seventh century. However, the Church of the Assyrian people was divided in the 4th Century into two branches, the Syrian Orthodox Church (Jacobite) and the Church of the East (Nestorian). Further divisions within these Assyrian Churches led to the establishment of the Chaldean Church (Uniate Catholic) in 1681 in DiyarBekir, Turkey and later in 1830 in Alqosh, northern Iraq, and the Syrian Catholic Church. With the arrival of Western Protestant missionaries into northern Mesopotamia since the 19th century, several smaller congregations of Assyrian Protestants arose as well.

The members of the Church of the East and Syrian Orthodox Church remained active in the Islamic world and were advanced in many aspects of science and knowledge. They were preferred in the courts of the Umayyad and Abbasid Islamic Caliphs. The Nestorian and Jacobite Assyrians did most of the [translations of the Greek science into Arabic](#) and from Arabic to Assyrian (Syriac) and later as Europe went into the Dark Ages, it was these efforts that were translated back to Greek, thus saving the world knowledge.⁴

³ Simo Parpola and Michael Porter. The Helsinki Atlas of the Near East in the Neo-Assyrian Period. 2001.

⁴ O'Leary, De Lacy. How Greek Science Passed to the Arabs. Ares Publishers, Inc. 1949.

With the invasion and destruction of both Tamerlane and the Mongols, many Assyrians sought refuge in the mountainous regions of northern Mesopotamia (northern Iraq and southeast Turkey regions). Most Assyrians remained isolated until the European missionaries initiated their contacts with the Assyrians in the early 19th Century. Others who opted to remain, continued to live a quiet, pious life in and around their ancestral lands until the massacres of the 19th Century and the outbreak of WWI forced further changes.

The European and American missionaries played a questionable role in the massacres that were inflicted not only on the Assyrians (1843-1847),⁵ but also Yezidis (1832 and 1844) and Assyrians and Armenians (1894 & 1895) by Kurdish leader Bedr Khan Beg and Nurallah Beg. Some 30,000 to 50,000 Assyrians were murdered during these massacres and many women, and young boys were abducted and lost to Kurdification.

The tragedy of the Assyrians continued. However, we must understand that prior to the Assyrian Genocide which occurred before, during and after World War I (1914-1918), major Assyrian communities still inhabited the areas of Harran, Edessa, Tur 'Abdin, and Hakkari in southeastern Turkey, Jazira region in northeastern Syria, Urmia in northwestern Iran, and Mosul in northern Iraq as they had for thousands of years.⁶

Although the holy war against the Armenians is perhaps better known, over three-fourths, or around 750,000 Assyrians, were also killed between 1843-1933 during these massacres and genocide. The continuous conflicts in the region and the Assyrian Genocide led yet again to the decimation and dispersal of the Assyrian people and the loss of the majority of their lands and villages. The segment of the Assyrians who survived the genocide in the Province of Van were [driven out of their lands](#) toward Mosul, which was another Ottoman province⁷ via the Urmia plains of Iran where large Assyrian populations already lived. This segment of the Assyrian people from Hakkari (Van Province) were kept in the Baquba Refugee Camp northeast of Baghdad from 1918-1920 before they were moved to the Mindan Camp near Mosul in 1920.⁸ Another segment of the Assyrian people who lived in the DiyarBekir Province, were driven towards the Aleppo Province (in modern Syria). Very few Assyrians remained in the Assyrian Tur 'Abdin's region of Mardin and Midyat as Kurds seized most of their lands and homes. We

⁵ The Hakkari Massacres: Ethnic Cleansing by Turkey (1924-1925). Racho Donef. Tatavla Publishing. 2014.

⁶ a) Let Them Not Return: Sayfo-- The Genocide against the Assyrian, Syriac and Chaldean Christians in the Ottoman Empire. David Gaunt, Naures Atto and Soner Barthoma. Berghahn Books. 2017.

b) The Assyrian Question. Joseph Yacoub. Published in 1986. Chicago: Alpha Graphic, 1993. Reprint.

c) The British Betrayal of the Assyrians. Yusuf Malek. New Jersey: The Kimball Press, 1935.

d) The Flickering Light of Asia: "Assyrian Nation and Church". Joel E. Werda. Published in 1924. Reprint. Chicago: Assyrian language and Culture Classes Incorporated, 1990.

e) The Tragedy of the Assyrians. R.S. Stafford. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1935.

f) The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1915-1916. James Bryce and Arnold Toynbee. Edited by Ara Sarafian. The Gomidas Institute, 2000.

g) Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim-Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia During World War I. David Gaunt. 2006. New Jersey.

⁷ Modern Iraq was established in 1921. During the Ottoman Empire rule, the region of modern Iraq consisted of three Ottoman provinces: Basra, Baghdad and Mosul.

⁸ Brig-Gen. H. H. Austin. The Baqubah Refugee Camp. The faith Press. 1920.

must clarify that during the 1914-1918 genocide, the countries known today as Turkey, Iraq or Syria did not exist yet. All the regions of these modern countries were parts of Ottoman Empire.

The Assyrian Genocide of 1914-1923 was the first major turning point of the Assyrians' modern history, because it not only decimated the population in a single event, but also led to the dispersal of the surviving community into several small, weak, and destitute communities.

The Assyrian national quest was born prior to WWI as the Assyrians were forced to enter the war because on Nov 1914 the Ottoman's Sheikh-ul-Islam declared the Islamic Holy War on the Christians on behalf of the Ottoman Empire. On the other hand, the Allies gave the Assyrians promises for a future independent home. The Assyrians' future of a home was deliberated in the League of Nations, but undermined and swayed by Great Britain in 1919/1920, and later when they gave in to the Young Turks leaders in 1923 at the expense of the earlier promises for national homes for the non-Turks of the empire. The stands of Great Britain during this time changed the whole shape of western modern Turkey (Asia Minor) and Constantinople (modern Istanbul), known historically as Thrace, as the British sided with Mustafa Kemal and the new Turkish nationalists against the Greeks. The British influence turned the Assyrian case into a less-important issue through side treaties between Great Britain, Iraq and Turkey, sidestepping the question of the Mosul Province⁹ and future borders dispute between Turkey and Iraq in the 1920s. In the end, the [British and the French dropped the Assyrian Question](#) and their settlement altogether by supporting the admission of Iraq into the League of Nations in 1932 and considering the Assyrian case an internal Iraqi issue.

The 1920 Treaty of Sèvres was signed between the Allies of World War I and the Ottoman Empire. Articles to consider homelands for the various non-Turkish populations of the Empire were secured. However, the Ottoman sultan was soon deposed and Turkish nationalist Mustafa Kemal and the Young Turks came to power and rejected the treaty. A new Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 was signed, which recognized the boundaries of the modern state of Turkey and the Allies dropped their demands of autonomy for the Turkish minorities and/or indigenous people such as Greeks, Assyrians and other smaller tribes and also for the Kurds. The Sunni Kurds of the Zagros Mountains, western Iran, had sided with the Sunni Ottoman Sultan Selim I against the Shia Safavid Persians. The Ottomans won the final 1514 Battle of Chaldiran. The [Sultan gave the Sunni Kurds permission](#) to become citizens of the empire and settle in eastern parts of it as he planned to have a buffer zone between the Sunni Ottoman Turks and Shia Persians. With time, the Kurds expanded their rule all over the region through many campaigns of massacre and later WWI.

The Assyrian question was addressed in postwar deliberations at the League of Nations. However, with the termination of the British Mandate over Iraq in 1932, the unresolved status of the Assyrians was relinquished to the newly formed Iraqi government with promises of certain minority guarantees specifically concerning freedom of religious, cultural, and linguistic expression. Many of the Iraqi military and national leaders at the time, such as Yasin al-Hashimi,

⁹ Turkish Government still claims some rights to the Mosul Province. They claim that in 1918 when the Armistice was signed, Mosul was still under the Ottoman Army rule and that the British Army was stationed at Shirqat on the Mosul Province southern borders. The British decided to continue marching north despite the signing of the Armistice.

[were graduates of War College in Istanbul or served in the Ottoman army](#). The legacy of the Ottoman military education led to a system of networking and politicisation that would [play a large role in Iraqi and Arab politics](#) in later years. Some of the Ottoman-trained officers carried their negative sentiments against the Assyrians from early days of WWI genocide. The Simele massacre was the first massacres committed by the Iraqi government (and certain members of the Kurdish tribes) during its systematic genocide of non-Arabs, including the Assyrians of Northern Iraq in August 1933. The term is used to describe not only the massacre of Simele, but also the killing spree that continued among 63 Assyrian villages in the Dohuk and Mosul districts that led to the deaths of an estimated 3,000 innocent Assyrians. Hundreds of Assyrian villages were looted. [Kurdish General Bekir Sidqi who led the Iraqi Army](#), invited Kurdish tribes to participate in the looting and massacre. Today, most of these villages continue to be illegally occupied by Arabs and Kurds.

The 1933 Simele massacre was the second major turning point in the Assyrian national aspirations. The massacre of more than 3,000 innocent Assyrians,¹⁰ including children and elderly and parading the Assyrian women naked in the streets in Simele, northern Iraq has a major impact on the Assyrian psyche. The massacre transformed the Assyrian national cause from a liberation movement or struggle for the return of historic lands to merely recognizing the Assyrian national identity or seeking to acquire cultural rights in a volatile environment between more [powerful Islamic and nationalist movements](#) (Turkish, Arab, Kurdish). In many periods from 1933 to the 1960s the Assyrians lived a passive life. Even today, the Iraqi Federal and Kurdish Regional governments refuse to recognize the Simele Massacre of 1933 despite the fact that Arab and Kurdish officials have continuously referred to it in their verbal communications.

With the arrival of the Ba'ath regime to power in Syria and Iraq (1963 & 1968), the Iraqi political and national course shifted. The Ba'ath regime needed some time of relative peace to secure their grip on power. In March 1970, an understanding between the Ba'ath regime and the Kurds led to the signing of a historic peace agreement where the Kurds were granted several privileges, including self-rule. The Assyrians were granted cultural rights, but they were referred to through their denominational name (Athouriyeen) and not national name (Ashouriyeen).

However, in 1975, Iraq and Iran signed the Algiers Agreement in which the Shah of Iran promised to end his support for the Kurdish revolt. The Kurdish national movement collapsed and many of its leaders fled Iraq. Here, the policy of Arabization became very explicit and publicly noticeable when, for example, in the 1970s, the authorities in Iraq issued directions preventing Assyrian parents from giving their new-born Assyrian names. Many Assyrian schools in Baghdad, Mosul and Kirkuk were nationalized. Assyrians were also harassed during the Iraq census. They were forced to register either as Arabs or Kurds. Many Assyrians were taken to custody for refusing to follow those directions. Assyrian singers and artists were imprisoned for singing Assyrian national songs or citing nationalistic poetry.

It seems that foreign plans had their own vision for the region. Many argue that the Shah of Iran refused to get his country involved in a war with Iraq. In 1979, a very surprising turn of events took place as the Shah of Iran was deposed, forced to leave Iran. The Ayatollah Khomeini was brought from France to lead the new Islamic Republic of Iran. Khomeini lived in the Shia city of

¹⁰ Other records estimate the figures to be almost 6,000 Assyrians murdered.

al-Najaf, Iraq during some period of his exile before making France his home. Saddam Hussein was not kind to Khomeini while the Iranian cleric was a guest in al-Najaf. The new Iranian leader did not forget Saddam's treatment. Soon, the Iraqi people had to go through harsher times as the 1980 Iraq-Iran war that lasted eight agonizing years ensued. Many Assyrians who were drafted in the Iraqi army were killed, with a large percentage being shot in the back by fellow Iraqi or Iranian Islamist soldiers.

With the Iraq-Iran war, the Kurds restarted their armed rebellion in northern Iraq. They received help from Iran again. In fact, the Kurds helped the Iranian Army to enter the village of Halabja and capture it. The Kurds have always claimed that the Iraqi Army poisoned Kurds in Halabja in 1988 during the Anfal Campaign; however, the facts are that it was the [Iranian Army that poisoned the Kurds](#) and not the Iraqi Army.

As the Iraq-Iran war ended in 1988, Saddam Hussein turned his attention to the Kurds who betrayed Iraq and helped the Iranians. The US used the Halabja narrative to initiate the Gulf War against Iraq where two no-fly zones in the northern and southern Iraq were drawn and the people living beyond those two lines were now protected by the International community. The first 105 seats Kurdish parliament was set in northern Iraq in 1992. Assyrians were assigned five seats, while the two Kurdish main parties: Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), split the remaining 100 seats 50/50. The KDP stole in broad day light one seat via a Assyrian who is a member of the KDP.

In May 1994, troubles erupted in the Kurdish region as fighting broke out between the two factions of the KDP and PUK. The initial clashes left around 300 people dead and over the next year, around 2,000 people were killed on both sides. There was a cease-fire in 1996 that did not last long. [Masoud Barzani \(KDP\) requested the help of Saddam Hussein](#) in order to push Jalal Talabani (PUK) out from Arbil. The forces of Saddam Hussein and Barzani did finally oust the Talabani out from Arbil where Barzani took control of the city. All these activities reflected negatively on the Assyrians who were stuck in between.

On October 7, 2002, in Cincinnati, [President Bush outlined his objectives for Iraq](#). The president said, quote: *"America is a friend to the people of Iraq. Our demands are directed only at the regime that enslaves them and threatens us. When these demands are met, the first and greatest benefit will come to Iraqi men, women and children. The oppression of Kurds, Assyrians, Turkomans, Shi'a, Sunnis and others will be lifted. The long captivity of Iraq will end, and an era of new hope will begin."*

However, the president did not keep his promise. The Assyrians soon realized the hope in the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) was just another dream and that they had to wait and see how they would be represented in the anticipated 2005 Constitution.

The following years showed that the only two Iraqi groups that benefitted from the 2003 US invasion were the Shia Arabs and the Kurds. From 2004 to 2011, many Assyrians were killed in the chaos that befell upon Iraq where the smaller and weaker unprotected groups suffered the most. This author documented all the [acts of murder, assassination and church bombings](#) on daily basis. A file was saved of the reported incidences.

For the Kurds, the 2003 US invasion was a green light to actualize the old “scheme of local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish areas lying east of the Euphrates, south of the southern boundary of Armenia as it may be hereafter determined, and north of the frontier of Turkey with Syria and Mesopotamia” as decided in Section III, Article 62 of the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres. The scheme had also called for “full safeguards for the protection of the Assyro-Chaldeans [Assyrians] and other racial or religious minorities within these areas...” Since neither Turkey, nor the Allied Powers, reiterated their commitment to a Kurdish or Assyrian autonomous region afterward (see the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne), the Kurdish people remained steadfast in the implementation of that scheme. The Assyrian nationalist movement, which emerged from the ashes of WWI genocide, has since pursued the “protection of the Assyro-Chaldeans” in the shape of a self-governing area within the Mosul Province (later Nineveh province), an area that includes the Nineveh Plain in Iraq.

Northern Iraq, southeast Turkey, northwest Iran and northeast Syria are the Assyrians’ ancestral lands. Most of these regions have slowly become dominated by the Kurds since the 1514 Battle of Chaldiran.¹¹ In northern Iraq, the 2003 invasion and the removal of the Ba’athist regime in Baghdad was an opportunity for the establishment of a new independent nation-state built upon democratic principles and reverence toward the rights of every Kurdish and non-Kurdish citizen. To date, nothing is further from the truth. For the Assyrians and Yezidis alike, anguish, fear, and hopelessness have engulfed the streets in northern Iraq. Even the Turkomans (remnants of the Ottoman Turks), who are supported by Ankara, cannot escape the wrath of the KRG. In Iraq’s central region, the Mandaeans faced continuous persecution. The aspirations of the freedom-loving people of Iraq are crushed as the overcrowded prisons in Duhok, Arbil (Erbil), and Sulaymaniyah receive more political prisoners, human rights advocates, and journalists every day.

The Iranian-born Masoud Barzani orchestrated three decades of internal strife within the Assyrian religious and political factions to weaken their national claims in northern Iraq. The illegal seizure of the Assyrian lands, the abduction and assassination of individuals, the continuous interference in the Assyrians’ internal affairs were but a few of the effective KRG activities against the Assyrians in the Kurdish region of Iraq. Since the Kurdish region is supported by several powerful regional and western governments, the KRG has continued to escape reprimand for its crimes and the persecution of the Assyrians, Yezidis (Ezidis), and other smaller non-Kurdish groups in the region. The most effective arrangement was the substitution of the Assyrian political parties with the Assyrian Christian faith leaders. KRG infiltrated the Assyrian churches and [built new places of worship to gain the trust](#) and cooperation of the Assyrian patriarchs and the local bishops. The Assyrian religious and political leaders, sympathetic toward the KRG are pushed forward in the media to make statements in praise of the KRG and on behalf of their oppressed people.

¹¹ Kurdish nationalists claim that this region is Kurdistan. They went further by claiming that the WWI Allies divided this “Kurdistan” into north, south, east and west Kurdistans. This claim contradicts every historical fact of the region. We know that there has never been a politically recognized country under the name of Kurdistan. We also know that Kurdistan has always been a virtual region, superimposed on the Middle East maps. If so, how could the Allies have divided a country that never existed politically into four parts?

When the "state" lost control over the Assyrian areas in these two countries (Iraq 1991, Syria 2012), the Kurdish forces (PKK and/or its offshoots in Syria and the Kurdish Peshmerga in Iraq) took control, and the Assyrian situation worsened even more, because these parties do not have any international restrictions since they are militias. Under the rule of the US-backed militias in both countries, Assyrian politicians and activists were targeted. In northern Iraq, [many Assyrian civilians and politicians were assassinated](#) by Kurdish partisans, most notably the martyr Francis Shabo, who was a member of the Kurdish parliament and objected to the Barzani government's silence on the occupation of Assyrian lands by influential Kurdish tribal leaders. In Syria, many Assyrians were assassinated by snipers, including George Jindu the leader of the Assyrian Khabur Guard Council (an Assyrian militia fighting alongside the Kurds), simply because one of his militia's leaders refused to send his fighters to distant fronts to fight against the Arabs. In addition, Elias Nasser was shot five times but survived the assassination attempt.

These practices were aimed at terrorizing the Assyrians and making them either submit or leave. Even after expelling ISIS from Syria, the Assyrians did not agree to return to their 35 empty Khabur region villages, because they did not trust the Kurdish militias or authorities. As for the Kurds of Iraq, they occupy thousands of acres of Assyrian lands and refuse to vacate them despite many court decisions. The KRG does not have real power over the large and powerful Kurdish tribal and religious leaders. On the other hand, there is no Assyrian reaction as required for several reasons, the most important of which is the reality imposed on the Assyrian parties in Iraq and Syria, and the lack of international interest in the Assyrians' affairs at the moment, despite the repeated complaints by the diaspora Assyrian organizations.

The attacks by ISIS in 2014 and the destruction of the Assyrian towns and villages in the Nineveh Plain and Khabur region in Syria were not coincidental. We all know that the longer people remain displaced and/or refugees, the less are the chances for their return. It is for this reason that the [Kurdish authorities delayed all the efforts to rebuild the Nineveh Plain](#) in an attempt to discourage the Assyrians from returning. The tragedy of the Assyrians in Iraq saw a new meaning of the word *persecution* between 2014 and 2017 with the emergence of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or *Daesh* in Arabic. Assyrians around the world shed tears as they watched videos of the destruction of the ancient Assyrian capital of Nimrod (Assyrian Kalhu or biblical Calah), Nineveh's ancient wall and its historic gates, and the Assyrian artifacts in Mosul Museum. The destruction of Assyrian archeological sites was also planned in order to change the Assyrian archaeological heritage of the Nineveh Province.

In 2016, Kissinger said that the biggest challenge facing the Middle East is the "potential domination of the region by an Iran that is both imperial and jihadist." He further wrote in August 2017 that if the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and its Shiite allies were allowed to fill the territorial vacuum left by a militarily defeated ISIL, the region would be left with a land corridor extending from Iran to the Levant "which could mark the emergence of an Iranian radical empire."¹² The spread of the Iranian militias in certain Assyrian towns in the Nineveh Plain after the defeat of ISIS did occur. This is true, but the [Kurds also continue to occupy regions within the Nineveh Plain](#) even when this region is part of the Nineveh Governorate and outside of the federal Kurdish region.

¹² Shehab Khan, "Henry Kissinger warns destroying Isis could lead to 'Iranian radical empire,'" *The Independent*, August 7, 2017, Accessed November 19, 2018.

Democracy is not words printed on a piece of a document to silence or satisfy people or the international community. Coexistence and transparency should be reflected in the country or region's flags, in the national anthems, in the treatment of the smaller groups, how the law is applied on them, and how they are justly treated in general. In a free and democratic society, all groups are reflected equally in the constitution of the land. There must not be a main group versus other secondary groups. If one group's name is mentioned, then all groups must be mentioned and treated as equals. Alda Benyamin emphasized that we need to remind ourselves that although it is the majority that rules in a democracy, the voices of the minority cannot be ignored.¹³

The Preamble of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution mentions the ethnic Arabs, Kurds, and Turkomans but fails to mention the other ethnic groups in Iraq. It refers to the suffering and atrocities committed against certain Arab groups, Kurds, and Turkomans but ignores the 1933 Simele Massacre where more than three thousand unarmed Assyrians, mostly women, children, and the elderly, were murdered by the Iraqi Army under the command of the Kurdish general Bekir Sidqi. It also fails to mention the hundreds of [Assyrian Catholics \(Chaldeans\)](#) that were murdered in Soriya in 1969 and later forced to evacuate their homes and lands.¹⁴

Article 125 of the said constitution states: *“This Constitution shall guarantee the administrative, political, cultural, and educational rights of the various nationalities, such as Turkomen [Turkomans], Chaldeans, Assyrians, and all other constituents, and this shall be regulated by law.”*¹⁵ However, it has been almost 20 years since these words were put on paper, yet we have seen nothing translated on the ground.

The Iraqi Civil Law of 1951 that is still active today, gives the authorities the permission to force Christian families formally registered as Muslim but privately practicing Christianity or another non-Islamic faith to either register their children as Muslims, or to have the children remain undocumented by federal authorities, thereby denying them the ability to legally convert from Islam. Also, personal status laws and regulations prohibit the conversion of Muslims to other religions, and they require the administrative designation of children as Muslims if either parent converts to Islam or if one parent is considered Muslim, even if the child is conceived by rape. Civil status law allows women identified in their official documents as non-Muslims to marry Muslim men, but it [prohibits Muslim women from marrying non-Muslims](#). Muslim men may marry non-Muslim women.

Meanwhile, in the 2008 Interim Constitution of the Kurdish federal region (still an interim at the time of writing this paper), article 2 clearly shows that they plan to usurp the Assyrian towns and villages that have been historically part of the Nineveh Governorate were then made official. Article 2 stated: *“Iraqi Kurdistan is a geographical and historical entity that consists of Duhok Governorate with its current administrative border, and the governorates of Kirkuk, Sulaymaniyah, and Arbil; and the districts of Aqra, Shekhan, Sinjar, Telkaif and Qaraqosh [Hamdaniya] and the sub-districts of Zumar, Ba'sheeqa and Aski Kalak of Nineveh*

¹³ Alda Benyamin, “New Iraq constitution must protect Christians,” *Toronto Star*, August 23, 2005, A17.

¹⁴ Both Simele and Soriya are Assyrian towns in northern Iraq.

¹⁵ See Iraqi Constitution.

Governorate; and Khanaqin and Mandali districts of Diyala Governorate; with their administrative border before 1968.”

Article 29 guarantees legal rights for ethnic and religious groups in the region and the freedom to refer to their local places through their own languages. The fact is that the Kurdish authorities force Assyrians to use the Kurdish language on their businesses and imposes Kurdish names on historic names of Assyrian towns and villages and [corrupt the history of the Assyrian](#) archeological sites in Arbil and Dohuk.

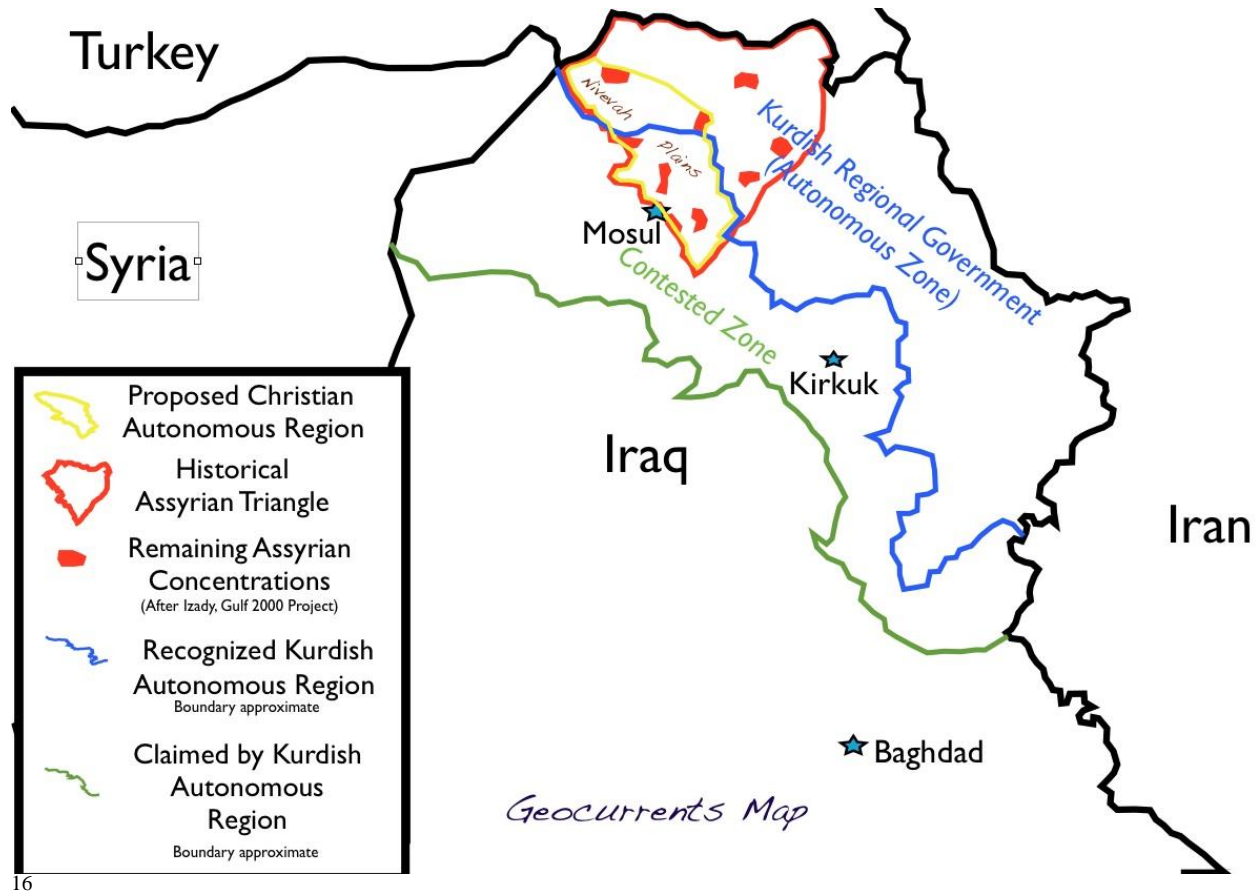
Article 31 guarantees equality for the ethnic and religious groups within the Kurdish region; however, that is never exercised on the ground. The Assyrians are not treated equally in business, for example. In many cases, when an Assyrian plan to establish a business, his permit is approved after much runaround and only when a Kurd owns a percentage of it.

Article 35 was promising, but as the subsequent actions by the KRG would prove, such an article meant nothing in reality. Ethnic rights were not guaranteed and administrative rights were undermined. Furthermore, there never were specific laws in the future to regulate such rights. It states: *“This constitution guarantees the ethnic, cultural and administrative rights of the Turkomans, Arabs, Chaldeans and Syriacs and Assyrians, Armenians, including self-rule, wherever they constitute a majority and that to be regulated by a law.”*

The safety of Israel and the survival of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) are currently behind all major Middle East policies of the western “Christian” states. Therefore, the animus of the United States and Europe is not directed at assisting the Assyrians to establish a Christian region in the Middle East. The reason is obvious. Israel and the KRG cannot afford a Christian state or enclave in the Middle East that may compete for the financial and moral resources of the West, drawing the focus of over a billion Christians around the world away from Israel and the Kurds and toward the greater Nineveh. This would also cause friction between the United States and the Muslim world represented by the oil-producing Arab Gulf countries, as well as Turkey, and Pakistan.

The Assyrian community needs to highlight and communicate their unique culture, rooted history, and to stress rights to their historic and ancestral lands on a global level. The doors were opened to effectively do so after the 2007 United Nations Declaration for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). The United Nations Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) provides a platform for indigenous perspectives to be heard worldwide. Assyrians attended all UNPFII sessions from 2012 through 2019 represented by delegations from the Assyrian Aid Society (AAS) and the Assyrian Universal Alliance (AUA); they met with representatives of other indigenous peoples, civil society organizations, as well as representatives of some participating countries. The annual meetings were disrupted after 2019 because of COVID.

Human rights groups, UN institutions and friendly nations must [assist the Assyrians in order to achieve this indigenous status](#), because that is the only way to protect this ancient and resilient people.



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By Fred Aprim, author of:

1. Assyrians: The Continuous Saga
2. Assyrians: From Bedr Khan to Saddam Hussein
3. The Betrayal of the Powerless: Assyrians After the 2003 US Invasion of Iraq

¹⁶ Map courtesy of <https://www.geocurrents.info/blog/2010/11/05/the-complex-relations-between-kurds-and-christians-in-northern-iraq/>