

The State of Arizona Congress and the Assyrian Genocide Resolution

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On Mar 15, 2023, HCR 2044, a concurrent resolution, recognizing the Assyrian Genocide, was introduced in the Fifty-sixth Legislature - First Regular Session (2023) of the State of Arizona, House of Representatives by the Speaker of the House Ben Toma.¹ I have to highlight four important points:

1. In article 1 (c) the resolution calls on the Government of Turkey to acknowledge the genocide. In article 2, Greeks, Armenians and Assyrians are mentioned as victims of the genocide committed by the Ottoman Empire between 1914 and 1923.

The genocide against the Christians did not stop with the fall of the Ottoman Empire in 1923. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish republic, continued the policy of Christian extermination and expulsion through 1924.² Therefore, the Republic of Turkey, the successor of the Ottoman Empire, must be implicated as perpetrator of genocide as well.

2. The Kurds and other groups were not mentioned as perpetrators of WWI Assyrian genocide in the introduced resolution. Only the Ottoman Empire, as a state, was implicated.

Numerous books, letters and other accounts written by both Assyrian and foreign historians, missionaries, diplomats, and eyewitnesses, attest to the fact that several groups, but particularly Kurds and Turks, were the main perpetrators of WWI Assyrian genocide. Highlighting this fact does not suggest that all Kurds or Turks are oppressive or criminals. The Assyrians have lived side by side with the Kurds, Turks, Arabs, Persians, Azeris and other Muslim neighboring groups. Some of these neighbors were peaceful and God fearing people. However, considering the fact that the Kurds have played a large role in committing the Assyrian genocide, the introduced text comes short from addressing the issue accurately and thoroughly by omitting the Kurds as perpetrators of Genocide.

It is agreed that atrocities crimes, particularly genocide and crimes against humanity, are not spontaneous acts. Instead, they develop as a process over time.³ The acts of genocide by Kurds against the Assyrians did not occur at a single incident around some abnormal circumstances. These acts are documented from early 1840s, 1890s, 1914-1918, 1933, and in more recent years. These acts of genocide were driven by many reasons, including religion, race and the control of land. Since the mid 19th Century, the Kurds have murdered more Assyrians, abducted more Assyrian girls, illegally stole more Assyrian lands compared with what other groups have committed against the indigenous Assyrians. Many argue, and rightfully so, that the genocide has not stopped, a soft genocide continues even today.⁴

We cannot tell half-truths regarding the Assyrian genocide and history. We cannot mislead our people and the world simply because certain church leaders and politicians have established good relations with the Kurdish leadership. During the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) board on March 30, 1967, Martin Luther King said, "... The problems of racial injustice and economic injustice cannot be solved without a radical redistribution of political and economic power". Handing few selected Assyrians good positions in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) does not reflect racial

1 <https://www.azleg.gov/legtext/56leg/1R/bills/HCR2044P.pdf>

2 <https://pappaspost.com/when-turkey-destroyed-its-christians/>

3 <https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/prevention.shtml>

4 <https://www.xlibris.com/en/bookstore/bookdetails/816512-the-betrayal-of-the-powerless>

or social justice. Many Kurdish leaders mislead the West by having few puppet Assyrians (and Turkomans and Yezidis) sugarcoat or cover-up the Kurdish leaders oppressive policies against non-Kurds within the Kurdish controlled region in northern Iraq. Furthermore, the West, and the US in particular, must stop overlooking the oppressive policies and actions by the Kurds against the indigenous Assyrians simply because the Kurdish leadership has succeeded to spread the misleading narrative of “protecting the Christians”. What makes the Assyrians unique is their ethnicity and not religion. Michael Rubin states, “The fact that Congress gives the Kurdistan Regional Government a free pass on religious freedom violations only encourages Masrour [Barzani] to double down on discrimination”.⁵

It is interesting to mention that Patriarch Mar Awa Royel as well did not mention the Kurds as perpetrators of genocide during his speech at the genocide resolution event organized by the Assyro-Chaldean Association of France last month.

3. The resolution states, quote: “Whereas, the most notable victim of this tragic period was the ethno-martyr and Catholicos Patriarch Mar Benyamin Shimun XXI, the leader of the Assyrian Nation and Church;”, unquote.

Martyred Mar Benyamin Shimun, the Patriarch of the then Church of the East, was the new Assyrian symbol of nobility and the personification of bravery and devotion. He sacrificed his own brother in exchange for the freedom of his people and he was a principle player in war and peace during WWI. With the temporal power in hand, he was the secular and religious leader of his congregation and beyond. Having said that, the use of “THE leader” vs “A leader” belongs to another debate. The Assyrian genocide could not be introduced through the murder of any single church leader, because it was the genocide of the Assyrian nation that had lost two-third of its population and most of its historic homelands. Why? Because there were other church leaders who were murdered by the Turks and/or Kurds, including, only for example, Mar Toma Audo, the Assyrian archbishop of the Chaldean Catholic Church in Urmia, Iran and Mar Addai Scher, the Archbishop of Siirt (in modern Turkey) of the Chaldean Catholic Church were murdered too during WWI, in 1918 and 1915 respectively.

4. We should strive to be inclusive instead of exclusive. While the church separates the Assyrians into denominations, civic and national activities should seek to unite the Assyrians. The church is an institution that plays an important part in Assyrian society, but the Assyrians should not seek the church involvement in all aspects of life. There are many honorable Assyrians with high moral standards who are qualified to steer and manage civic, cultural, national and all non-church related activities independent from the church. Arthur Clarke, British science fiction writer, inventor, and futurist wrote: “One of the great tragedies of mankind is that morality has been hijacked by religion. So now people assume that religion and morality have a necessary connection. But the basis of morality is really very simple and doesn't require religion at all.”

Taking these thoughts into consideration, I applaud such projects. The introduction of this genocide resolution is the fruit of a long process that started in 2019 in Arizona by Seyfo Center and other Assyrian activists.⁶ However, the 2019 detailed draft resolution that implicated both Kurds and Turks was not adopted by certain congressional leaders. Furthermore, this resolution comes only few weeks after the passing of the Assyrian genocide resolution in the French Senate⁷. These activities are good steps in the Assyrians' efforts for a global recognition of the Assyrian genocide of WWI.

5 <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/stop-giving-iraqi-kurds-a-free-pass-on-religious-freedom>

6 I have a copy of that draft resolution for those interested to read it.

7 <https://www.fredaprim.com/pdfs/2023/Genocide%20Recognition%20by%20French%20Senate%20with%20hyperlinks.pdf>