

2018 Human Rights Report

Struggling to Breathe: the Systematic Repression of Assyrians

**ASSYRIAN
CONFEDERATION
OF EUROPE**



ABOUT ASSYRIANS

An estimated 3.5 million people globally comprise a distinct, indigenous ethnic group. Tracing their heritage to ancient Assyria, Assyrians speak an ancient language called Assyrian (sometimes referred to as Syriac, Aramaic, or Neo-Aramaic).

The contiguous territory that forms the traditional Assyrian homeland includes parts of southern and south-eastern Turkey, north-western Iran, northern Iraq, and north-eastern Syria. This land has been known as Assyria for at least four thousand years. The Assyrian population in Iraq, estimated at approximately 200,000, constitutes the largest remaining concentration of the ethnic group in the Middle East. The majority of these reside in their ancestral homelands in the Nineveh Plain and within the so-called Kurdish Region of Iraq.

Assyrians are predominantly Christian. Some ethnic Assyrians self-identify as Chaldeans or Syriacs, depending on church denomination. Assyrians have founded five Eastern Churches at different points during their long history: the Ancient Church of the East, the Assyrian Church of the East, the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Syriac Catholic Church, and the Syriac Orthodox Church. Many of these churches, as well as their various denominations, have a Patriarch at their head; this role functions, to various degrees, in a similar way to the role of the Pope in Roman Catholicism. There are at least seven different Patriarchs who represent religious Assyrian communities – however, these individuals frequently experience oppression from governmental institutions in their native countries, and consequentially often face pressure that prevents them from disclosing accurate information on the subject of human rights. The majority of Assyrians who remain in Iraq today belong to the Chaldean and Syriac churches.

Assyrians are one of the most consistently persecuted communities in Iraq and the wider Middle East.



ABOUT THE ASSYRIAN CONFEDERATION OF EUROPE

Founded in April 2016, the Assyrian Confederation of Europe works to represent, connect, and strengthen one of Europe's largest, most vibrant, and best-integrated communities. We serve as a European umbrella organisation for Assyrian national federations and organisations in Europe, and support efforts in Assyria for democracy and equal rights.

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Assyrian Confederation of Europe Human Rights Report 2018

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NINEVEH PLAIN

The Nineveh Plain is the only region in Iraq where the largest segment of the inhabitants are Assyrians. The area is considered the original Assyrian heartland.



“ On January 21, 2014, in a landmark moment for Assyrians and other minorities in the Nineveh Plain, the Iraqi Council of Ministers voted for the creation of three new governorates in Iraq, among them a Nineveh Plain Governorate. This new governorate would ostensibly serve as a safe haven for minorities, including Assyrians, while remaining part of Iraq and under the authority of the Central Government.

★ BAGHDAD

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Overview of Report

This report relies on readily-available information. It therefore makes use of relevant local journalism when possible. Unfortunately, abuses against Assyrians often go unreported even in local news. This report is therefore not intended as an exhaustive list of all human rights concerns for Assyrians, but instead seeks to highlight prevalent and well-documented events.

This report uses a variety of terms for the northern region of Iraq currently administrated by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), including "so-called Iraqi Kurdistan" and "the so-called Kurdish Region of Iraq." It should be noted that these signifiers refer to the geographic area for ease of communication, and indeed ACE does not dispute the right of the Kurdish people to exercise self-determination in their homeland. However, it is the position of ACE that certain areas of so-called Iraqi Kurdistan should *not* fall under Kurdish authority because they are the homeland of other minorities, most notably the Nineveh Plains region. ACE believes that the Nineveh Plains should be administered by Assyrians directly in accordance with these same principles of self-determination.

A number of the issues discussed in this report affect many groups and are not exclusive to Assyrians. Assyrians are often targeted alongside other groups with a Christian identity, for example. It is certainly true that other minorities experience hardship and are deserving of attention, protection, and respect.

Nevertheless, the focus of this report is to highlight the abuse experienced by Assyrians, who, unlike many other repressed minority groups, currently have no homeland free from such conditions.

List of Stakeholders*

Assyrian Groups

Iraq

- Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM): the largest genuine and “organic” Assyrian political party in Iraq.
- Abnaa al-Nahrain: a genuine and “organic” Assyrian political party in Iraq.
- Assyrian Patriotic Party: a genuine and “organic” Assyrian political party in Iraq.
- Nineveh Plains Protection Unit (NPU): an Iraqi-state sponsored Assyrian militia force that was founded to combat Daesh in the Nineveh Plains region.

Kurdish Groups

Iraq

- Kurdish Regional Government (KRG): the official ruling body of the autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq.
- Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP): A nationalist Kurdish party in so-called Iraqi Kurdistan, led by the Barzani tribal family since 1946.
- Asayish: The KRG’s political police and intelligence services.
- Peshmerga: The KRG’s party-political militia.
- Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council: An ostensibly Assyrian political party that is in fact controlled by the KDP and therefore serves as a KDP proxy party.
- Chaldean Coalition: An ostensibly Assyrian political party that is in fact controlled by the KDP and therefore serves as a KDP proxy party.
- Shlama: An ostensibly Assyrian political party that is in fact controlled by the KDP and therefore serves as a KDP proxy party.

Syria

- Democratic Union Party (PYD): Kurdish political party, currently leading in the *de facto* autonomous region in northern Syria.
- Dawronoye: A small network of Assyrians wholly funded and controlled by Kurdish self-administration in northern Syria.
- Sutoro: a neighbourhood police force associated with the Dawronoye.

*Many of the stakeholders listed in this section operate or exist in more than one of the countries discussed in this report. These stakeholders are not listed under a particular country heading, or are simply listed under the country that they are mostly associated with.

Iran

- Democratic Party of Iraqi Kurdistan (DPKI): Militant nationalist Kurdish organisation based in Iran and exiled in northern Iraq.

Turkey

- Kurdish Workers Party (PKK): Militant nationalist Kurdish organisation based in Turkey in Iraq, led by Abdullah Ocalan. Recognised as terrorist organisation by USA, UK, EU, and NATO, currently engaged in ongoing conflict with Turkey.

Shia Arab Groups

Iraq

- Badr Organisation: A Shia Arab group with ties to Iran, led by Hadi-al-Ameri
- Babylon Movement: An ostensibly Assyrian political party that is in fact controlled by the Badr Organisation and therefore serves as a Badr Organisation proxy party.
- Babylon Brigade: Nominally Christian militia that is predominantly populated by Shia Muslims with ties to the Badr Organisation.
- Shabak Brigade 30: Nominally Christian militia that is predominantly populated by Shia Muslims with ties to the Badr Organisation.

Other

- Daesh (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/ISIS)(Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant/ISIL): A fundamentalist terror group that rose to global prominence in 2014, controlling large amounts of territory in Iraq and Syria, notably the city of Mosul. Daesh was responsible for death and destruction on a horrific scale, often explicitly targeting religious minorities including Assyrians.
- Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU): An Iraqi state-sponsored umbrella organisation composed of around 40 militias that are mostly populated by Shia Muslims, though other groups are also represented.
- Yezidis: Another minority community found in many of the same regions and communities as Assyrians. Like Assyrians, Yezidis were targeted by Daesh and other more powerful external groups. Assyrians and Yezidis also face many of the same challenges today.

Introduction

Despite having ancient roots in the Middle East, Assyrians living in the area have struggled for survival in recent centuries. In addition to regular societal marginalisation and persecution, calamitous massacres have been carried out against this vulnerable minority community, from the 1915 Ottoman genocide (known as *سەفۆ* or *Sefo*, meaning ‘Sword,’ in Assyrian) to the brutal violence perpetrated by Daesh (ISIS) since 2011. These more recent atrocities have been recognised by the European Parliament as genocide perpetrated against a number of groups, including Assyrians.¹ Hundreds of thousands have fled to Europe, North America, and elsewhere, seeking peaceful and prosperous lives.

Now that Daesh is virtually defeated, Assyrians are confronted with other challenges. In 2018, they were targeted for political and cultural repression and were affected by ongoing regional violence. Across the Middle East, Assyrians are facing an existential crisis due to these continuous pressures. Vulnerable Assyrian communities are increasingly marginalised and disenfranchised. They are being slowly smothered by repressive systems. This is remarkably tragic in Iraq, where Christianity has long been a vital aspect of Iraqi culture and history and has been practiced by Assyrians for millennia. If Assyrians are to be wiped out in Iraq, it will mean the end of this ancient and venerated practice in the country.

This report seeks to give an account of human rights abuses, as well as other concerning factors that pose this existential threat to the Assyrian community that remains in their Middle Eastern homeland.

Iraq



The ancient Assyrian city of Nimrud – located south of Mosul – was bulldozed by Daesh (ISIS) in 2015. Archeological sites were destroyed in order to erase Assyrian history and cultural heritage. © Al Jazeera

Country Profile

The vast majority of the Assyrians still living in their homeland today are found in Iraq, especially in the Nineveh Province. Though they have lived in the region for centuries, Iraqi Assyrians have regularly struggled with persecution and violence, especially during the 20th century. From horrific events like the Simile Massacre in 1933 to regular cultural suppression and forced displacement, the community has endured countless assaults on its very existence.² In recent decades, some of the

worst incidents of cruelty in modern history have been perpetrated against Iraqi Assyrians, namely in the chaos during the invasion of Iraq and the subsequent rise of Daesh (ISIS) in 2014.³ As a result, more and more Assyrians have fled from Iraq, fearing for their lives and livelihoods.

When Daesh occupied Nineveh, they gave Christians in the area an ultimatum: convert to Islam, pay the discriminatory “protective” *jizya* tax levied on non-Muslims, or be put to

death.⁴ Hundreds of thousands of Iraqi Assyrians were forced to flee as a result. Thereafter, Daesh attempted to systematically eradicate Assyrian cultural and historical heritage, destroying Assyrian artefacts and bulldozing the ancient city of Nimrud in 2015.⁵ Some of the damages are still being discovered. In March of 2018, security forces unearthed a mass grave with at least 70 massacred people, including at least 40 Assyrians.⁶

While Assyrians constitute the overwhelming majority of Christians in Iraq, other Christian groups do exist.

Furthermore, Christians are not the only group in the country facing persecution. To echo a sentiment from the introduction of this report, it is certainly true that these other minorities experience human rights violations and are deserving of attention, protection, and respect. Nevertheless, the focus of this report is to highlight abuses perpetrated against Assyrians, who, unlike many other repressed minority groups, currently have no homeland free from such conditions.

After years of warfare and shocking human rights abuses, the Iraqi state is considerably weakened, often unable to enforce rule of law. At the same time, the various militias and other armed groups with differing allegiances (Christian, Shia, Kurdish, Sunni, etc.) that were formed in order to combat Daesh have gained significant political and military presences.⁷ It is extremely

“Daesh attempted to systematically eradicate Assyrian cultural and historical heritage, destroying Assyrian artefacts and bulldozing the ancient city of Nimrud in 2015.”

concerning that these groups continue to operate in Assyrian land today, despite the fact that the threat has been defeated in that area (this issue will be discussed in more detail below).⁸ Particularly

noteworthy examples of abuses faced by Assyrians can be found in so-called Iraqi Kurdistan, where leading Kurdish politicians have used Assyrians as a stepping stone to further their own independence movement (this issue will be discussed in more detail below).⁹

The following issue sections will outline ongoing Human Rights concerns for the Assyrian people in Iraq.

Issue: Facing Threats and Abuse, Assyrians Unable or Unwilling to Return

Faced with these dangerous and turbulent conditions, a large number of the Assyrians who fled Iraq in terror still do not feel secure enough to return. Currently, just over half of the families who formerly resided in the Nineveh Region have still not repatriated.¹⁰ According to a recent study by Minority Rights Group International, only 500,000 Christians (the overwhelming majority of which are Assyrian) currently remain in Iraq, compared to between 800,000 and 1.4 million in 2003.¹¹

Many Assyrians have also lived as refugees in neighbouring countries, especially Jordan. Though they were shielded from violence, many now feel as though their culture, language, and traditional beliefs have eroded during their absence.¹² Others worry that their professional careers have stagnated. In many ways, even though the constant threat of violence under Daesh (ISIS) has been eliminated, the continued existence of Assyrians in Iraq hangs in a precarious balance.¹³ This dire situation has been

recognised by a variety of international actors, including American Vice President Mike Pence, who referred to it as, “[an] unprecedented assault in those ancient lands.”¹⁴

Assyrians from across the country tell of broken trust, intense pain, and ongoing security concerns.¹⁵ As with any refugee community, some Assyrians, such as 19-year-old Chahd (speaking to Al Arabia), never want to return to the homes where they experienced such intense trauma.¹⁶ The former Mosul resident’s sentiment, “I want to go back to my home and my hometown,

but life there is unbearable,” is echoed by countless others.¹⁷ According to Gwendolen Cates, a documentarian who spent much of the last three years filming in Iraq, “[Minorities] are being increasingly “ghettoized,” with their land being taken.”¹⁸

As a result of these incessant hardships, many Assyrians, have searched for a new life outside Iraq. Facing poor work and study conditions, it is often young Assyrians who have expressed the strongest desires to move elsewhere.¹⁹ Bishop Timotheus Musa Al Shamani told the France-based AED that

"without security and without work, no Christian will stay in Iraq."²⁰ The depopulating of fragile areas renders the already-weakened Assyrian community even more vulnerable. With fewer Assyrians around to create a strong, supportive society, isolated individuals and families find themselves more easily exploited and ignored by other groups.



Assyrian refugees gather for prayer in a Beirut church. Hundreds of Assyrian families have fled from Daesh (ISIS) to Beirut. ©Dylan Collins

Churches have traditionally served as cornerstone intuitions of Assyrian society. In recent years, several of these important churches have been forced to close due to lowered attendance.²¹ This includes at least eight churches in Baghdad.²² These closures are particularly telling, because Baghdad was never occupied by Daesh – instead, some commentators have attributed reduced church attendance in the area to the safety

concerns which are all too commonly felt by Assyrians across the country.²³ Some have complained of extortion from gangs and gunmen, while others have recorded kidnappings and murders.²⁴ These regular threats are because Iraqi Assyrians are, in the words of one journalist, “an easy target.”²⁵

Issue: Assyrian Elections Manipulated by Kurdish Democratic Party

During the May Iraqi elections of 2018, Assyrian votes were wholesale manipulated or subverted by the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Badr Organisation (a group with ties to Iran – this will be expanded upon below). One of ACE’s partner organisations, the Washington, D.C.-based Assyrian Policy Institute (API), published a report late in 2018 entitled “[Iraq's Stolen Election: How Assyrian Representation Became Assyrian Repression.](#)”²⁶ It documents widespread voter intimidation and electoral manipulation perpetrated by several external groups. This human rights report will highlight particular sections from the API report, quoting it at length. It is therefore strongly recommended to read the full scope

of API's work for a more detailed and complete account.

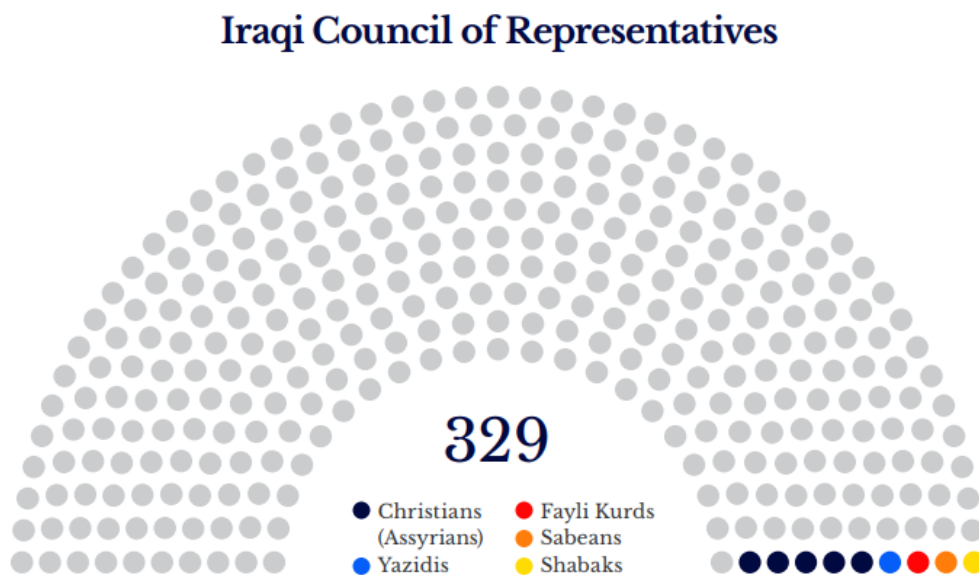
Background: a Broken Quota System

The Iraqi Council of Representatives is the country's representative legislative body. Iraq uses a quota system for its various minority groups; there are a certain number of seats reserved for specific minority populations (such as Kurds or Yazidis).²⁷ Though this system is intended to ensure that these populations are not ostracised from national politics, it has unfortunately been abused by dominant parties and has not yielded any desirable results.²⁸ Various aspects of the quota system's design make it vulnerable to abuse and manipulation. Chief among these problems for the Assyrian people are the way in which the quotas

themselves are assigned and voted on.

The Council of Representatives reserves no places specifically for Assyrians – instead, five seats (out of 329) are allocated to Iraq's Christian population.²⁹ While many Assyrians do indeed identify with the Christian faith, it is fallacious to say that all Assyrians are Christian, nor are all Iraqi Christians Assyrian. In effect, this means that Assyrians are not represented as an ethnic group in Iraq's legislative body. The Assyrian Policy Institute argues that this seemingly innocuous distinction is fact highly problematic:

“The quota, as it is currently defined for Assyrians, puts forward a sectarian vision of this community based on religion, whereas Kurds and Arabs are identified as distinct peoples with their corresponding



Five seats are allocated to Christians in the Iraqi Council of Representatives. © API

rights and entitlements within the political system of Iraq. Thus, there is a deliberate attempt to render Assyrians as having less agency than the dominant groups in the political sphere, who are more than their popularly associated religious beliefs, and are afforded privileges such as political positions based on their ethnic identity. For example, an unofficial power sharing deal that has persisted since 2004 has meant that the position of President, one which comes with great prestige and recognition, must be held by a Kurd...

...This religion-based classification that has been imposed on Iraq's Assyrian community and used to define them in a political context has contributed greatly to the deliberate dilution of the community's ethnic identity. This sectarian label consequently weakens their rights to land and self-determination as an indigenous people—a legacy from the Arabization campaigns enforced by the Baath Regime who identified them as “Arab Christians” or “Iraqi Christians”. This reductive classification has effectively resulted in the erasure of modern Assyrian history.”³⁰

Bizarrely, even the inadequate Christian minority seats are not protected from domination by other groups. Candidates for these seats are not given a separate ballot, which in effect means that anyone in Iraq can vote for the representatives of Iraqi Christians.³¹ As will be discussed later in this report, four of the five Christian seats are currently held by

non-Christian organisations through their use of proxy parties and other fraudulent methods. Assyrian politicians who have long advocated for special elections have had their proposals rejected by the federal government.³² From API:

“The irony of this defective system is striking: the ostensible purpose for the quota is to protect the interests of an underrepresented minority, but this objective is undermined when the majority is able to override Assyrian wishes and determine who will fill the reserve seats.”³³

[Electoral Abuse by the Kurdish Democratic Party and Badr Organisation](#)

These structural failures have left the door open for the Christian seats to be captured by more powerful political interests. Two

groups in particular have successfully manipulated the electoral system to the point where they collectively control more seats than any organic Assyrian organisation: the KDP and the Badr Organisation.

The KDP has employed a variety of tactics (discussed below) to exploit the faulty Iraqi system in local and federal elections since those elections first came into effect in the mid-2000s.³⁴ This Kurdish nationalist party

is motivated to assert itself in Assyrian politics in order to pursue a stronger electoral position for legislation that would lead to an independent or more powerful Kurdistan.

The Badr Organisation is a Shia Arab group with ties to Iran. It operates politically and militantly across Iraq.³⁵ The group, led by Hadi al-Ameri, was established in 1983 as the armed wing of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). When the Badr Organisation cut its ties to the SCIRI, it formed an independent political wing in an attempt to maintain relations with Iran.³⁶ The Badr Organisation now considered “Iran’s oldest [surviving] proxy in Iraq” as a result of its close and abiding ties.³⁷ Its rise to power has been more recent than the KDP, but its motivations are similar: the Badr Organisation hopes to establish an independent Shia region in the South of Iraq, and therefore rigs Iraqi politics to the detriment of Assyrians, in order to gain political power.³⁸

Abuse of the democratic system by these groups is documented below.

Proxy Parties

API documented widespread use of KDP and Badr Organisation proxy parties, including a blatant and damning public admission from a senior KDP official. Their analysis gives strong evidence for the extent and severity of these issues. From API:

“Through the strategy of creating and controlling Christian Assyrian proxy organizations—generally by rewarding loyalty with resources unavailable to independent Christian Assyrian parties—the Kurdistan Democratic Party was able to capture two of the five quota seats reserved for Christians.”³⁹



Hemin Hawrami
@heminhawrami

KDP has 28 seats. Duhok 10, Erbil 8, Mosul 6, Suli 1, Baghdad 1. KDP as the only multi religious party in Kurdistan, mobilized the Christian members & succeeded in wining 2 out of 5 seats of Christian quota. In total KDP now has 28.

5/19/18, 3:27 AM

21 Retweets 78 Likes

Tweet by head of KDP Foreign Relations Hemin Hawrami on May 19, 2018. It was deleted shortly thereafter. Courtesy of API.

“In a since-deleted Tweet posted on May 19, 2018, head of KDP Foreign Relations and Senior Assistant to Masoud Barzani, Hemin Hawrami wrote, “KDP as the only multi religious party in Kurdistan, mobilized the Christian members & succeeded in wining [sic] 2

out of 5 seats of Christian quota. In total KDP now has 28.” In his tweet, Hawrami asserts that the KDP won 28 seats, a number that includes the two seats won by the KDP-funded Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council and the Chaldean Coalition. The significance of this statement from Hawrami is that it represents an open recognition that the KDP and the proxy parties are one and the same.”⁴⁰

“When small Assyrian KDP-proxy parties achieve electoral victories over the organic Assyrian representation, it must be understood that the successes of these tiny groups are due to the powerful backing of the KDP in addition to ethically-questionable manipulation of the electoral system and sometimes outright fraud or other illegal measures. It would be a mischaracterization to view these parties as alternative Assyrian voices competing within a democratic space.”⁴¹

“KDP financial patronage remains indispensable for purchasing the loyalties of persons who then serve as figures standing for policies that are otherwise unpalatable to the vast majority of Assyrians. Parties organized around the policies held by the KDP proxies would never form organically within the Assyrian community. Apart from KDP monetary interventions, there has never been an instance where an Assyrian party formed that was based on a popular notion that Assyrian homelands should be subsumed by the Kurdistan Region.”⁴²

“Kurdish authorities have for more than a decade practiced a strategy of offering incentives to minority

communities in exchange for their support for the KRG’s efforts to annex the Nineveh Plain, while imposing restrictions and penalties on those who do not. The KDP buys the allegiances of Assyrian political and religious leaders through a patronage system that fosters political divisions within the community. This patronage system also has the effect of obfuscating and muddling the voices of the Assyrian majority, making advocates, NGOs, and Western government officials less able to identify a clear picture of the local dynamics harming the community.”⁴³



Assyrian KDP member Ano Abdoka (center) at a KDP rally in Erbil on September 25, 2018. Abdoka is the head of a KDP proxy party called Shlama. © API

“What is actually at stake, therefore, is not the question of who will represent Assyrians within an established political arena, but rather the very nature of that political arena. Rather than allowing this arena to remain an Assyrian one, KDP proxy parties serve to advance the objective of dismantling the semi-independent Assyrian political jurisdiction that is viable in Nineveh (and which has already been functional in post-2003 Iraq) and to annex the Nineveh Plain to the Kurdistan Region. This necessarily means subsuming Assyrian political agency under Kurdish (and specifically KDP) political control. Rather than a diversity of Assyrian

parties organized around a multiplicity of positions, the majority of Assyrian parties are part of the KDP bloc. Opposite this bloc is the organic Assyrian representation, consisting of a much smaller number of parties.”⁴⁴

“[The API’s] definition of “organic Assyrian representation” has nothing to do with political position; for a political entity to be legitimate it simply needs to have emerged from within the Assyrian community, to not have been erected by an external entity, and to not receive financial payouts from another party. At present, non-proxy “organic” Assyrian parties include the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM), Abnaa al-Nahrain, the Assyrian General Conference, and, more recently, the Assyrian Patriotic Party. Of these, the ADM is the largest party. More recently, other major Iraqi and Kurdish parties—most notably the Shia Arab Badr Organization—have exploited the Christian Assyrian identity and erected their own proxy organizations to



Babylon Movement leader Rayan al-Kildani pictured alongside Badr Organisation leader Hadi al-Ameri at an event in Baghdad in December 2015. The Babylon Movement is a proxy party run by the Badr Organisation. © API

further their interests. This development worryingly signals the further institutionalization of this proxy system and the near-complete marginalization of organic Assyrian representation in Iraq.”⁴⁵

“The Badr Organization, an Iranian-backed Arab group operating militarily and politically across Iraq, also secured two of the five seats through the Babylon Movement, a nominally Christian, Muslim group used to extend and superficially diversify Badr’s presence in the north of the country.”⁴⁶

Voter Intimidation and Voter Fraud

API’s analysis and first-hand accounts of the situation on the ground in Iraq also revealed a significant degree of voter intimidation and the mobilisation of thousands of non-Christian voters. From API:

“In areas administered or controlled by the KRG (Kurdistan Regional Government), the Assyrian Policy Institute received dozens of reports of intimidation and harassment against voters, electoral workers, and electoral monitors by KDP members and affiliates of KDP-backed Christian candidates. All KRG security forces are openly party political and have a history of engaging in voter intimidation. While the Assyrian Policy Institute has not been able to estimate an approximate percentage of voters in these communities who were forced into voting against their will, it [is] evident that such pressure and threats were widespread... Disturbing developments since the 2017 Kurdish referendum have signaled increased risks for anyone who speaks

out against injustice and abuse of power by the key actors which comprise the KRG.”⁴⁷

“Deliberate interference of the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Badr Organization in the elections for Christian representatives, which included the methodical mobilization of tens of thousands of non-Christian voters, means this election cannot possibly reflect the will of the Christian Assyrian community in Iraq.”⁴⁸

“For example, the number of Assyrians in Kirkuk is reported to be 4,612. This number includes Assyrians of all denominations, including members of Chaldean and Syriac churches. However, the total number of votes cast in Kirkuk for seats reserved for Christians was 13,307, which is 289% of the estimated total number of Assyrians residing in Kirkuk without factoring in younger, ineligible voters. The number of recorded votes for the Chaldean Coalition (139) alone exceeded the total number of Assyrians in Kirkuk, totaling 4,815 votes.²⁸ The surge in votes cast for Christian quota seat candidates in the 2018 May elections despite plummeting numbers and voter apathy undermines the results and renders the elected representatives illegitimate.”⁴⁹

“The evidence gathered by the Assyrian Policy Institute in preparation for this report indicates that the Badr Organization deliberately mobilized tens of thousands of Shia Arab voters to dwarf the votes cast by Assyrian voters for independent candidates and ensure a victory for the Babylon Movement. It also strongly suggests the

“The surge in votes cast for Christian quota seat candidates in the 2018 May elections despite plummeting numbers and voter apathy undermines the results and renders the elected representatives illegitimate”

Babylon Movement engaged in misconduct and outright voter fraud.”⁵⁰

“The Babylon Movement led all lists in the Nineveh Governorate, receiving a reported 9,581 votes from local residents in the province. This is a significant rise when compared to the 2014 parliamentary elections, in which the Babylon Movement received only 6,672 total votes. The only plausible explanation for this drastic rise in the space of four years was the powerful backing of the Badr Organization and its close affiliation with the PMU, which resulted in the mobilization of tens of thousands of Muslim voters to influence the results of the quota.”⁵¹

Significance

The success of these tactics profoundly indicates deep-rooted problems with Iraqi democracy at large. For Assyrians, the situation is dire. If these abuses are allowed to continue, they will threaten the stability of the Assyrian identity. From API:

“In addition to contending with extremist violence that has driven many Assyrians out of the country altogether, those who remain—in reduced numbers—feel perpetually embattled within the political systems that are responsible for ensuring their rights. The political dangers that beset

Assyrians include the ongoing theft of Assyrian ancestral homelands, persistent campaigns to reduce

Assyrian political agency making Assyrians increasingly dependent on larger political parties, and the effort to deny Assyrians an administrative role over those areas that are home to the greatest concentrations of Assyrian population but which are often not provided adequate security by the central and regional administrations. These problems erode the survivability of Assyrians in Iraq, as they contribute to increasing marginalization while avoiding the healthy resolution of crucial security dilemmas that inform Assyrian well-being and safety in the country.”

These threats are also more damaging to the future longevity of the Assyrians than even the menace posed by extremist groups like the Islamic State; whereas the latter is visible and condemned by both the international community and Iraqi officials, the former constitute more subtle and hidden ways of undermining Assyrian rootedness in their homeland that are often not recognized by Western officials who engage with Iraq and are therefore ignored or remain un-confronted, even as the damage is done. A dysfunctional minority quota system, therefore, which fails to protect the fragile political representation of communities like the Assyrians, poses very serious risks and must be rectified.”⁵²

Issue: Assyrian Mayors Arbitrarily Stripped of Power by KDP

In July of 2018, Faiez Abed Jahwareh, the mayor of Alqosh in the Assyrian-majority

Nineveh Plain, was arbitrarily detained and beaten by elements of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).⁵³ He was arrested – without a warrant – a second time by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) police and intelligence services known as Asayish.

Mayor Jahwareh had previously been removed from office in July of 2017 by the Nineveh Provincial Council, which is dominated by KDP members (31 of 41 members at the time of the incident).⁵⁴ At that time, he was accused of corruption, but

that claim was later dismissed as baseless by the Iraqi Administrative Court of Justice. Within a fortnight, the Alqosh District Council, also dominated by the KDP (4

out of 6 members) installed KDP member Lara Yousif to replace him before Jahwareh’s court appeal period had been completed.⁵⁵

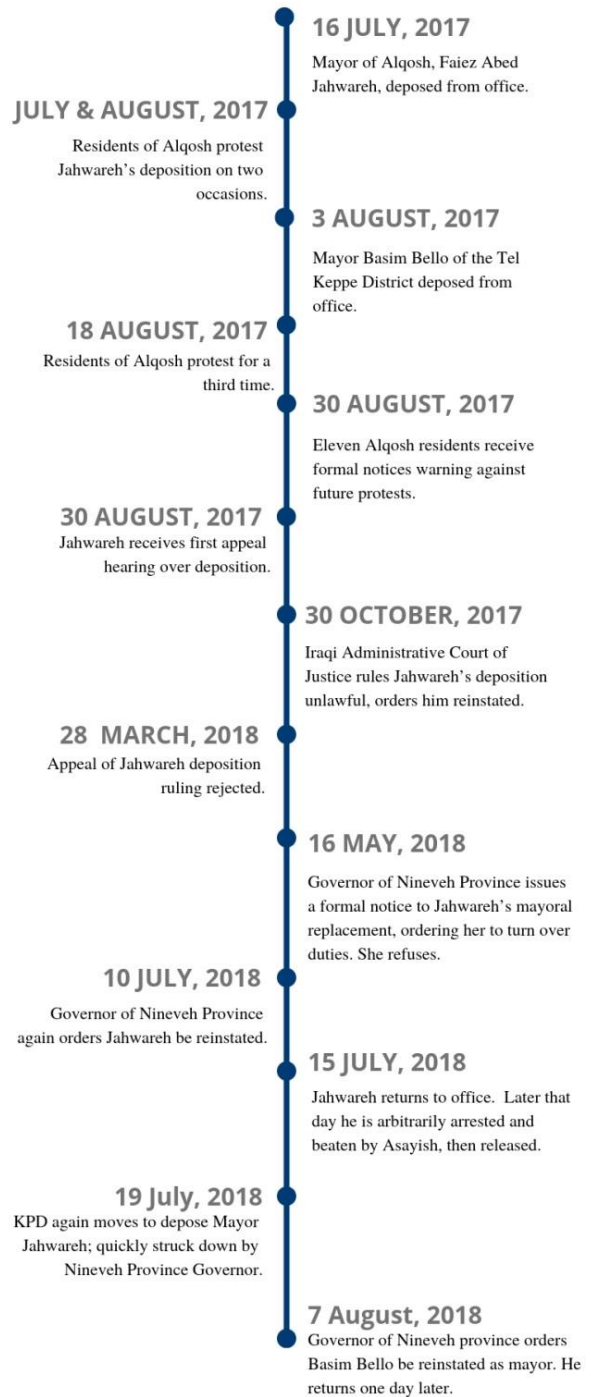
Just 19 days after Mayor Jahwareh’s deposal, another democratically-elected mayor in the Nineveh province, Basim Bello of the Tel Keppe District, was removed from power by the same KDP-dominated Nineveh

Provincial Council.⁵⁶ Bello is known by locals for opposing KDP policies, and was likewise accused of crimes of corruption, which were later overturned.⁵⁷ He was replaced by KDP member Adel Marogy Jajou.

The timing of these events is deeply suspicious, as it took place just ahead of the 2017 Kurdish independence referendum, held in September of that year. As noted earlier in this report, an independent Kurdistan has long been a cornerstone goal of the KDP. Despite this fact Bayan Rahman, an official KRG representative, has since denied that these actions were politically motivated during an event at the United States Institute of Peace.⁵⁸

Assyrians in Alqosh took action and protested Jahwareh's undemocratic deposal on numerous occasions, despite arrests and threats from local KDP security forces.⁵⁹ Thousands of Alqosh residents also signed a petition calling for Jahwareh to be reinstated as mayor. As a result, the aforementioned Court of Justice ordered that Jahwareh be reinstated in October of 2017. At that time, he was arrested and threatened for the first time by Asayish.⁶⁰ Though the court ordered that Jahwareh resume his post on March 15,

Timeline of events: Mayoral Deposition



Yousif refused to step down; in both May and July, she received formal notices from the Nofal Hammadi, the Governor of

Nineveh province, to return the position to Jahwareh.



Assyrians in Alqosh protest Mayor Jahwareh's deposal in July 2017. © API

On July 15, Mayor Jahwareh was finally able to return to work. Lamentably, his hardships continued, as that same morning he was taken from his office by Asayish, who detained, threatened, and beat him.⁶¹ During his unlawful arrest, multiple eyewitnesses reported that city hall staff were threatened and were warned against supporting him as Mayor, because the KDP was in control and would, “decide what happens in Alqosh.”⁶² On July 19, the head of the Nineveh Provincial, KDP member Bashar al-Kiki, again moved to depose Jahwareh on the grounds that he had not returned to work, despite the fact that his absence was due to threats on his life.⁶³ Thankfully, the Nineveh Governor made his

support of Mayor Jahwareh clear at that time. Mayor Bello was able to return to his post thanks to another Court of Justice order on August 8, 2018.⁶⁴

The legal battles fought by these two Assyrian mayors speak to the struggles that the Assyrian people face in Iraq today. Though both have been reinstated, the KDPs political motivations and violent tactics spell a worrying situation for the freedom of Assyrians. The KDP cannot be allowed to undermine democracy and suppress Assyrian voices for their own political ends.

Issue: Paramilitary and Militia Forces Linger, Creating Security Concerns

As mentioned above, various paramilitary and militia forces were created in Iraq as part of the US-led coalition to fight Daesh (ISIS). These forces were generally populated by local community members and received professional training. They acted as a vital part of the effort to defeat Daesh. Among these groups is an Assyrian militia: the Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU).⁶⁵ The NPU is of particular importance to Assyrian communities in the area, as they represent one of the first instances of Assyrians being allowed to handle their own

security needs without relying on other groups.⁶⁶

A variety of paramilitary groups – including the NPU – have been formally authorized under Iraqi Security Forces since 2016.⁶⁷ On August 2, 2018, many of these groups were disbanded, absorbed into the Iraqi Army, and transitioned into local security forces because they are better-trusted by local populations.⁶⁸ The NPU itself continues to operate in the southern Nineveh Plains under the authority of Iraqi Security Forces.*⁶⁹

However, the presence of particular militias is not always welcome. Since Daesh’s defeat, residents have indicated security concerns related to the continued operations of certain militias in liberated areas.⁷⁰ Among the groups creating instability for Assyrians are the aforementioned Babylon Brigades and the Shabak Brigade 30. Both of these militias have links to the Badr Organisation, which, as previously discussed, has ties to Iran.⁷¹ Though they are nominally Christian, both are predominantly populated by nonlocal Shia Muslims who have little or no

connection to the communities they are charged with protecting.⁷²

The presence of these outsider groups in a number of towns has prevented residents

from returning home for an extended period of time, even once the areas had been incrementally liberated from Daesh.⁷³ The Shabak Brigade in particular has fostered negative and

distrustful relationships with local populations. After its rapid expansion in southern Nineveh Province, the Assyrian Policy Institute received reports that Christian Assyrians were pressured to convert to Islam.⁷⁴ In addition, Assyrian women reported numerous cases of sexual harassment, particularly at armed checkpoints.⁷⁵



Kurdish Peshmerga Forces are generally mistrusted by other minority populations. © AFP

A large number of Assyrians also hope that the KRG’s party-political militia, the Peshmerga, as well as the Kurdish party-

*Correction: a previous version of this report stated that the NPU itself has been fully absorbed. Corrected 4/4/2019

political police, Asayish, will be transitioned out of Assyrian area.⁷⁶ Locals continue to stress the need for Assyrian-led security.⁷⁷ There are a numerous motivations for this desire, which range from a feeling that the Peshmerga left Assyrians to fend for themselves during the height of Daesh to resentment over ongoing political abuses by the KRG. Many members of other non-Kurdish minority groups, notably Yezidis, express similar concerns. To take a prominent example, the 2014 Sinjar Massacre of Yezidi civilians is widely believed to have been made possible by the poorly-communicated and hasty withdrawal of Peshmerga forces, which left the vulnerable population defenceless.⁷⁸

Issue: Assyrian Civilians Endangered by Foreign Airstrikes

Due to complications stemming from a variety of conflicts in recent decades, armed Kurdish groups continue to operate in the mountainous and remote northern border regions of Iraq.⁷⁹ Notable among these groups are the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (DPKI) and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which are engaged in

“Danger and insecurity are particularly profound for minority communities facing other pressing issues, including Yezidis and Assyrians.”

ongoing conflicts with Iran and Turkey, respectively.⁸⁰ It is worth noting that the PKK is recognised as a terrorist organisation by the United States, United Kingdom, European Union, and NATO.⁸¹ Though

these groups do not target Assyrians themselves, their operations are based in or around Iraqi towns or villages. This proximity means that innocent civilians, including

Assyrians, are often caught in the crossfire when foreign governments attack such groups on Iraqi soil.

Foreign militaries have carried out airstrikes against unwelcome PKK and DPKI elements in Assyrian villages for a number of years.⁸² Despite the danger posed to civilians, both the Iraqi Government and the KRG have failed to address ongoing safety concerns.⁸³ As a result, some public figures, including Yacoob Yaco, an Iraqi-Assyrian MP in the Kurdish Parliament, have appealed directly to foreign governments to stop the strikes.⁸⁴ Danger and insecurity are particularly profound for minority communities facing other pressing issues, including Yezidis and Assyrians. Assyrian communities were damaged by military

operations targeting armed Kurdish groups on several occasions in 2018.

In September, the Turkish military carried out airstrikes against a number of targets in Assyrian areas of northern Iraq. On September 1, it bombed Dooreh village in Barwar, Dohuk Province.⁸⁵ Just three days later, on September 4, Rabatkeh village in Nahla, Dohuk Province, was also attacked.⁸⁶ Unverified accounts reported that further bombings took place in Annoneh village, Barwar on September 5.⁸⁷ Although no civilians were killed during these attacks, they did inflict a massive amount of property damage to a vulnerable community. Houses and farmlands were extensively damaged, and the local Assyrian population was left to extinguish fires by themselves.⁸⁸ According to locals, the KRG tends to stay away from areas with PKK presence.⁸⁹

The Turkish military was also involved in at least one on-the-ground clash with the PKK. On December 13, 2018, nearly five hours of conflict took place between the two forces near the Assyrian village of Annoneh (Kanimase), Barwar, Dohuk Province.⁹⁰ Local Assyrians reported that the clash, which took place near an Assyrian church, is symptomatic of escalating violence between

the PKK and the Turkish military over the past year.⁹¹ Clashes such as these are fairly not uncommon, but have only begun to be documented recently.



Fires from Turkish airstrike cause damage in the Assyrian village of Dooreh in Barwar, Iraq. © API

The Iranian government has also carried out airstrikes of its own against Kurdish targets. On September 8, 2018, just three days after the most recent Turkish attack, the Iranian military bombed the local DPKI headquarters near the Assyrian town of Armota in Erbil Province.⁹² The Iraqi foreign ministry later condemned the attack, in which at least 11 people were killed and score of others were wounded, as a violation of national sovereignty.⁹³ Residents of Armota were displaced as a result of the attack and fled to nearby towns, though damage to their homes appeared to be minimal in the aftermath. The area has been bombed at least three times in the past,

prompting one local, to say, “I'd like to see one generation of our people whose childhood isn't marked by bombings.”⁹⁴

“Locals’ daily lives are deeply affected by the fighting, from safety concerns to the loss of homes and livelihoods to fears of extensive on-the-ground warfare.”

The ongoing conflict creates palpable instability for Assyrians in the region. Locals’ daily lives are deeply affected by the fighting, from safety concerns to the loss of homes and livelihoods to fears of extensive on-the-ground warfare.⁹⁵ Some Assyrians in remote areas hunt in the local mountains in order to sustain themselves and their families – many are now apprehensive about this essential part of their lives, as they worry that they may be mistaken for a combatant and gunned down.⁹⁶ Others say they can no longer visit the historic Mar Qayoma Monastery, situated in the mountains on the outskirts of Barwar, due to PKK presence in the area.⁹⁷ As a result of continued insecurity with no help from the

government or KRG, numerous Assyrians have been forced to flee.

Issue: Assyrian Homes Illegally Occupied and Sold

Facing violence and persecution from Daesh, hundreds of thousands of Assyrians fled from their homes in recent years. In November of 2018, it was reported that some 350 homes left unoccupied were illegally sold to other owners through the creation of false legal documents.⁹⁸

According to local journalism, Assyrian homes have been targeted substantially more than the property of any other group. Some appear to have been illegally sold by fraudsters and criminals, while others were seized by corrupt officials for a variety of purposes.⁹⁹

The false papers used to sell these homes will make restitution much more difficult for their rightful owners in the future. Taking a loss on the entire value of a residence would be calamitous enough for any family, but this practice will especially affect those who will return to strangers living in their homes.

Some steps have already been taken to prevent future property theft through increased controls and oversight. The illegal sales of some 50 homes across the country have reportedly been cancelled.¹⁰⁰ The Assyrian Confederation of Europe has

previously released a statement calling on Iraqi authorities to exercise more careful oversight in future to end this “targeted, ruthless [practice that takes] advantage of poor and desperate people.”¹⁰¹



Assyrians from Nahla blocked by KDP Asayish members from participating in a protest against land left in 2016. © API

Syria



When Assyrian villages were occupied by Daseh (ISIS), the group destroyed Assyrian churches like this one. © Sylvian Mercadier

Country Profile

Violence and human rights abuses in Syria have been perpetrated at horrific levels since the outbreak of the civil war in 2011.

According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, 10,204 civilians were killed in 2017 alone.¹⁰² Because of the sectarian nature of much of the fighting, civilian communities around the country have been targeted by a variety of armed groups, ranging from the Syrian army and various foreign militaries to paramilitary, militia, and terror groups, especially Daesh (ISIS). Lamentably, no religious or ethnic community has been safe

from violence. Syrian-Assyrians, who are concentrated in the province of Hassakeh, an area known to Assyrians as Gozarto, are no exception.¹⁰³

It is important to note that Assyrians are not the only Christians in Syria, and furthermore Christians are not the only group in the country facing persecution. To again echo a sentiment from the introduction of this report, it is certainly true that other minorities experience human rights violations and are deserving of attention, protection, and respect.

It would be impossible to list every abuse that Assyrians have faced at the hands of Daesh. As in Iraq, Assyrians in Syria were brutally targeted as a result of the Christian component of their identity. They were forced into awful situations where their only options were to convert to Islam, pay the discriminatory “protective” jizya tax levied on non-Muslims, or be put to death. In addition, Daesh kidnapped countless Christian religious leaders (many of whom remain missing today) including the Syriac Orthodox Archbishop of Aleppo Mar Gregorios Yuhanna Ibrahim (missing since 2013).¹⁰⁴ According to former US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, “ISIS is clearly responsible for genocide against Yezidis, Christians, and Shia Muslims in areas it controls or has controlled. ISIS is also responsible for crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing directed at these same groups...”¹⁰⁵ Although Daesh is no longer capable of controlling territory, its crimes have left a deep scar in the Assyrian community; moreover, violence continues as the Syrian Civil War rages on.¹⁰⁶

In another parallel with Iraq, paramilitary and militia groups representing all sides of the conflict continue to commit widespread human rights abuses. Based on their various

ideologies, some of these groups target Christian minorities, including Assyrians.¹⁰⁷ Because of the chaos caused by the ongoing Civil War, many acts of abuse go undocumented.



Syriac Orthodox bishop Mar Gregorios Yuhanna Ibrahim, missing since being kidnapped in 2013. © Sarah Mac Donald

Unfortunately, the situation in Syria is even worse for Assyrians than the one in Iraq. While the Iraqi government’s response to the violence perpetrated against Assyrian communities could justifiably be described as inadequate, it directly worked to harm these communities. In Syria, however, many Assyrians have faced discrimination and forced displacement from the government itself, which has spent considerable energy on empowering Shia groups.¹⁰⁸ These groups, which represent the religion held by the Al-Assad government, have received preferential treatment at the expense of other groups.¹⁰⁹

Assyrians face these same discriminatory practices from Kurdish groups in a *de facto* autonomous region in the northeast governorate of Al-Hassakah, declared by local Kurds in March of 2016.¹¹⁰ Reports have emerged detailing forced displacement, the suppression of the Assyrian language in schools, and mounting pressure to lionize Kurdish figures to students.¹¹¹ Community leaders reported that Kurdish authorities appropriated homes that had been abandoned as a result of the fighting. In late 2017, abandoned Christian homes in the city of Tabqa, Raqqa Province, were ordered to be appropriated for Kurdish families if their owners had not yet returned.¹¹² Specific acts of abuse will be discussed in a dedicated issue section below.

Facing violence from all sides and fleeing for their lives, Syria's Assyrian population has been reduced by due to death or displacement by more than half since 2011.¹¹³ As a result, this population is currently facing an existential crisis. Though the worst of the violence seems to be over, steady pressure from all involved parties still threatens Assyrians' continued

"Facing violence from all sides and fleeing for their lives, Syria's Assyrian population has been reduced by due to death or displacement by more than half since 2011."

existence in the region.

The following issue sections will outline ongoing Human Rights concerns for the Assyrian people in Syria.

Issue: Kurdish Region Represses Assyrian Cultural Education

The aforementioned self-declared Kurdish autonomous region in Syria has posed challenges to the Assyrian residents of areas that are now administered by the *de facto* Kurdish government. Many of these communal tensions have been palpable for years, and were previously documented in an ACE report entitled "[Assyrians under Kurdish Rule: The Situation in Northeastern Syria](#)," published in early 2017.¹¹⁴ One of the principle areas of contention centres on the school curricula mandated by this

government, particularly in relation to history. Assyrian private schools have operated as important institutions in the region since before 1935 and have recently begun to teach Assyrian language, history, and culture in addition to the standardised Syrian educational programs.¹¹⁵ However, in

recent years, Assyrian schools have been pressured to promote Kurdish nationalism by lionizing the PKK and its leader Abdullah Ocalan, and by portraying a monolithic version of history that revolves around the Kurdish identity and idealized maps of a Greater Kurdistan.¹¹⁶ As stated previously in this report, it is worthwhile to note that the PKK is regarded as a terrorist organisation internationally by the United States, United Kingdom, EU, and NATO.¹¹⁷ Assyrian community members have consistently rejected this curriculum, and the Assyrian Confederation of Europe expressed concerns related to this issue the aforementioned 2017 report.¹¹⁸

Rather than force Assyrian schools to teach a Kurdish-centric narrative, the Democratic Union Party (PYD), which currently holds power in the region, instead decided to effectively segregate Assyrians from the remainder of the population. It accomplished this by barring Kurds and Arabs from attending these schools while also introducing screening processes to ensure that students remained separated.¹¹⁹ In order to circumvent this screening process, some non-Assyrians simply refused to disclose their ethnic background on official documents; classes were taught in Arabic so

that students from all ethnic backgrounds could receive their education at the school.¹²⁰ The self-administrative government has since learned that locals were employing this strategy to escape from their educational system, and consequentially ordered all Assyrian schools to be closed for failing to comply with educational standards.¹²¹



Local Assyrians protest PYD closure of Assyrian schools in Qamishli, Syria on August 28, 2018. © API

The PYD closed the first Assyrian schools in Derik (Malikiyyah) and in Derbesiye on the 7 of August 2018.¹²² Despite this order, the schools continued to operate. Soon after, Assyrian groups in Germany and Syria, including the Assyrian Confederation of Europe member in Germany, *Zentralverband der assyrischen Vereinigungen in Deutschland und europäische Sektionen* (ZAVD) condemned the school closures.¹²³

On August 28, PYD-affiliated militiamen, along with the Sutoro (a neighbourhood police force associated with the Dawronoye, itself a small network of Assyrians wholly funded and controlled by the Kurdish Self-Administration in Syria) entered Assyrian schools in Qamishli and expelled all administrators and teachers from the building.¹²⁴ When the school's staff refused to turn over keys to the school buildings, these groups proceeded to break the existing locks and replace them, declaring the school closed.¹²⁵ Hundreds of locals and their children staged a protest, breaking the new locks on a school in the Wusta neighbourhood and tearing down signs reading "school closed."¹²⁶ Sutoro forces reportedly fired gunshots into the air in order to intimidate protesters.¹²⁷ Later, pro-Kurdish sources attempted to undermine the protests by reporting that protesters were allied with the Assad regime and had been sent to "cause chaos."¹²⁸

In late September, Isa Rashid, chairman of Nsibin Institute for Assyrian schools in Qamishli, was reportedly beaten badly outside his home by two men, supposedly

Dawronoye members.¹²⁹ As previously mentioned, because the Dawronoye serves as a Kurdish proxy, it can be concluded that this attack was ordained by the Kurdish self-administration. He was hospitalized with wounds to his head, but ultimately survived. Locals speculated that he had been targeted for rejecting the Kurdish educational plan.¹³⁰ Speaking to Syria Direct, a local resident had this to say about ongoing tensions related to education: "People here have dealt with water and electricity shortages, but they won't accept interference in the education System. Education is a red line."

but they won't accept interference in the education System. Education is a red line."¹³¹ It has yet to be seen how these disputes will be resolved, but many local Assyrians doubtless share this view.

Issue: Assyrian Writer Arrested and Held without Charge

On September 30 2018, Syrian writer Souleman Yousph was arrested by the Sutoro at his home in Qamishli and detained without charge.¹³² He is a contributor to several media outlets, including the Assyrian news website Ankawa, the independent Arabic news website Elaph, and the political and cultural online secular magazine

Ahewar.¹³³ Eyewitnesses reported that Sutoro members also took a laptop, a personal computer, a number of cell phones, and other documents from his home.¹³⁴ The writer was held for five days before finally being released on October 4.

Yousph has regularly used the aforementioned

journalistic platforms, as well as his personal social media pages, to express critical views of the Kurdish administration's handling of Assyrian issues. In the

same month as his arrest, he published an article in Ankawa and numerous social media posts that decried the closing of Assyrian schools and the beating of Isa Rashid (as discussed in the previous issue section).¹³⁵ His writing accused the administration of destroying the social, cultural, and educational structures of Assyrian society.

Though it is not known for what reason Yousph was arrested, there is substantial circumstantial evidence that points toward this being an act of repression orchestrated out by the PYD. In addition to the proximity

of these actions to Yousph's vocal condemnations of PYD policies, it should be noted that the day after his arrest, the Sutoro released a statement on Facebook which referenced "those spreading lies."¹³⁶ Furthermore, the post said that democracy has rules and limitations, and that defamation is punishable by law in Western

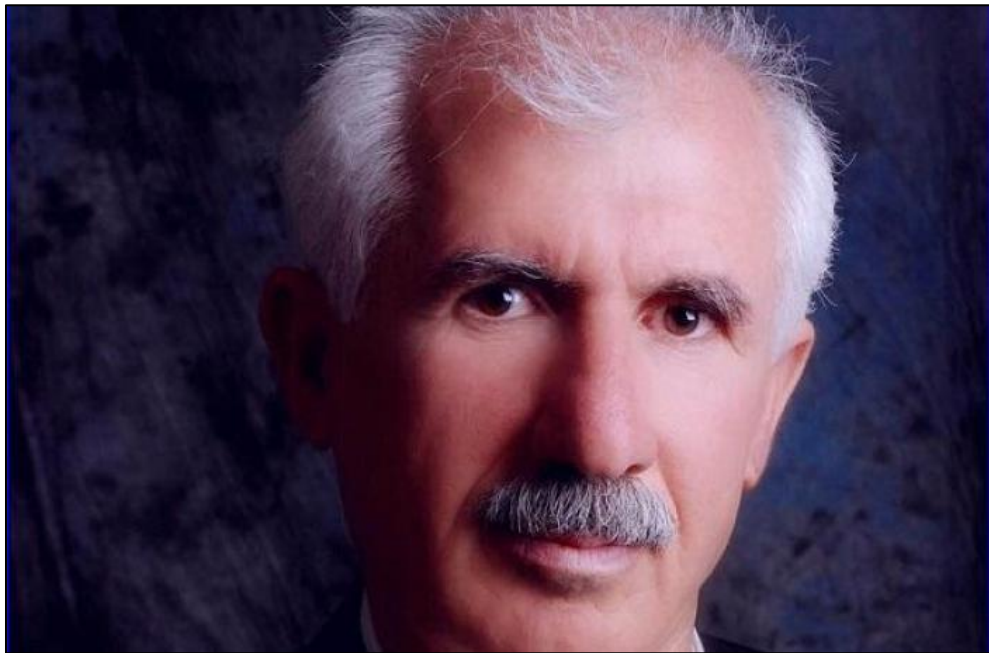
countries. Though Yousph's arrest was not directly mentioned, it does not seem unreasonable to conclude that these statements were made in reference to the writer, who at that time was still in Sutoro custody. The

Assyrian Policy Institute believes Yousph's work covering the developments affecting Assyrians in northern Syria was the sole reason for his detention.¹³⁷

Speaking to Syria Direct after his release, Yousph was quoted as saying, "The situation of Assyrians, and Christians in general, in this region [of Syria] is a growing crisis."¹³⁸ Indeed, it seems that the PYD is comfortable with pushing Assyrian interests to the side in order to pursue an apparent desire to secure the independence *de facto* Kurdish region in Syria. Despite its stated desire to create a more pluralistic and

accepting society, the PYD continues to use repressive tactics such as these to further Kurdish goals. Some community leaders, like Archbishop Jacques Behnan Hindo, worry that these actions represent a plan to "oust" Christians from the area, adding: "For years I have been saying that the Kurds are trying to eliminate the Christian presence in

this part of Syria."¹³⁹ Souleman Yousph and Isa Rashid serve as prominent examples of a trend wherein minorities like Assyrians are increasingly denied various political freedoms.¹⁴⁰ Such an approach is cause for grave concern and merits attentive monitoring from the international community.



Assyrian writer Souleman Yousph. © API

Turkey



Religious leaders have been involved in a long legal battle with the Turkish government over their property rights to the ancient Mor Gabriel Monastery. Image courtesy of Wikipedia.

Country Profile

The Republic of Turkey has long faced international criticism for its treatment of religious and ethnic minorities, which it has historically oppressed, marginalized, and slaughtered. Since the rise of the Justice and Development Party (AK, from Turkish *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) in 2002, the Turkish government has stated a desire to improve its treatment of these groups.¹⁴¹ Though this shift in governmental rhetoric is to the benefit of minority groups, the extension of cultural rights and religious

freedom has not yet been fully put into practice for many of these groups, including Assyrians. Despite the fact that the 1982 Turkish constitution provides for freedom of religious belief, the state's interpretation of secularism involves governmental control over religious communities and places of worship.¹⁴² Islam is governed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*), while all other religions are controlled by the General Directorate for Foundations (*Vakıflar*).¹⁴³ As a direct result, the Turkish

government plays a heavy hand in religious affairs. Under the leadership of Turkish President Recep Erdoğan, governmental attitudes towards minorities have been far from consistent, and in some areas have appeared to backslide since the alleged 2016 coup attempt.

Mistreatment of minorities has long been pointed out by external observers, especially the European Union. Minority reforms have been a key part of Turkey's EU ascension process, and have even been highlighted as a fundamental issue since before EU membership was on the table.¹⁴⁴ During a 2004 progress report on Turkey's EU ascension process, the European Commission specifically mentioned problems that non-Muslim religious communities face "related to legal personality, property rights, training of clergy, schools and internal management."¹⁴⁵

The following issue sections will outline ongoing Human Rights concerns for the Assyrian people in Turkey.

"Under the leadership of Turkish President Recep Erdoğan, governmental attitudes towards minorities have been far from consistent, and in some areas have appeared to backslide since the alleged 2016 coup attempt."

Issue: Assyrian Ecclesiastical Property Rights

Over the past year, the Turkish government has taken steps to return rightful ownership of Assyrian churches, monasteries, and cemeteries to their religious leaders. In early 2018, 56 ecclesiastical assets were set to be returned to Assyrian religious institutions.¹⁴⁶ The restoration of property certainly represents an important step in the right direction. However, the government's treatment of Assyrian land holdings has been inconsistent at best over the course of the past decade. It has yet to be seen if recent developments constitute a positive new trend or another promise that will be rescinded.

This sort of scepticism remains because recent reforms come after years of restrictive policies which target religious minorities throughout the country, including Assyrian Christian institutions. In addition to countless bureaucratic hurdles (from which Sunni religious establishments are often effectively exempted), the Turkish government has, on more than one

occasion, expropriated hundreds of Assyrian plots of land as well as the buildings upon them.¹⁴⁷ Much of this land has been owned by Assyrians for centuries and includes important religious sites.¹⁴⁸



Mor Gabriel Monastery. Image courtesy of Wikipedia.

An emblematic and infamous case of property seizure involves the historic Mor Gabriel Monastery (Syriac: ܡܘܪ ܓܒܪܝܐܠ ܡܘܪܝܬܐ), the oldest surviving Syriac Orthodox monastery in the world since its foundation in the year 397.¹⁴⁹ Mor Gabriel's property rights were brought into question following an update of Turkey's cadastral land registry, a process which began in 2005. In 2009, the monastery's property ownership was legally disputed by the Turkish state.¹⁵⁰ Local Kurdish villagers claimed that they needed the property for farming purposes. As a result, some sources speculate that these villagers have contributed to

heightened tensions by placing pressure on the Turkish state to appease them by repurposing the lands.¹⁵¹ After a long legal battle, the General Assembly of Turkey's Supreme Court placed the entirety of the land (totalling about 220,000 square meters) in government hands, leaving the future of this ancient worship site to the state's discretion.¹⁵²

Thanks to ongoing legal disputes between Mor Gabriel's leaders, the Turkish Treasury, and the local community, the actual ownership of various parcels of ecclesiastical land has shifted back and forth. However, in recent years, the general trend has been the slow return of parcels of land to the monastery, including 55 title deeds in 2018.¹⁵³ Property disputes are ongoing for the remainder of Mor Gabriel's appropriated land.¹⁵⁴

Though the Mor Gabriel case is the most well-known, hundreds of other Assyrian religious institutions have been faced with similar legal challenges. Some have also experienced partial success; for example, in March of 2018, the Turkish Parliament approved the return of many of the plots of land associated with the Mor Malke and Mor Abrohum monasteries in Mardin

province, including the monasteries themselves.¹⁵⁵ Though 54 of the 110 plots originally owned by the monasteries are still held by the government (mainly the surrounding forests and farmland), even the partial return of property represents an important step in the right direction.¹⁵⁶

The international community has expressed strong concerns about the treatment of these seized lands on numerous prior occasions, including scathing reports and calls for reform from the European Commission, European Parliament, and the US Department of State.¹⁵⁷ One member of the European Parliament (MEP) previously said of the situation, “Maybe the Turkish government does not want to forcibly eject the [Assyrian] minority from the country, but at the same time it wants to completely erase it.”¹⁵⁸ Though the situation on the ground has evolved since the time of this statement, its message still represents a real concern for Turkish Assyrians.

Though the Turkish state should be commended for beginning to reverse the

unjust expropriations of previous years, more must be done in order to rectify the situation outlined above. Land seizure is one of several bureaucratic obstacles (e.g. differently-enforced zoning laws,

““Maybe the Turkish government does not want to forcibly eject the [Assyrian] minority from the country, but at the same time it wants to completely erase it.”

restrictions on fundraising and tax exemptions, and property rights limitations) that directly restrict freedom of religion for Assyrian Christians and other religious minorities.¹⁵⁹ The

situations created by disputes such as these place Assyrian religious institutions – a cornerstone of Assyrian society – in limbo. Assyrians require full and equal protection under the law.

Issue: Declaration of Freedom of Religion Released under Suspicious Circumstances

Condemnatory press regarding the treatment of minorities in Turkey has negatively affected the international reputation of the Erdoğan government, and has proven to be a major stumbling block in its relations with Western nations in particular.¹⁶⁰ In July of 2018, pro-government sources reported that representatives of Turkish minority

communities, including Assyrian religious leaders, had signed a declaration stating that they were “free to follow their faith in Turkey, denying allegations that they were being victimized.”¹⁶¹

Unsurprisingly, several external sources, including other leading figures in these communities, have expressed their suspicions about the authenticity of the declaration.¹⁶² Some speculated that the signatories of the declaration were coerced. Others stated that the government asked for a statement to be released ahead of an important meeting, which pushed the leaders to sign it for fear of losing political access.¹⁶³ Indeed, other Assyrian religious leaders have pointed out that religious property issues (examined in the preceding section of this report) serve as direct

evidence that the declaration was not truthfully and freely created.¹⁶⁴

While the actual events surrounding the production of this declaration are unknown, they are doubtless unusual. In a truly free and equal society, communities rarely feel the need to announce the fact that they are free. As the ethnically Armenian lawmaker Garo Paylan (People’s Democratic Party, HDP), speaking to Al-Monitor, put it, the fact that the declaration exists is “in itself proof that we are not free.”¹⁶⁵ At the moment, there is no concrete evidence that minority leaders were coerced to sign the declaration; nevertheless, the doubtful circumstances surrounding its publication constitute grounds for scepticism toward the Erdoğan government’s intentions.



Since taking power in 2014, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has proven to be a controversial figure with regard to minority rights. © Reuters/Umit Bektas

Iran

Country Profile

Iranian society is dominated by a sect of Shia Islam known as the Twelver Jaafari school.¹⁶⁶ Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the country has been officially governed as a theocratic republic founded upon this belief system. However, the Iranian constitution does make allowances for a certain number of other belief systems: five other Islamic schools are accorded respect (Maliki, Hanafi, Shafi'i, Hanbali, and Zaydi), while Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism are considered as protected religious minorities.¹⁶⁷ These minorities are free to practice their beliefs "within the limits of the law." Of the 290 seats in the Iranian Parliament, five are reserved for non-Muslims, including one for Assyrian Christians.¹⁶⁸ Despite such allowances, the predominance of religious doctrine as a basis for governance in Iran means that minorities explicitly have fewer rights than members of the dominant religion. As a result, minorities often face restrictions and

discriminatory practices. For example, beyond the five parliamentary seats, non-Muslims are not permitted to be elected to a representative body or hold senior government, intelligence, or military positions.¹⁶⁹

It is important to note that Assyrians are not the only Christians in Iran, and furthermore Christians are not the only group in the country facing persecution. To again echo a sentiment from the introduction of this report, it is certainly true that other minorities experience human rights violations and are deserving of attention, protection, and respect.

Historically, many Assyrians have been forced to flee from Iran, fearing persecution. From a population numbering approximately 32,000 in 1996, only 7,000 remain today.¹⁷⁰ Christian churches continue to face extensive governmental surveillance, restrictions on construction, and are often

closed for offering services in Farsi (more on this last point in an issue section below).¹⁷¹ At the same time, Christians, especially pastors, are regularly arrested on national security charges for allegedly proselytizing (which is prohibited via apostasy laws) or for offering religious services from their homes.¹⁷² This will be discussed in the issue section below. Ultimately, while Christianity is not explicitly banned in Iran, Iranian Christians – including Assyrians – face sharp limitations and tremendous pressure from the Shia government.

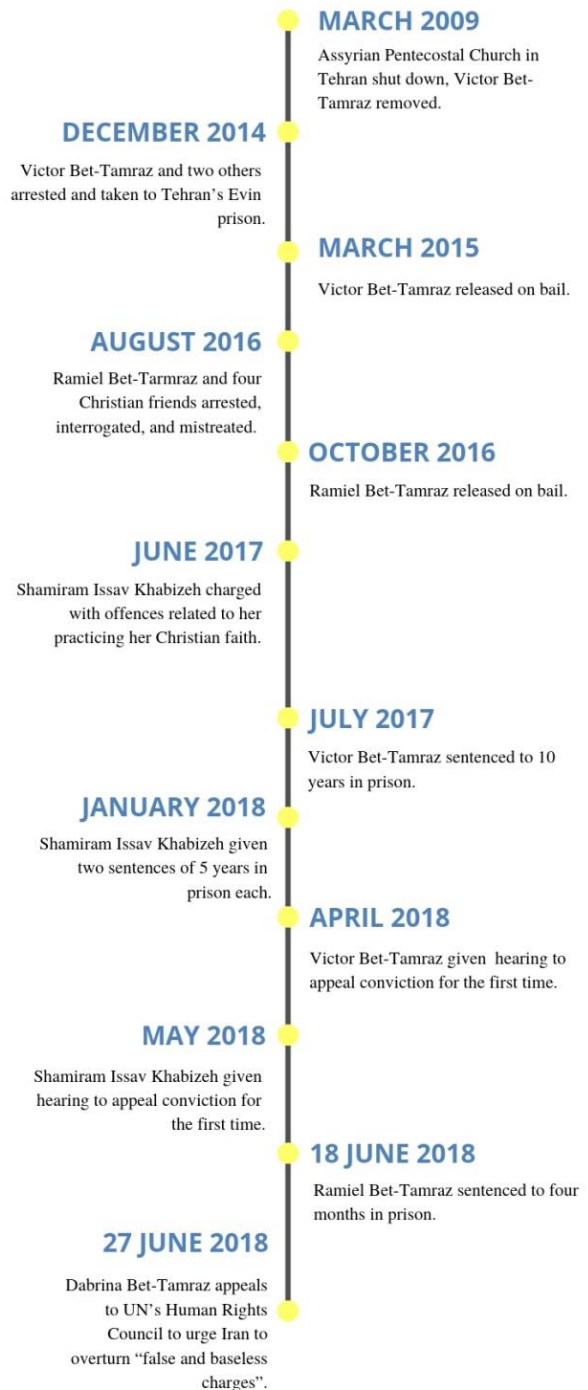
Issue: Assyrian Family Persecuted on Religious Grounds

The Bet-Tamraz family, Assyrian Pentecostal residents of Tehran, has suffered intensely as a result of Iran's attitude towards many of its Christian minorities. They have been collectively sentenced to more than 20 years in prison for nonviolent religious practices. Their story helps to illustrate persecutory tactics frequently employed by the government.

Victor Bet-Tamraz, the father of the family, had been the leader of Iran's Assyrian Pentecostal Church until it was shut down

by the Ministry of Interior in 2009 for offering services in Farsi.¹⁷³ The church was eventually allowed to reopen with a different

TIMELINE OF EVENTS: BET-TAMRAZ PERSECUTION



religious leader at its head and with services exclusively in Assyrian. This move is part of a general trend wherein the state attempts to limit the possibility of conversions away from Shia Islam to other faiths. In doing so, it often marginalises minority religious communities and severely restricts their ability to practice freely.

On December 26, 2014, Victor Bet-Tamraz was arrested in his home in Tehran, along with two Christian converts, during private Christmas celebrations.¹⁷⁴ According to Dabrina Bet-Tamraz, the daughter of the family, authorities confiscated “computers, a laptop, passports, ID cards, documents relating to my parents’ house and the car, my parents’ marriage certificate, books, Bibles, CDs of worship music, all electronic devices, money and bank cards.”¹⁷⁵ Victor Bet-Tamraz and the two other individuals were charged with acting against national security and acting against the regime by organising small groups.¹⁷⁶ They were held in Iran’s Evin prison,

notorious for its callous treatment of prisoners.¹⁷⁷ They reported having little contact with family members and no access to their lawyers – a UN

“...a UN Special rapporteur later issued a statement raising concerns about these practices at Evin Prison, calling them “contrary to international law.”

Special rapporteur later issued a statement raising concerns about these practices at Evin Prison, calling them “contrary to international law.”¹⁷⁸ Victor Bet-Tamraz was released on bail in March 2015, several months after his arrest. In May 21, 2017, he and the other individuals who were arrested with him were put on trial, and in early July were sentenced to 10 years in prison on the charge of “forming a group composed of more than two people with the purpose of disrupting national security.”¹⁷⁹ Victor Bet-Tamraz appealed this judgement and had his first hearing in April of 2018. There will reportedly be two more hearings, but dates have not yet been set.¹⁸⁰ While the appeal is pending, Victor Bet-Tamraz is currently out on bail.

On August 26, 2016, Ramiel Bet-Tamraz, the family’s son, was arrested along with four of his friends, all Christian converts, during a picnic in Firuzkuh.¹⁸¹ All five were also imprisoned in Evin in a section under

the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Intelligence. There, they reported facing intense and repeated interrogation without a lawyer present and enduring long periods of

solitary confinement.¹⁸² The interrogations apparently centred on their individual Christian activities, as well as questions related to Victor Bet-Tamraz. On October 10 the same year, Ramiel was allowed out on bail. On June 18, 2018 he was called for a short trial session before a branch of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran, where he was sentenced to four months in prison for “spreading propaganda against the system [through] membership of illegal house churches.”¹⁸³ He has appealed his conviction, and this process is still ongoing.

On June 19, 2017, Shamiram Issav Khabizeh, the mother of the family, was summoned to the Office of the Prosecutor in Evin prison and charged with threatening national security by organising small groups, attending a seminary abroad, and training church leaders and pastors to act as spies.¹⁸⁴

In January 2018, a branch of the Revolutionary Court in Tehran sentenced Shamiram Issav to five years in prison for “membership of a group with the purpose of disrupting national security” and another five years in prison for “gathering and colluding to commit crimes against national security.”¹⁸⁵ She too has appealed her sentencing, receiving her first hearing in May 2018, and is awaiting further hearings.

On June 27, 2018, Dabrina Bet-Tamraz, appealing to the UN’s Human Rights Council in Geneva, called for intervention to overturn “false and baseless charges” imposed on her father, mother, and brother.¹⁸⁶ She had been accused of similar offenses, but is based in Switzerland and was therefore able to avoid arrest. She also revealed that her family had to put their house up as collateral for bail money.



The Bet-Tamraz family, from left to right: Ramil, Victor, Shamiran, and Dabrina. © API

Dabrina stated that the Bet-Tamraz family has no intentions to attack the government, and that all of their charges were related to peaceful actions related to genuine religious belief.¹⁸⁷

These proceedings have created an international outcry. On August 23, 2018, Amnesty International urgently called on the Iranian government to drop charges and to stop the arbitrary

harassment of Christians across the country.¹⁸⁸ It also asked for ordinary citizens to petition the government for the family's release.

On September 10, 2018, Jon Koriel, the Chairman of the Board of the Assyrian Policy Institute, published a similar statement.¹⁸⁹ Both noted that Iran is a signatory of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 18 of which states that, "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or in private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teach"

and that persons belonging to religious minorities "shall not be denied the right, in community with other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language."¹⁹⁰ The government's treatment of the Bet-Tamraz family, and of countless Assyrians and other Christians like them since the 1979 Revolution, is in clear

violation of these acknowledged principles.

The case of the Bet-Tamraz family is important to highlight, not just to call attention to the clear violation

of the family's human rights and basic freedoms, but also to underscore a representative case of the ways in which Christianity is repressed by the Iranian state. Miles Windsor of Middle East Concern has noted that, while Christians have long been persecuted for their faith in Iran, the jail sentences associated with their arrests have been increasing in recent years.¹⁹¹ Here, it should be again noted that these discriminatory practices are not unique to the Bet-Tamraz family or to Assyrians, but affect Christians and other minority religious groups across the country.

Recommendations

In light of the lengthy list of human rights abuses detailed in this report, it is clear that significant changes need to be made. The Assyrian Confederation of Europe has compiled the following list of recommendations to the actors involved:

- The European Union should ensure that it consistently recognises Assyrian issues in any official document related to Iraq, Syria, Turkey, or Iran. Humanitarian aid to these nations, particularly that which is sent to Kurdish institutions, should be made conditional until reforms are made in the treatment of Assyrians.
- EU policymakers should use their considerable voice to raise important issues related to human rights abuses in these nations and should call for greater autonomy for Assyrians there. This holds especially true in Iraq, where plans to implement an autonomous zone in the Nineveh Plains region have stalled since 2014. The EU should push for this regional autonomous government as it supported the establishment of an autonomous Kurdish government in previous years.
- Any aid funds designed to assist Assyrians should be given to Assyrian officials directly, especially in the Nineveh Plains region. This will ensure that such funds are not abused by other groups, who put Assyrian issues behind their own.
- The EU should form an Assyrian Friendship group in the European Parliament. This dedicated group of MEPs would display a commitment to Assyrian issues and would more effectively raise awareness of them to a larger public audience.
- More generally, the EU should consult with Assyrians and Assyrian institutions as an important source of independent information related to regional issues.
- The EU should closely monitor Assyrians' fundamental human rights to free and fair election in Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Turkey, by sending observational teams composed not only of European citizens, but also of Assyrians and other diaspora community members.
- The EU should recognize the fact that minority communities are not monolithically religious in nature – minority political organising across the Middle East and in diaspora is more complex than a single religious identifier. It should therefore acknowledge, and encourage nations across the Middle East to acknowledge, that these complexities should be taken into account in matters of representation.

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