

A brief history of the plight of the Christian Assyrians* in modern day Iraq

(1932-2008)

By David William Lazar

The recent murders of 15 Assyrian Christians and their mass exodus from their homes in the city of Mosul, the provincial capital of the Nineveh province is the latest round of ethnic cleansing campaigns against the Christians of Iraq. The purpose of this article is to shed light on the plight of the Assyrian Christians since Iraq gained its independence from the British in 1932.

After the Ottomans were defeated and the borders of the new Middle East were drawn, Britain and France remained as imperial powers in the area. In 1932, Iraq was given its independence and Faisal the Hashemite (related to the prophet Muhammad) was brought from the region known today as Saudi Arabia and was appointed King in return for all the services he and his tribe had rendered to the British crown. His cousin was also appointed as king over Jordan. Assyrians were absorbed into the new Iraq, after they had fled their mountainous homeland in the Hakkari region in present day Turkey and the plains of Uremia and Salamis in present day Iran. Kurds took over these lands and became the dominant force there, always threatening to secede from the respective central governments of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria and demanding an independent "Kurdistan".

The first act of ethnic cleansing against the Assyrian Christians in the newly formed Kingdom of Iraq occurred in 1933. The Iraqi army under the leadership of Bakir Sidqi, a Kurd, attacked the Christian inhabitants of numerous northern towns and villages and for several days continued their horrendous acts of murder, rape and pillage against innocent civilians. When the "brave" Muslim soldiers finished their week long rampage, the death toll exceeded 3000. All this took place under the watchful eyes of British authorities, literally speaking, because British fliers were taking photos of the events on the ground and specifically the massacres that were being committed in the town of Simele. It's also worth mentioning here that Kurdish irregulars had participated actively in the bloody campaign and several of their Mullahs (Muslim priests) had declared Jihad or holy war against the Christian "infidels".

A large segment of the Assyrian inhabitants of the small towns and villages of northern Iraq fled their homes and settled in the large cities of Baghdad, Mosul, Kirkuk and Basra. This allowed the Kurds to move into the abandoned areas and lay claim to them. In 1958 the King was toppled and Iraq was declared a Republic. In 1959, Mullah Mustafa Barazani, the defeated leader of Kurdish liberation movement who had fled to the Soviet Union after his dream of an independent Kurdistan in Iran was shattered was unwisely invited to come to Iraq by the new Iraqi regime. After less than a year of settling in Iraq, Mullah Mustafa Barazani organized a new revolution, this time in northern Iraq, and what followed were fifteen years of continuous civil

war that drained the resources of the country and more importantly caused hundreds of thousands of Assyrians to flee their homes and lands and become displaced refugees in large cities, however this time they faced another threat which denied their existence as a unique ethnic group. The Baath regime started referring to them as Christian Arabs and history books were rewritten in support of the ruling party's position, at the same time, Assyrian schools were taken over by the central government, social clubs were forced to accept Arabs into their membership, athletic teams were disbanded and the Assyrian language was only allowed to be taught in churches as language of liturgy. In summary an economic and social system of apartheid aimed at destroying the Assyrian ethnic identity. This caused many Assyrians to immigrate to Western countries while large numbers of their young men joined the Kurdish revolt and hundreds if not thousands gave the ultimate sacrifice for the Kurdish cause.

The trend has been as follows since Iraq came into existence; if the Assyrian Christians have any issues with the central government in Baghdad, Kurds side with the government and participate in military campaigns against them. If Kurds rise against the government, they expect the Assyrians to support them and ally with them against the "common enemy", when Assyrians flee the war zone, because they don't have a national interest in a war between lawless Kurdish tribes and the central governments, their Kurdish "allies" take over their homes and lands and claim them to have always been an integral part of "Kurdistan". Therefore a policy of "Arabization" of the Assyrian identity by the brutal Baath regime of Saddam Hussein and sons in Baghdad and all the other provinces and a similar policy of "Kurdification" of Assyrian lands in northern Iraq by the Barazani clan.

In 1991 and after the Iraqi military was defeated by a world coalition of the willing under the leadership of the US, a safe-haven was carved out of Iraq to allow Kurds and other ethnic groups to live and prosper in peace without the interference from Saddam and his military, this was planned to be an area from which Iraqi opposition groups would launch attacks against the regime in Baghdad in the hope that one day they would succeed in toppling it. The region prospered but peace didn't last too long, because Kurds are divided along tribal lines and because the Kurdish tribes under the leadership of the Barazani clan speak a completely different language from the Kurds under his mortal enemy's leadership, Jalal Talabani (the current president of Iraq), add to the centuries old animosities, revenue in hundreds of millions of dollars from the illegal sale of smuggled Iraqi crude oil to Turkey, a Kurdish "civil war" erupted and lasted for four years until Barazani pleaded with Saddam to help him defeat Talabani, Saddam obliged and invaded the region crushing Talabani's militia and forcing him to seek refuge in neighboring Iran.

The Clinton administration was able to bring the two rival Kurdish factions together and pressure them to sign a cease fire agreement and then dividing the US protected Kurdistan

region into two territories each clan ruling its own area. All this time encroachment on Assyrian lands continued and several Assyrian individuals were murdered by Kurdish secret police (Asayish) including Francis Shabo, Assyrian member of Kurdistan regional parliament.

In 2003 the US invaded Iraq and toppled Saddam's regime and in 2005 a constitution was drafted and voted on by a large portion of the Iraqi populace. The document grants the smaller ethnic groups (Assyrian, Turkmen) the right to establish their own schools and observe their unique ethnic and religious traditions and at the same time run their own affairs at the local level (Article 125 of the Iraqi constitution). The only geographical area left for the Assyrians where they constitute a small majority is what is known as the plain of Nineveh, which is part of the Nineveh province, the "heart" of the historic and ancestral land of the Assyrians.

The Kurds realizing that the most popular Assyrian political entity, the Assyrian Democratic Movement, had no intention of unifying the Nineveh plain with the Assyrian areas under Kurdish control, they began a systematic and vicious campaign against the Christian Assyrians. They prevented them from voting during the 2005 Iraqi parliament elections by threatening the voters with violence or by not allowing election boxes to be delivered to the voting centers or by shutting down many of these centers under the pretext of lack of security. They were also able to manipulate the deep rooted sectarian divisions among the Christians by supporting one faction against the other and by "buying" the support of church leaders from the main three denominations. They also established a 24 hour Assyrian satellite television program (Ishtar TV) that broadcasts worldwide promoting Kurdish propaganda and appointed leaders of smaller Assyrian political parties as "ministers" in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

Less than a month ago, the Kurdish-Islamist parliament of the "new and democratic" Iraq removed article 50 from the newly passed provincial electoral law, in effect destroying any hope that the Christians had in attaining rightful representation at the provincial level without being aligned with the Kurdish coalition. Article 50 had guaranteed 13 seats in several provinces where Christians reside and one of these being the Nineveh province where Kurds constitute less than 20% of the population, the three seats guaranteed to the Christians were seen as a "critical block" that would in affect prevent the Kurds from swallowing the Nineveh province and making it part of the so called Kurdistan region. The other two seats that were allocated to the other two smaller minorities, the Yazidis (adherents of an old pre-Christianity religion) and Shabaks (Shiites by faith and remnants of numerous Persian conquests of Northern Mesopotamian region) were also seen as a threat by Kurds because these two communities reject the idea of annexing the plain of Nineveh which they share with their Christian neighbors

to the Kurdish region and are strong supporters of the establishment of an administrative unit with ties to the Federal government in Baghdad.

The Kurdish coalition is now asking the Iraqi parliament to introduce another article to the Iraqi provincial electoral law guaranteeing seats for the Christians only without any quota seats for the Yazidis and Shabaks. By separating the Christians from their Yazidi and Shabak neighbors, an administrative unit with ties to Baghdad would not be feasible with the Christian areas alone and the only solution would be to grant this region self-rule under the KRG. With this accomplished the borders of the Kurdish region would be at the doors of the city of Mosul and they would be able to exert economic and political pressure on the whole Nineveh province and eventually annex it to Kurdistan when and if Iraq is partitioned along ethnic and sectarian lines. The annexation of the Nineveh province to the Kurdish region will also give an independent Kurdistan a “geographical” continuity to the North East area of Syria which Kurdish nationalists refer to as Western Kurdistan.

In conclusion, it's the belief of the author of this article that the creation of an independent Kurdistan will cause instability and many wars in the region. The major Kurdish parties follow a fascist ideology mixed with tribal mentality and are notorious for suppressing the voice of freedom and democracy in their region. The Assyrian Christians have suffered tremendously and throughout the centuries at the hand of Kurdish chieftains. The present large population of Kurds and the dwindling numbers of Christian Assyrians on their ancestral lands is the result of hundreds of years of ethnic cleansing, committed by Kurds against Assyrians by declaring Jihad or holy war or actively participating in holy wars declared by fellow Muslims such as the Ottomans.

The Assyrian Christians of Iraq are loyal citizens of that country and they don't want to see it divided. All that they're asking for is an administrative unit in the Nineveh plain, where they can live in peace with their neighbors, practicing their religion and preserving their ethnic identity. We ask the civilized world to help us achieve our objective in establishing this administrative unit and we put the Federal government in Baghdad on notice that if this doesn't get accomplished Kurdish dreams of an independent Kurdistan will soon become a reality.

- Present day Assyrians are the descendants of the Assyrians of antiquity that ruled most of the Middle East for several centuries. Their last capital was the city of Nineveh where God sent Jonah in the belly of a whale to preach to its inhabitants and ask them to repent. Assyrians belong to the Chaldean rite (Unitary church with Rome), Syriac rite

(Jacobites), Eastern Church (Nestorians). Their language is referred to by scholars as Syriac or neo-Aramaic. By the third century AD, most Assyrians had accepted Christianity. It's believed that the apostles St. Thomas and St. Bartholomew and Thaddeus of the seventy disciples evangelized the Assyrians and were instrumental in the establishment of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church of the East, the Church which the majority of Assyrians belonged to at one time.