Profile

Assyrians comprise a distinct ethno-religious group in Iraq, although official Iraqi statistics consider them to be Arabs. Descendants of ancient Mesopotamian peoples, Assyrians speak Aramaic and belong to one of four churches: the Chaldean (Uniate), Nestorian, Jacobite or Syrian Orthodox, and the Syrian Catholic.

Assyrians form a distinct community, but with three origins: (1) those who inhabited Hakkari (in modern Turkey), who were predominantly tribal and whose leaders acknowledged the temporal as well as spiritual paramountcy of their patriarch, the Mar Shimun; (2) a peasant community in Urumiya (see Iran); and (3) a largely peasant community in Amadiya, Shaqlawa and Rawanduz in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Historical context

Because of its expulsion from the ‘Orthodox’ community at Ephesus in 431, the Assyrian Church operated entirely east (hence its title) of Byzantine Christendom, establishing communities over a wide area. Its heartlands were at the apex of the fertile crescent. The Mongol invasions, however, virtually wiped out the Assyrian Church except in limited areas.

On the whole the Assyrians co-existed successfully with the neighbouring Kurdish tribes. In Hakkari, Assyrian tribes held Kurdish as well as Assyrian peasantry in thrall, just as Kurdish tribes did, and rival Assyrian tribes would seek allies among neighbouring Kurdish tribes, and vice versa.

Religious tensions only developed in the 1840s, partly a result of European penetration and interest in Christian communities, partly the product of local rivalries, and partly because of growing Sunni-Armenian tensions. Sunni persecution of the Assyrians was a regular feature by the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1915 the Hakkari Assyrians were encouraged to
revolt against the Ottomans (who had started massacring Armenians) by Russian forces, which then proved unable to support them. The community fought its way to Urumiya but with the collapse of Tsarist Russia in 1917 was compelled to march southwards to the British occupied zone. The survivors, 25,000 or so, were settled in Iraq.

After the war several factors led to tragedy: it proved impossible for Assyrians to return to Hakkari as they wished; they were denied the kind of autonomy they had enjoyed there; and growing mistrust existed between the community and the Arab government, partly because the British used the Assyrians’ formidable fighting qualities in a specially raised force to guard British installations.

Assyrians viewed Iraqi independence in 1932 as a British betrayal. Growing tension led to a confrontation in 1933, followed by a series of massacres perpetrated by the Iraqi army, in which anything between 600 and 3,000 perished. Many Assyrians left for America, including the Mar Shimun, but the greater part remained and accommodated themselves within the Iraqi state. Many moved south to Baghdad.

Assyrians were unable to avoid the Kurdish conflict. As with the Kurds, some supported the government, others allied themselves with the Kurdish nationalist movement. In 1979 a number of smaller parties combined to form the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM), formally joining the Kurdish armed struggle in 1982. Assyrian villages and people were victims like the Kurds in the 1988 Anfal campaign. ADM was part of the Kurdistan Front and participated in the 1992 Kurdistan election, five seats being reserved for Assyrian representatives. ADM demanded Assyrian recognition in the Iraqi Constitution, full cultural rights and equal treatment. If the Kurds achieved a federal state, the Assyrians would demand autonomy within it, but there was also a widespread desire to emigrate.

Assyrians, along with other Christian minorities, were especially affected by Saddam Hussein’s genocide or Anfal campaign. Launched in 1988, the campaign resulted in the death or forced disappearance of some 100,000 people – mostly Kurds, but including many thousands of people from different minorities – and the policy of ‘Arabization’ that continued until 2003. As well as disappearances and murder, the Arabization policy officially forced minorities to change their ethnic identity. The 1987 and 1997 national censuses obliged all Assyrians to choose between an Arab or Kurdish identity; those who insisted on identifying as Assyrian were struck off the list or arbitrarily registered as Arab or Kurd. In 2001, decree 199 proclaimed the ‘right’ of every Iraqi to change their ethnic identity and to choose an Arab one. Hundreds of thousands were also forcibly displaced, particularly in the economically significant region around Kirkuk.

As ethnic and religious minorities, Assyrians were doubly targeted during the ethnic and sectarian civil war that gripped Iraq after the March 2003 invasion. Assyrians formed a disproportionate part of the millions of Iraqis displaced by the war. They suffered from killings, bombings, kidnappings, torture, harassment, forced conversions, and dispossession. Assyrian churches, businesses and homes were also targeted. People were abducted or killed in
attacks simply because they were in targeted Christian areas, worked for foreign companies, or held official or professional positions. These included civil servants, medical personnel and civic and religious leaders.

Christians who worked with people in high-profile positions and with the international community were particularly at risk. For example, on 22 September 2005, gunmen opened fire on a Nissan pickup truck carrying six Assyrian security guards assigned to protect Pascale Warda, an Assyrian activist and the former Iraqi Minister of Migration and Displacement. Four out of the six were killed. Two members of the Assyrian Democratic Movement, a Christian political party, were killed and two others wounded in November 2005 when gunmen opened fire in Mosul, according to a hospital official. CNN reported they were posting flyers for forthcoming regional parliamentary elections. Similarly in April 2008, Assyrian Orthodox priest Father Adel Youssef was shot to death by unidentified militants in central Baghdad.

The years 2007 and 2008 saw a push for Assyrian autonomy, self-rule or self-administration in the Ninewa region of Iraq. Although such ‘separation’ could potentially expose Assyrians to further insecurity, the regional Kurdish government supported this move for a new province – possibly because it would reinforce the Kurdish wish to separate from Iraq. Meanwhile, the Kurdistan Regional Government confiscated Assyrian lands across the north.

In October 2010, an attack on the Our Lady of Salvation Syriac Catholic church in Baghdad sent shockwaves through the Assyrian community. The attack, which was carried out by militants associated with Al-Qaeda in Iraq, left at least 56 dead and 78 wounded. In the aftermath of the attack, it was reported that more than 1,000 Christian families fled Baghdad.

Current issues

The advance of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in 2014 had disastrous consequences for Assyrians. ISIS’s takeover of the city of Mosul in 2014 caused hundreds of Christian families to flee towards the Ninewa plains and areas held by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The remaining Christian families received an ultimatum to either convert to Islam, pay jizya (a tribute levied on non-Muslims) or be killed. By July 2014, almost all Christian families had left the city. ISIS marked Christian homes in Mosul with the Arabic letter N (for ‘Nazarene’) and designated them the property of the Islamic State, looting them of their contents.

Between 6 and 7 August, ISIS proceeded to take control of all Assyrian areas in the Ninewa plains, including Tel Isqof, Bartalla, Karamles, Batnaya, Tel Keyf, and Iraq’s largest Christian town, Qaraqosh, previously home to 50,000 people. This caused a second wave of displacement, as approximately 200,000 people fled towards the KRG region. ISIS fighters robbed Assyrian families as they were fleeing from their areas, confiscating their money, cars, mobile phones, jewellery and identification documents. ISIS fighters and residents of neighboring villages also looted and plundered homes and farms belonging to Assyrians who had fled.

In addition to being displaced in large numbers, Assyrians have also suffered from a campaign
of deliberate destruction of their historical, cultural and religious heritage. Beginning in 2014, ISIS destroyed many Assyrian churches, tombs, and historical sites, some thousands of years old. Some examples include Assyrian Green Church in Tikrit, the ancient city of Hatra and the historical Assyrian capital of Nimrud. The group also destroyed a large number of artifacts in Mosul Museum, most of them linked to the Assyrian civilization.

In response to the recent wave of violence and a perceived failure of the Iraqi authorities to protect them, many Assyrians are choosing to emigrate. The community is continuing to shrink in size and is now a small fraction of what it was prior to 2003. Those who remain fear for their safety, especially in Baghdad, where bombings and abductions are frequent and the climate of sectarianism has led to harassment of Christians by Shi’ite militias.

In the Kurdistan region, although the security situation is better, Assyrians often report suppression of their political activities by the Kurdish authorities. There is pressure on Assyrians and other minorities to support the political aims of the two dominant Kurdish parties, and instances of illegal Kurdish construction on Assyrian-owned lands occur frequently.

Recently, some Assyrian groups, most notably in the diaspora, have thrown their support behind a proposal for a semi-autonomous ‘safe zone’ for minorities in the Ninewa plains. Many are advocating for some element of international protection for this zone, due to their distrust in both the Iraqi government and the KRG. In this plan, minorities would also be given the authority to manage their own security, in contrast to the previous arrangement. This coincides with the trend of self-defense against ISIS of some Iraqi minority communities since 2014.

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