

## Assyrians

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### Profile

An estimated 225,000 Assyrians [US CIRF 2006] 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 live mainly in the major cities and in the rural areas of north-eastern Iraq where they tend to be professionals and businessmen or independent farmers. They are Christians, belonging 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. But 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 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 in Hakkari; 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 Anfal, 1987-8. ADM was part of the Kurdistan Front, and participated in the 1992 Kurdistan election, five seats being reserved for Assyrian representatives. ADM demands 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 is a widespread desire to emigrate.

Rivalry over the Patriarchate led to a split in 1964, but in 1990 the two patriarchs met and agreed terms for a reunion.

## **Current issues**

As ethnic and religious minorities, Assyrians have been doubly targeted during the ethnic and sectarian civil war that has gripped Iraq since the March 2003 invasion. Assyrians form a disproportionate part of the millions of Iraqis displaced by the war. They have suffered from killings, bombings, kidnappings, torture, harassment, forced conversions, and dispossession. Although a dip in the level of violence in Iraq in the latter part of 2007 provided some measure of relief for all Iraqi communities, as violence rose again in 2008, Assyrians continued to be targeted. In April 2008, Assyrian Orthodox priest Father Adel Youssef was shot to death by unidentified militants in central Baghdad.

There has been a recent push for Assyrian autonomy, self-rule or self-administration in the Ninewah region of Iraq. Although such 'separation' could potentially expose Assyrians to further insecurity, the regional Kurdish government has supported this move for a new province - possibly because it would reinforce the Kurdish wish to separate from Iraq. Meanwhile, the Kurdistan Regional Government has assiduously confiscated Assyrian lands across the north.