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## Assyrians

Also called Syrian Orthodox Christians or Syriacs, the language and practices of Assyrians originated in early Christianity.

Their historical homeland in Turkey is in the provinces of Mardin and Hakkari in the south-east. Around 95 per cent of Assyrians in this region have left Turkey because of persecution and displacement. A 1995 study estimates the number of remaining Assyrians to be around 15 000, the majority of whom live in Istanbul and around 2000–3000 of whom live in the south-east.

Assyrians belong to the same ethnicity and speak the same language (Assyrian). They are divided into four main groups based on differences of theological interpretation and denomination. The Assyrian Orthodox community in Turkey has four metropolises: Turabdin, Mardin, Adıyaman and Istanbul. Their patriarchate is in Damascus, Syria. The Deputy Patriarch of Assyrian Catholics is also in Istanbul; their patriarchate is in Lebanon.

The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation (UNPO) estimates that from 1915 – 1918, around 750,000 Assyrians Christians were killed after a fatwa was declared against them, and this impacted directly on the dispersal of the community across the Middle East, especially to Iraq where a strong Assyrian community already existed. Further dispersal has continued as the community has experienced waves of persecution.

The Assyrian community was invited by the British to be an ally in World War One. In return, they were promised autonomy, independence, and a homeland. After the British mandate in Iraq expired, the question was never resolved and the status of Assyrians in Iraq was left with the government there.

In Turkey in the 1920s and 30s particularly, Assyrians continued to suffer alongside Kurds and Armenians as, under Turkish law, their villages were renamed with Turkish names. They were also caught up in the conflict between the Turkish armed forces and the PKK during 1984 – 99. They suffered forced evictions, mass displacement and the burning down of their homes and villages. The internally displaced people (IDPs) were not offered just compensation or provided with alternative housing. The displaced were not allowed to return to their homes until 1999.

In June 1994, the Assyrian Democratic Organization and Human Rights Without Frontiers issued a joint file at a press conference at the Belgian Parliament that listed 200 Assyrian villages destroyed in Turkey in the previous 30 years and a list of 24 Assyrians assassinated in Turkey since 1990.

During the 1990s, reports in the Turkish Daily News and by Amnesty International and other organizations documented the ongoing persecution of Assyrians in Turkey, including abductions (including of priests,) forced conversions to Islam through rape and forced marriage, and murder.

These pressures, and other insidious forms of persecution and discrimination, have decimated the community.

Turkey has restricted the scope of the Treaty of Lausanne to Armenians, Jews and Rums. This has unlawfully left other non-Muslims, including Assyrians outside the protection of the Treaty. Assyrians have been particularly vocal in pointing out their unlawful exclusion and demanding the recognition of their rights under the Treaty. Because of this exclusion, they do not have the right to education in their mother tongue, something that many Assyrians wish to do. They also do not have the right to set up their own schools, enjoyed (albeit with state restrictions,) by other minorities.

As Turkey seeks to join the EU, a few restrictions on minorities have been relaxed. In November 2004, amendments were made to the Law on Associations in November 2004 lifted many of the restrictions on the freedom of association. Most importantly, the establishment of associations is no longer subject to prior authorization.<sup>235</sup>The reforms also created more space for minorities to exercise their freedom of association, inter alia by setting up associations to develop their culture. Following these reforms, some minorities, such as Roma, Caucasians and Assyrians, have set up such associations.

In 2005, the government officially allowed the celebration of the Assyrian New Year (Akito), which was highly symbolic for the Assyrian community. However with such dwindling numbers, and often caught between the Kurdish demands and the state, the community's survival in Turkey remains under severe pressure.

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