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# Assyrian Genocide in Modern History

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# Assyrian Genocide in Modern History

August 7, 2019

*Produced in partnership with the Assyrian American Association of Southern California, the Assyrian American Cultural Organization of Arizona, and the Centre for Canadian-Assyrian Relations.*



## Cover photo:

Sept. 1933 satellite image of Bartashah, an Assyrian village northwest of Simele, after an attack by Arab and Kurdish irregulars during the 1933 Simele Massacre. The circular pits are traits of bombings. (*Reforging a Forgotten History* by Sargon Donabed, pg. 119)



### About the Assyrian American Association of Southern California

Founded in August 1964, the Assyrian American Association of Southern California is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization whose broad mission is to serve and advance the Assyrian-American community by concentrating on a wide spectrum of areas such as cultural and linguistic identity, public and governmental outreach and advocacy, education, arts and literature, youth services, among other initiatives.

[www.aaaofsc.org](http://www.aaaofsc.org)

### About the Assyrian American Cultural Organization of Arizona

Founded in 2012, the mission of the Assyrian American Cultural Organization of Arizona is to create a sustainable and far-reaching social and educational organization to serve the needs of the Assyrian-American community of Phoenix, Arizona, and to spark an interest and love for Assyrian culture and heritage.

[www.assyrianamerican.org](http://www.assyrianamerican.org)

### About the Centre for Canadian-Assyrian Relations

Founded in March 2014, the Centre for Canadian-Assyrian Relations (CCAR) is a non-profit organization based in Greater Toronto Area whose mission is to help build bridges amongst the Assyrian and Canadian communities by sharing our culture with the Canadian public, while working in cooperation with Canadians to share the Canadian way of life with the local Assyrian community.

[www.ccarofficial.com](http://www.ccarofficial.com)

### About the Assyrian Policy Institute

Founded in May 2018, the Assyrian Policy Institute works to support Assyrians as they struggle to maintain their rights to the lands they have inhabited for thousands of years, their ancient language, equal opportunities in education and employment, and to full participation in public life.

[www.assyrianpolicy.org](http://www.assyrianpolicy.org)

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# Contents

## INSIDE

This document provides a summary of five major events in modern history during which Assyrians were subjected to genocide and ethnic cleansing, as well as recommendations for further reading.

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| <b>What is genocide?</b>   | <b>2</b>  |
| <b>1843</b><br><i>The first recorded genocide of Assyrians in modern times</i> | <b>3</b>  |
| <b>1915-1918</b><br><i>The Ottoman Turkish Genocide of the Assyrians</i>       | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>1933</b><br><i>The Massacre of Assyrians at Simele</i>                      | <b>8</b>  |
| <b>1969</b><br><i>The Massacre of Assyrians at Soriya</i>                      | <b>10</b> |
| <b>2014-2015</b><br><i>Genocide and ethnic cleansing at the hands of ISIS</i>  | <b>11</b> |
| <b>The Lasting Impact of Genocide</b>  | <b>13</b> |
| <b>References</b>  | <b>14</b> |

## What is genocide?

Under international law, the definition of genocide includes two main elements:<sup>1</sup>

A mental element: the "intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group as such; and

A physical element, which includes the following five acts, enumerated exhaustively: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily harm or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

The term 'genocide' was coined by Raphael Lemkin, who was directly influenced by the Simele Massacre and the earlier Armenian, Assyrian, and Greek Genocide.<sup>2</sup> According to Lemkin:

By "genocide" we mean the destruction of an ethnic group.... Generally speaking, genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished by mass killings of all members of a nation. It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves. The objectives of such a plan would be disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of the personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such groups....<sup>3</sup>

## 10 Stages of Genocide

1. **Classification:** Members of a community are divided into "us and them."
2. **Symbolization:** People are forced to identify themselves.
3. **Discrimination:** People are subjected to systematic discrimination.
4. **Dehumanization:** Members of the targeted community are equated with animals, vermin, or diseases.
5. **Organization:** The government creates or designates special forces to enforce policies.
6. **Polarization:** The government spreads propaganda designed to turn the populace against the targeted group.
7. **Preparation:** Official action to remove or relocate targeted group begins.
8. **Persecution:** Murders and confiscation of property begins; community leaders are often targeted first.
9. **Extermination:** Large-scale massacre of the group.
10. **Denial:** The government takes actions to prevent documentation and research and denies any crimes were committed.

*"The houses of the wretched inhabitants were fired, and they themselves hunted down like wild beasts and exterminated. Neither sex nor age met with favour or mercy; the mother, brothers, and sisters of the patriarch were the objects of peculiar barbarity, the former being literally sawed in two and the latter most shockingly mangled and mutilated...."*  
—*The Times, UK (September 6, 1843)*<sup>4</sup>

# 1843

## The first recorded genocide of Assyrians in modern times

The first recorded genocide of Assyrians in modern times took place in 1843 in Hakkari (modern-day Turkey) at the hands of Kurdish forces under the command of Bedr Khan Beg. The genocidal campaign was sanctioned by Ottoman Turkish officials to subdue the perceived threat of Assyrian independence:

In the eyes of the Kurds, the presence of the homeland of the Assyrian tribes in the midst of their own intensive settlements represented a serious challenge to their dominance of the region.<sup>5</sup>

At least ten thousand Assyrians were killed in the brutal massacres. Women and children were enslaved, and villages were looted and burned in the mountains where Assyrians had lived almost autonomously for thousands of years. Churches, villages, farmlands, and irrigations channels were completely destroyed. The Assyrians fought back against the attacks, but the Turkish army ultimately joined Bedr Khan Beg and his forces. The various Assyrian tribes in the region were encircled, leaving no path for Assyrians to escape the impending massacres. According to an American missionary:

[The Kurds swept] with fire and sword swept through the country, sparing neither young nor old, male nor female, except a few thousand whom they could carry away into a captivity worse than death....

A brave band did indeed dispute the progress of the fiery invaders..., but they were soon borne down by superior numbers, and only four out of the forty heroes...escaped with their lives. The whole of Tyary, with the exception of four or five villages, was laid in ruins, the houses burned....

Some of the most venerated churches, which for centuries had been the sanctuaries of these people..., were now spoiled...[and blown] to fragments with [gun] powder. The valuable library of the patriarch was burnt, and in the flames perished a collection of manuscripts, dear to the [Assyrians], and venerated by all.<sup>6</sup>

According to eyewitness accounts: Assyrian children were thrown into the air and bayoneted, many were forced into fires while still alive, and some women threw themselves into a river with their young children tied to their backs to escape slavery.<sup>7</sup>

▼ *A valley in Hakkari through which Assyrian genocide survivors escaped. Photographed in 2019. (Athra Kado)*



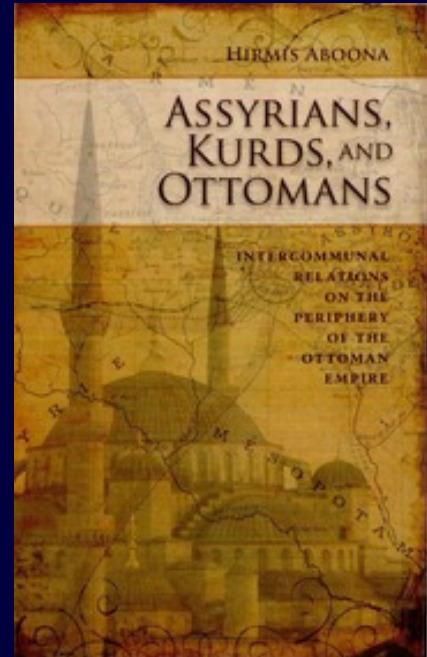
## Recommended Reading

At the time, the Patriarch of the Church of the East was recognized as both the temporal and civil leader of the Assyrian people. Members of his family were murdered in the massacres, including his mother:

The fate of the patriarch's mother, aged eighty-seven, was a horrifying one: her attacker abused her, and her body was then chopped into four pieces, put on a raft, and floated down the Zab, where it was intercepted at the village of Chamba, the centre of the district of upper Tiyari, with a note reading, 'Your son will have the same fate.'<sup>8</sup>

Survivors of the attack were forced to carry heavy loads of plunder while traveling on foot for extremely long distances. They were whipped and tortured along the way, and many were killed or died due to exhaustion.

Bedr Khan Beg and allied Kurdish forces led similar assaults on Assyrian villages in neighboring regions throughout the 1840s.<sup>9</sup>



*Assyrians, Kurds, and Ottomans*

Hirmis Aboona | Cambria Press (2008)

"The entire Christian nations of the Armenians and the Assyrians are undergoing the process of extermination..." —Abraham Yohannan, Department of Oriental Languages, Columbia University (1916)<sup>10</sup>

# 1914-1925

## The Ottoman Turkish Genocide of the Assyrians

The Assyrian Genocide began in late 1914 and continued for more than a decade, with the peak of the violence occurring between 1915 and 1918. During these years, the Ottoman Turks (later the Republic of Turkey) and allied Kurdish tribes subjected hundreds of thousands of Assyrians to a systematic campaign of massacre, torture, abduction, deportation, impoverishment, and cultural and ethnic destruction. The campaign also included the destruction of historic Assyrian villages and cultural heritage sites, as well as the assassination of Assyrian intellectual and religious leaders.

The massacres took place in various phases over a very wide area under Ottoman Turkish rule—including modern-day Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. It is estimated that at least 300,000 Assyrians were murdered during the genocide and a large number were forced into permanent exile. Tragically, this figure represented more than half of the entire Assyrian population at the time.<sup>11</sup>

Though lesser known, the Assyrian Genocide coincided with the well-documented Armenian Genocide of 1915. The aim of the Young Turk regime was to homogenize the Ottoman Empire by Turkifying the country and eliminating non-Turkish and non-Muslim communities. Ottoman and Turkish officials at the highest levels admitted to policies encouraging or carrying out massacres, deportations, and the deprivation of food and shelter:

[S]ources confirm that the Ottoman Turks and their

Kurdish allies massacred hundreds of thousands of Assyrians in order to exterminate the Christian population, raped and enslaved hundreds and more likely thousands of Assyrian women in a systematic fashion, and deported the Assyrian population en masse from their ancestral lands under conditions that led to famine and widespread death.<sup>12</sup>

The policy of ethnic cleansing was advanced by fanning religious fanaticism. In 1914, the Ottoman Sultan declared a *jihad* (holy war) against "the enemies of Islam, who have proven their hostility by their attacks on the Caliphate."<sup>13</sup> It was these declarations of *jihad* that facilitated the genocidal campaign against the Christian communities in the Ottoman Empire, including Armenians, Greeks, and Assyrians, as they were considered infidels (*kafir*).

▼ During the genocide, Assyrians, Armenians, and Greeks were forced into death marches as shown below.



Eyewitness accounts of the Assyrian Genocide are many. In his book *Les Assyro-Chaldéens et les Arméniens massacrés par les Turcs* published in 1920, Assyrian Father Joseph Naayem recounted:

I am determined to record the martyrdom of a small people, the most worthy of interest yet at the same time the most abandoned, arising out of a great empire of the world's most ancient civilization, whose country, like Armenia, was the stage for Turkish abominations in which men were tragically murdered, women, children, and the aged deported into the desert, pillaged, martyred and subjected to the worst atrocities. This people is the Assyro-Chaldean people.

How can I not impart the details of the tragic martyrdom of the Assyro-Chaldeans from the district of Jezireh, on the Tigris, and from Midyat, where more than fifty villages whose names I know, mostly prosperous and fertile villages that were soon to be on the route of the great Baghdad railway line and for which a bright future was certain, were totally sacked and ruined, while most of their population was put to the sword.<sup>14</sup>

Those who survived the massacres were forced into exile:

Here was a heart-breaking spectacle! A crowd of 200,000 people, men, women, children, all on foot, going who knows where; all that could be seen along the road were poor wretches with swollen legs, pitiful old men barely able to carry their loads, small children weeping and grieving mothers crying for their dead or lost children. Then from time to time, the Kurds would fall on those who were slowest and massacre them. Finally, after a painful journey of ten days, this wretched population arrived in Russia where many of them died of poverty and sickness. As for the [Assyrian] town of Van, it has been almost entirely razed and destroyed.<sup>15</sup>

Many of those Assyrians escaping the genocide found refuge in parts of modern-day Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon.

Rev. John Eshoo, who himself survived the horrific massacre at Khoi (in modern-day Iran), wrote:

You have undoubtedly heard of the Christian massacre at Khoi, but I am certain you do not know the details. Here had migrated a part of our people, and one-fourth of our refugees were stationed in Sardavar (Khoi). These Assyrians were assembled into one caravansary, and all shot to death by guns and revolvers. Blood literally flowed in little streams, and the entire open space within the caravansary became a pool of crimson liquid. The place was too small to hold all the living victims for the work of execution. They were brought in groups, and each new group compelled to stand up over the heap of the still bleeding bodies, and was shot to death in the same manner. The fearful place became literally a human slaughter house, receiving its speechless victims, in groups of ten and twenty at a time, for execution.

The helpless Assyrians marched like lambs to their slaughter, and they opened not their mouth, save by saying: "Lord, into thy hands we commit our spirits."

When the procession arrived at the place appointed, the executioners began by cutting first the fingers of their victims, joint by joint, till the two hands were entirely amputated. Then they were stretched on the ground, after the manner of the animals that are slain in the East, but these with their faces turned upward, and their heads resting upon the stones or blocks of wood. Then their throats were half cut, so as to prolong their torture of dying. And while struggling in the agony of death, the victims were kicked and clubbed by heavy poles the murderers carried. Many of them, while still laboring under the pain of death, were thrown into ditches and buried before their souls had expired.

The young men and the able-bodied men were separated from among the very young and the old. They were taken some distance from the city and used as targets by the shooters. They all fell; a few not mortally wounded. One of the leaders went



## Recommended Reading

close to the heaps of the fallen and shouted aloud, swearing by the names of Islam's prophets that those who had not received mortal wounds should rise and depart, as they would not be harmed any more. A few, thus deceived, stood up, but only to fall this time dead by another volley from the guns of the murderers.

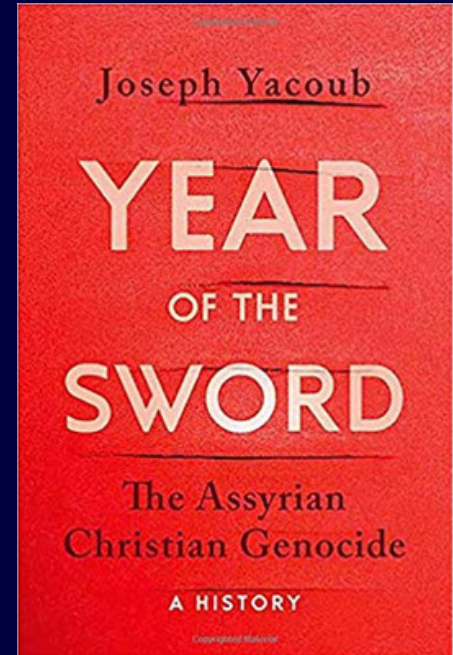
Some of the younger and goodly looking women, together with a few little girls of attractive appearance, who pleaded to be killed, against their will were forced into Islam's harems. Others were subjected to such fiendish insults that I cannot possibly describe. Death, however, came to their rescue, and saved them from the vile passions of the demons.

The Assyrian victims of this massacre totaled twenty-seven hundred and seventy men, women and children, exclusive of an equal number of the Armenians.<sup>16</sup>

In March 2018, the Assyrian Patriarch Mar Benyamin Shimun XXI, who was recognized as the religious and civil leader of the Assyrian people at the time, was assassinated by Kurdish chieftain Simko Shikak during a meeting held under a flag of truce.

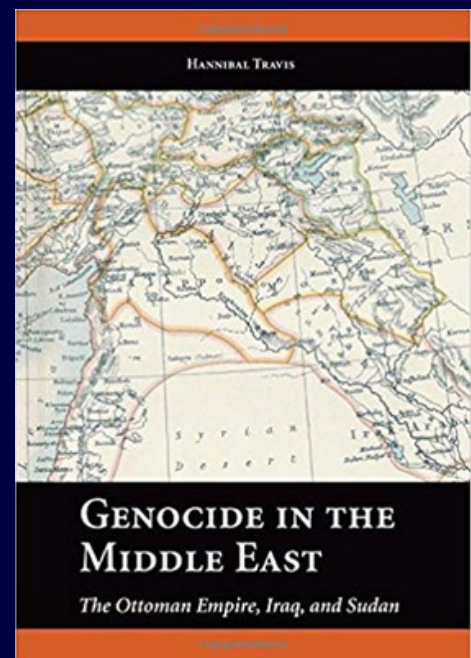
While the scale of the violence declined, the massacres against Assyrians continued until 1925. The Assyrian Genocide effectively destroyed the Assyrian community and had a lasting impact.

To this day, the Turkish Government continues to deny the 1915 Genocide of Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks. A number of countries have formally recognized the genocide. In 2007, the International Association of Genocide Scholars reached consensus that the atrocities committed by Ottoman Turkey and later the Republic of Turkey constituted genocide against Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks.<sup>17</sup>



### *Year of the Sword*

Joseph Yacoub | Oxford University Press (2015)



### *Genocide in the Middle East*

Hannibal Travis | Carolina Academic Press (2010)

*“I saw and heard many horrible things in the Great War, but what I saw in Simele is beyond human imagination.” —Secret report of a British eyewitness in the service of the Iraqi Government (1933)<sup>18</sup>*

# 1933

## The Massacre of Assyrians at Simele

The Simele Massacre, known to Assyrians as *Pramta d'Simele* was a massacre committed by the armed forces of the Iraqi state systematically targeting the indigenous Assyrian population in northern Iraq in August 1933. The term is not only used to describe the massacre in Simele, but the wider genocidal campaign that took place across more than 100 Assyrian villages in Dohuk and Nineveh that led to the death of as many as 6,000 Assyrians.

Despite the establishment of the Iraqi state in 1932, Assyrians continued their pursuit of statehood, petitioning the League of Nations for autonomy, protection, and a guarantee of freedom to emigrate out of Iraq in the event of massacres against them. Public animosity towards the Assyrians was widespread as Iraqi nationalist propaganda campaigns had portrayed them as violent rebels and Iraqi officials had vilified them.

The expected violence against the Assyrians began in August 1933. Iraqi troops, joined by marauding Kurdish tribesmen, organized a massacre of hundreds of Assyrian civilians in northern Iraq and looted their villages. The Assyrians resisted the attacks, and the town of Simele became a place of refuge for Assyrians fleeing the areas under assault.

General Bakr Sidqi, an Iraqi nationalist of Kurdish origin, was given permission by the government to eliminate “any and all Assyrians.”<sup>19</sup>

▼ *Assyrian refugees who survived the Simele Massacre pictured in the Khabour Region of Syria. (1935)*



The Assyrians in Simele were forcibly disarmed before Iraqi troops and Kurdish irregulars arrived in the district without warning or provocation and began to fire indiscriminately against the defenseless Assyrians. Some Assyrian women were mutilated. The inhabitants of 65 Assyrian villages were massacred, including up to 3,000 in Simele, where it is reported that the “worst massacres of all” took place:

Reports began to surface that even nine-year-old girls were being raped and burnt alive. Most children were stabbed to death as they threw themselves over the naked and headless corpses of their mothers.<sup>20</sup>

Iraq’s violent campaign against its indigenous community lasted until August 16, 1933, but violent raids on Assyrians persisted through the end of the month. Assyrians were largely confined to their homes in fear of further attacks.

## Recommended Reading

According to an eyewitness account from Lt. Col. Ronald Sempill Stafford, British Administrative Inspector for Mosul:

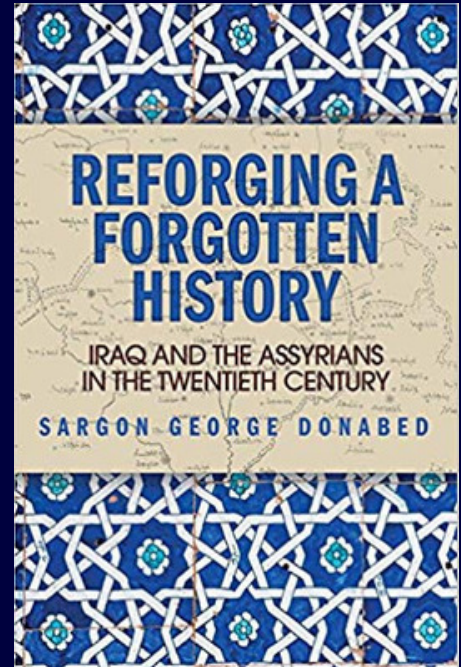
Here and there in the mountains they came up with fugitive Assyrians. And every Assyrian they caught they shot out of hand. Clearly by now the Army had decided that the Assyrians, as far as possible, were to be exterminated. No pretence was made that these operations had any purely military objective, for the Army Intelligence officers did not even take the trouble to cross-question the captured Assyrians, who were simply shot as they were rounded up...it was evident by now that the Army Command was quite certain in its own mind that, in its decision to wipe out the Assyrians, it would...be backed not only by Arab public opinion, but by the Baghdad Government.<sup>21</sup>

As many as 6,000 Assyrian men, women, and children were slaughtered, while tens of thousands more were forcibly displaced. Thousands of women were sexually assaulted, many of them kidnapped, never to be heard from again. Those who escaped the violence survived only to live in a state of starvation and complete marginalization.

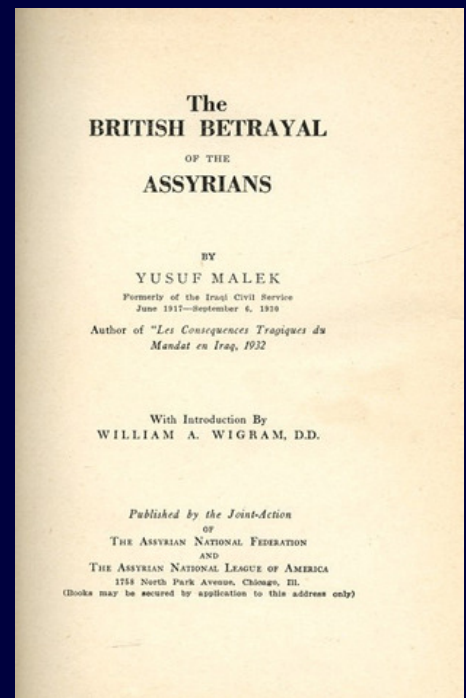
The Simele Massacre, which closely followed the Assyrian Genocide, effectively ended the Assyrian pursuit for statehood.

The Iraqi Government has never recognized the Simele Massacre despite appeals from Assyrian representatives. Further, Assyrians murdered in the events of 1933 were callously buried in mass graves. Relatives of those killed were prohibited from unearthing the bodies for a proper burial.

The mass gravesite of the 1933 Simele Massacre is currently marked with a sign reading "Simmel Archaeological Hill" atop a large dirt hill. The bones of Simele Massacre victims are scattered across the site, protruding from the dirt and exposed to passersby. The area is unprotected, treated as a waste yard, and is often littered with trash. The Kurdistan Regional Government has also built a communications tower on the top of the hill, which Assyrians find offensive. Assyrians have long called for a dignified reburial and proper memorial at the site, but it continues to be neglected.



*Reforging a Forgotten History*  
Sargon Donabed | Edinburgh University Press (2016)



*The British Betrayal of the Assyrians*  
Yusuf Malek | (1935)

*"I was ten years old and I fell on the ground. A woman fell over me and her blood covered me. Other children, too, were covered in blood and thought dead." —Noah Yonan, survivor of the Massacre at Soriya*<sup>22</sup>

# 1969

## The Massacre of Assyrians at Soriya

On the morning of September 16, 1969, Iraqi forces led by Lieutenant Abdul Karim al-Jahayshee attacked the Assyrian village of Soriya which is located in Dohuk, Iraq. Upwards of 100 Assyrians inhabited the village during the time of the assault. Forty-seven villagers were killed, including the local village priest, and twenty-two wounded.

According to the eyewitness testimony of a survivor:

I was ten years old and I fell on the ground. A woman fell over me and her blood covered me. Other children, too, were covered in blood and thought dead. At the same time, the Iraqi Army soldiers in our village began spreading out, shooting into houses and burning the houses... While we were running, wounded people escaping with us died of their gunshot wounds, bleeding to death. We were all running to the village of Bakhlogia, four kilometers away, to hide. We got to Bakhlogia, but the villagers couldn't give us refuge; it was too dangerous.<sup>23</sup>

While the exact motivation behind the Soriya Massacre remains unknown, the intention was clear. It is believed that the massacre took place in response to a mine detonated under a military vehicle near the village during a time in which Assyrians were actively involved in the armed resistance against the ruling Ba'ath Party.

The Iraqi Government has never recognized the Soriya Massacre and very little research on it exists.



▲ *Painting by an unknown Assyrian artist depicting the Soriya Massacre based on eyewitness testimony.*

*"We did not know if we would make it out in time. No human being should have to experience this kind of terror." –Assyrian survivor of the ISIS attack on the Nineveh Plain (2018)<sup>24</sup>*

# 2014-2015

## Genocide and ethnic cleansing at the hands of ISIS

In 2014, the ISIS advance into the Nineveh Plain in Iraq devastated the indigenous Assyrian community in the region as hundreds of thousands were forcibly displaced. There were small numbers of Assyrian casualties, and some Assyrian women were taken captive by the terrorist group to be sold as sex slaves.

At the time of the ISIS advance, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Peshmerga forces controlled security in the region. However, after disarming the local Assyrians, the Peshmerga preemptively withdrew from these areas ahead of the ISIS attack without notifying local populations.<sup>25</sup>

Defenseless, the Assyrians and other ethnic communities of the Nineveh Plain were forced to flee. According to the account of an Assyrian man from the town of Bakhdida:

It was about 3pm in the afternoon. I was driving with a friend when we heard an explosion nearby. We headed that way to see what had happened.

▼ *Assyrian hostages photographed with local bishop after being freed from ISIS captivity. (ACERO, 2015)*



We heard people screaming as we neared. Two young boys— aged six and eight— who had been playing soccer were struck by a mortar. This is when we knew ISIS was coming. We gathered their remains and put them into an empty bag of chips and delivered them to their families. We realized the Peshmerga had abandoned us during the night. Word spread quickly and then the church bells were ringing—a signal that it was time to leave. We did not know if we would make it out in time. No human being should have to experience this kind of terror.<sup>26</sup>

The ISIS assault led to the expulsion and effective exile of the Assyrian people from their ancestral lands. While the overwhelming majority of Assyrians were able to escape the impending violence, close to half of those displaced have not returned.

This ethnic cleansing campaign against Assyrians coincided with the horrific Yazidi Genocide in Sinjar, during which approximately 5,000 Yazidis were killed, with thousands of Yazidi women kidnapped and forced into sexual slavery.

The atrocities committed by ISIS against Yazidis and Christians was officially recognized as genocide by the United Nations, the European Parliament, and a number of individual nations. The U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Department of State recognized the genocide in 2016.<sup>27</sup>

## Recommended Reading

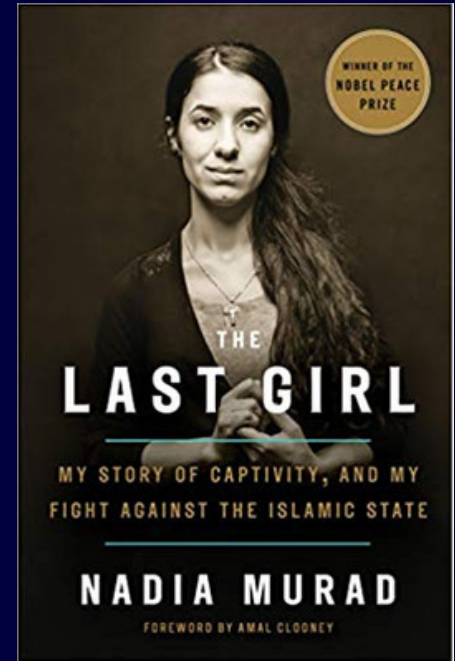
In February 2015, ISIS launched an assault against the 35 Assyrian villages of the Khabour Region in Syria. Dozens were killed in the attack, and upwards of 200 Assyrian civilians were taken captive by the terrorist group. The villages were pillaged and destroyed.

Most captives were later released; however, three of them were murdered on camera in a video that was published online. Tragically, the majority of Assyrians in the Khabour Region during the time of the ISIS attack were either survivors of the Simele Massacre of 1933 or their descendants.

The events of 2015 led to the expulsion and effective exile of the Assyrian people from an area which they had inhabited almost exclusively for nearly a century.

"This is the fate of the Assyrians," said an Assyrian woman who survived the February 2015 attacks on Khabour. "My grandmother used to tell me stories of the [Assyrian] genocide. I never thought that one day I would have a similar story to tell."

In addition to the murder, enslavement, and sexual exploitation of tens of thousands of Yazidis, Assyrians, and other victims, the ISIS policy of genocide and ethnic cleansing also included the deliberate destruction of Yazidi and Assyrian cultural heritage.



### *The Last Girl*

Nadia Murad | Penguin Random House (2018)

# The Lasting Impact of Genocide

The effects of genocide outlast the violence. Some of the lasting impacts of genocide on the Assyrian people include:

- The lives of millions of Assyrians were lost or destroyed;
- The dispossession and destruction of Assyrian lands and the forced demographic change of areas that were historically inhabited by Assyrians;
- The forced and often permanent separation of Assyrian families, a trend that continues today as a result of incessant persecution;
- The ruination and disintegration of Assyrian social and religious structures;
- The end of the Assyrian pursuit of statehood;
- The forced dispersion of the Assyrian population across newly-formed nation states, forming permanent divisions among the Assyrian people;
- The fragmentation, marginalization, and subjugation of the Assyrians under hostile governments;
- The dispossession of Assyrian ethnic identity and forced assimilation into dominant cultures, i.e. Arabization, Turkification, and Kurdification;
- The destruction of Assyrian cultural heritage, including buildings, books, works of art, and artifacts;
- The prevention of the proper documentation of modern Assyrian history;
- Transgenerational trauma and deep psychological effects among those directly and indirectly exposed to genocidal violence;
- Consecutive "lost generations" of Assyrians;
- The ongoing existential threat facing the Assyrian people.

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