



Erasing the Legacy of Khabour:  
Destruction of Assyrian Cultural  
Heritage in the Khabour Region of Syria

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## ABOUT ASSYRIANS

An estimated 3.5 million people globally comprise a distinct, indigenous ethnic group. Tracing their heritage to ancient Assyria, Assyrians speak an ancient language referred to as Assyrian, Syriac, Aramaic, or Neo-Aramaic.

The contiguous territory that forms the traditional Assyrian homeland includes parts of southern and southeastern Turkey, northwestern Iran, northern Iraq, and northeastern Syria. The Assyrian population in Iraq, estimated at approximately 200,000, constitutes the largest remaining concentration of the ethnic group in the Middle East. The majority of these reside in their ancestral homelands in the Nineveh Plain and within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Assyrians are predominantly Christian. Some ethnic Assyrians self-identify as Chaldeans or Syriacs, depending on church denomination. Assyrians have founded five Eastern Churches at different points during their long history: the Ancient Church of the East, the Assyrian Church of the East, the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Syriac Catholic Church, and the Syriac Orthodox Church. The majority of Assyrians who remain in Iraq today belong to the Chaldean and Syriac churches.

Assyrians represent one of the most consistently persecuted communities in Iraq and the wider Middle East.

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## 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.

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## **ERASING THE LEGACY OF KHABOUR: DESTRUCTION OF ASSYRIAN CULTURAL HERITAGE IN THE KHABOUR REGION OF SYRIA**

*March 31, 2020*

### **COVER IMAGE COURTESY KHLAPIEEL BNYAMEEN (@KHLAPIEEL).**

Mart Mariam Assyrian Church (Church of the Virgin Mary) in Tel Nasri, Khabour photographed after its destruction. (September 2016)

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# Key Terms

- **Ba'ath Arab Socialist Party in Syria** is a political party founded upon the Arab political philosophy known as Ba'athism, which promotes secular Arab nationalism, Arab socialism, pan-Arabism, and militarism.
- **Cultural Heritage** is the legacy of physical artifacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that is inherited from past generations.
- **Al-Hasakah** is the capital city of Al-Hasakah Governorate and is located in the far northeastern corner of Syria. The Khabour River runs through al-Hasakah and the rest of the governorate.
- **The Islamic State** (also known by its language Arabic acronym *Daesh*) is a jihadist militia group that follows a fundamentalist, Salafi doctrine of Sunni Islam. It has been designated as a terrorist organization internationally by the United Nations and individual countries. The Islamic State gained global prominence in early 2014 when it claimed territory in Iraq and Syria and committed genocide and ethnic cleansing campaigns against Yazidis, Assyrians, and other ethnic and religious minorities.
- **The Khabour Guards** is an Assyrian militia formed after the collapse of Syrian Government control of the Assyrian-majority Khabour Region in northeastern Syria. The militia is composed of local Assyrians and maintains checkpoints in a number of Assyrian villages, most notably Tel Tammar. It was initially established as an independent force, but is now affiliated with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces.
- **The Khabour Region** is the unofficial term used to describe the 35 Assyrian villages along

*Tangible Cultural Heritage* refers to physical artifacts produced, maintained and transmitted intergenerationally in a society or group. It includes artistic creations, built heritage such as buildings and monuments, and other physical or tangible products of human creativity that are invested with cultural significance.

*Intangible Cultural Heritage* refers to the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objectives, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. Examples of intangible heritage are oral traditions, performing arts, local knowledge, and traditional skills.

the Khabour River in al-Hasakah Governorate in northeastern Syria.

- **The Khabour River** is an important branch of the Euphrates River, rising in the mountains of southeastern Turkey, flowing southeastward through northeastern Syria, and moving southward where it joins with the Euphrates. The term Khabour is derived from the Akkadian word Khabūr, which means “source of fertility.”
- **The People’s Protections Units (YPG)** is a Kurdish militia in Syria and the primary component of the **Syrian Democratic Forces**.

- **UNESCO**

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization is a specialized agency of the United Nations based in Paris, France. Its declared purpose is to contribute to promoting international collaboration in education, sciences, and culture in order to increase universal respect for justice, the rule of law, and human rights. UNESCO pursues its objectives through five major programs: education, natural sciences, social/human sciences, culture and communication/information.

# Executive Summary

Often overlooked in the discourse concerning the atrocities committed by the Islamic State against the Assyrian people is the destruction of cultural heritage. In this report, we analyze the destruction of Assyrian tangible and intangible cultural heritage in the Khabour Region in northeast Syria as a significant aspect of the Islamic State's policy of ethnic cleansing and genocide.

**Part I** provides an overview of the events of February 2015 when the Islamic State launched an assault targeting the 35 Assyrian villages in the Khabour Region. The surprise assault forced thousands of Assyrians to flee their homes. Dozens were killed, and upwards of 200 civilians were taken captive by the terrorist group. For a period of approximately three months, Islamic State militants occupied the villages which formed its southern bank, as well as a number of villages on the northern bank. During this time, homes were looted and churches were set on fire or severely damaged by explosions.

**Part II** discusses the Assyrian community in Khabour. In the aftermath of the Assyrian Genocide (1914-1923) and the Simele Massacre (1933), thousands of Assyrian survivors were relocated to refugee camps in French-controlled Syria along the Khabour River. Originally intended to be temporary, the camps became permanent settlements consistently inhabited by the Assyrians until the Islamic State offensive in February 2015. Prior to the start of the conflict in Syria, it is estimated that as many as 20,000 Assyrians lived in the Khabour Region, spread across its 35 villages. The Islamic State assault effectively ended the Assyrian presence in the region, as less than 1,000 returned following its liberation from Islamic State control.

**Part III** examines elements of Assyrian cultural heritage in Khabour, including places of worship, as well as social practices and traditions. The Syrian Government prohibited the establishment of Assyrian cultural centers or organizations. Thus, most Assyrian cultural heritage sites in Khabour are church buildings, which became center to cultural norms and practices. In addition to their use as places of worship, Assyrian churches in the Khabour Region were used as archival places and community centers in lieu of spaces designed to promote Assyrian culture and heritage. The significance of religious cultural heritage in Khabour as symbolic of the Assyrian culture and certain aspects of it, therefore cannot be overstated. Prior to the February 2015 attacks, the Khabour Region contained dozens of holy sites, which are listed in this section.

**Part IV** provides evidence and context on the destruction of Assyrian tangible and intangible cultural heritage in northeast Syria. The Islamic State specifically and systematically targeted the culture, identity, and heritage of the Assyrian people as part of its policy of genocide and ethnic cleansing. Numerous Assyrian cultural and religious sites in northern Iraq and northeastern Syria have been destroyed. In Khabour, a total of 11 Assyrian churches were destroyed by the terrorist group, and thousands were displaced, resulting in considerable risk that Assyrian cultural identity will disappear.

**Part V** draws conclusions from the previous sections and provides recommendations to promote accountability of perpetrators and assist the Assyrian people in recovering. There is strong evidence of the systematic intentional destruction of Assyrian tangible cultural heritage by the Islamic State in both Syria and Iraq, and the existence of such a policy is only confirmed by official publications of the Islamic State. These actions not only constitute war crimes, but were undertaken pursuant to a policy of cultural genocide. We call on the international bodies such as UNESCO to investigate the destruction of the cultural and religious sites presented in this report and urge relevant government authorities to ensure adequate safeguards for the protection and conservation of Assyrian cultural heritage within their jurisdiction.

#### FURTHER READING

- Helen Malko (2019), “Heritage wars: A cultural genocide in Iraq.” In J.S. Bachman (Ed.), *Cultural Genocide: Law, Politics, and Global Manifestations* (pp. 207-226). New York, NY: Routledge.
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- Alberto M. Fernandez, “Dawn at Tell Tamir: The Assyrian Christian Survival on the Khabur River,” *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* XII, no. 1 (April 1998): 34-47, <http://www.aina.org/articles/asotk.pdf> (accessed March 30, 2020).



# Part I: Introduction

*Cultural heritage is neither static nor frozen in time, as conservation and authorized heritage discourse tend to frame it. It is rather a living and evolving cultural process of meanings and memory making and remaking. Its destruction, therefore, is an attack on memory, identity, and the sense of belonging felt by local communities, i.e. a cultural genocide.*

— Helen Malko, “Heritage wars: A cultural genocide in Iraq”<sup>1</sup>

Before dawn on February 23, 2015, militants of the self-proclaimed Islamic State launched a fierce offensive targeting the 35 Assyrian villages in the Khabour Region in northeastern Syria. The surprise assault forced thousands of Assyrians to flee their homes. Dozens were killed, and 226 civilians were taken captive by the terrorist group.<sup>2</sup>

For a period of approximately three months, Islamic State militants occupied the villages which formed its southern bank, as well as a number of villages on the northern bank. During this time, homes were looted and churches were set on fire or severely damaged by explosions. Although the area was fully liberated in May 2015, Assyrian continuity and livelihood in Khabour will be forever tainted by the trauma, violence, and instability that Assyrians in the region endured as a result of the rise of the Islamic State. It marked their largest exodus from the Khabour Region since the start of the Syrian civil war.<sup>3</sup>

The atrocities that took place in the Khabour Region were not the only Islamic State attack on Assyrians in the region. Months prior in August 2014, the Islamic State overran the Nineveh Plain in neighboring Iraq—an area considered the ancient Assyrian heartland.<sup>4</sup> In Khabour, many historic sites and holy places belonging to Assyrians have been destroyed since 2015.

There has consistently been a link between cultural and physical destruction in the genocidal campaigns targeting the Assyrian people in modern history. Catastrophic losses have been sustained with regard to Assyrian cultural heritage, and many sites remain at great risk. The targeting of Assyrian cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, has jeopardized the survival of the Assyrian culture, as well as traditions and practices central to Assyrian identity.

There has consistently been a link between cultural and physical destruction in the genocidal campaigns targeting the Assyrian people in modern history.

There is little reason to doubt that Assyrian intangible cultural heritage has been heavily affected as a result of war, destruction, displacement, and other disruptions to the social, economic, and cultural fabric of the Assyrian people over the course of the past century. The destruction of heritage is more than just the destruction of property—it threatens the unique identity of the targeted communities. The targeting of Assyrian cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, has jeopardized the survival of the Assyrian culture, as well as traditions and practices central to Assyrian identity.

Discussions about the atrocities committed by the Islamic State against Assyrians and other minoritized peoples from 2014 onward have primarily focused on murder, sexual assault, kidnappings, and forced displacement. In this report, we analyze the destruction of Assyrian tangible and intangible cultural heritage in the Khabour Region as a significant aspect of the Islamic State’s policy of ethnic cleansing and genocide. Evidence of destruction is documented and presented in context with other criminal acts to ensure these deeds do not go unrecognized and unpunished.

This report is divided into five parts. Part II provides an overview of the Assyrian community in Khabour. Part III examines the concepts of tangible and intangible cultural heritage in relation to the Assyrians of Khabour. Part IV provides evidence and context on the destruction of Assyrian tangible and intangible cultural heritage. Part V draws conclusions from the previous sections and provides recommendations to promote accountability of perpetrators and assist the Assyrian people in recovering.

## Part II: The Assyrians of Khabour



The French Red Cross delivering aid to Assyrian refugee camps along the Khabour River. (c. 1939)

While Assyrian settlement in the region dates back to ancient times, the major modern Assyrian presence in Syria stems back to the aftermath of the Assyrian Genocide (1914-1923) and the Simele Massacre (1933).

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.<sup>5</sup> The campaign also included the deliberate destruction of historic Assyrian villages and cultural heritage sites, as well as the assassination of Assyrian intellectuals and religious leaders.<sup>6</sup>

The massacres took place in various phases over a wide area under Ottoman Turkish rule—including modern day Turkey, Iran, and Iraq. It is estimated that upwards of 250,000 Assyrians were murdered during the genocide and a large number were forced into permanent exile. Tragically, this number represented more than half of the entire Assyrian population at the time.<sup>7</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.<sup>8</sup>

Western Assyrians<sup>9</sup> fleeing massacres in the historic Assyrian territories of Mardin, Diyarbakir, Midyat, Tur Abdin, and elsewhere sought refuge in the French-controlled province of Al-Jazira, where they established the city of Qamishli, originally named Beth Zalin ('house of reeds' in Assyrian). Eastern



Assyrian refugees who survived the Simele Massacre of 1933 in Iraq pictured in the Khabour Region of Syria. (1935)

Assyrians fled their territories in southeastern Turkey, namely Hakkari, and were driven to modern-day Iraq, Iran, and Lebanon. Tragically, many of those who took refuge in northern Iraq would be targeted again a decade later in 1933 when the nascent Iraqi state systematically targeted the indigenous Assyrian population in the north of the country, killing as many as 6,000 Assyrians.<sup>10</sup> The atrocities committed in this genocidal campaign would later become known as the Simele Massacre.<sup>11</sup>

Eastern Assyrians<sup>12</sup> who survived the Assyrian Genocide and/or the Simele Massacre were relocated to refugee camps in French-controlled Syria along the Khabour River, following an agreement between the French, the British, and the League of Nations. Those Assyrians who fled Iraq were subsequently stripped of any right to Iraqi citizenship, including those who were indigenous to Iraqi territories.<sup>13</sup>

Originally intended to be temporary, the camps became permanent settlements consistently inhabited by the Assyrians until the ISIS assault in February 2015; however, these villages are still referred to using the loanword “*campeh*” by local Assyrians.

## The Khabour Region

The Khabour River is an important branch of the Euphrates River, rising in the mountains of southeastern Turkey, flowing southeastward through northeastern Syria, and moving southward where it joins with the Euphrates. The term Khabour is derived from the Akkadian word Khabūr, which means “source of fertility.”<sup>14</sup>

The 35 Assyrian villages established along the banks of the Khabour River are spread between the major Syrian cities Al-Hassakah and Ras al-Ayn. The 25 villages on the northern bank stretch roughly 25 miles, while the ten villages on the southern bank are approximately 13 miles in length. Tel Tammar was the largest of the Assyrian settlements; it became the administrative center of the Khabour Region. While some Assyrians eventually moved into major cities such as Damascus and Aleppo, it was primarily in the Khabour Region that they were able to retain their distinct cultural identity:

The Khabour villages remained a kind of living museum of Hakkari life. The villages were settled by tribe, and their names continue to colloquially bear the titles of the Assyrian tribes that inhabit them in parallel to their official Arab titles.<sup>15</sup>

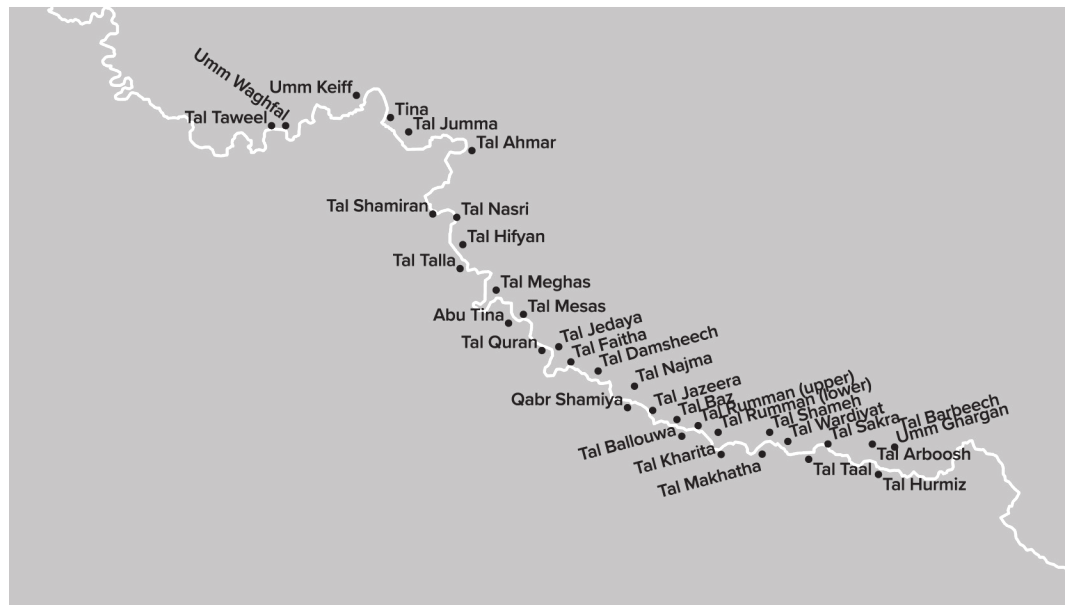
No comprehensive survey of the Assyrian population in Syria has been done since July 1940, which is when Assyrians first acquired Syrian citizenship and titles to their lands, but estimates of the Assyrian population in Khabour alone was estimated to be as many as 30,000 in the 1990s.<sup>16</sup> In addition to the Assyrian



Tel Hurmiz village pictured in 2014.  
(Faraj Mesho, 2014)

majority, the Khabour Region had small populations of Sunni Arabs and Kurds which grew in recent decades. The shift in demographics were most evident in Tel Tammar and Tel Jumaa where the populations were once exclusively Assyrian. Prior to 2011, estimates for the total population in Tel Tammar was 14,000; roughly one third of the population was Assyrian. That number has shrunk to several hundred in the aftermath of the Islamic State. The village of Tel Jumaa was devoid of Assyrians even prior to the start of the war, and now contains an Arab majority.

*Map 1 depicts the position of the 35 Assyrian villages along the Khabour River.*



## The Islamic State Assault on Khabour

The February 2015 assault on the 35 villages of Khabour effectively ended the historic Assyrian presence in the region.

The armed conflict in Syria drove thousands of Assyrians to flee the country. However, the Khabour Region itself was not directly impacted by the war until the rise of ISIS years later. The February 2015 assault on the 35 villages of Khabour effectively ended the historic Assyrian presence in the region. Prior to the start of the war in 2011, estimates for the Assyrian population in Khabour alone numbered as many as 20,000.<sup>17</sup> Recent estimates, largely based on church records, show the number has dwindled to less than 1,200. Most villages along the Khabour River have been entirely abandoned; Tel Tammar remains the main population center and has seen an influx of Assyrians from villages in Khabour that have been emptied or destroyed after the events of 2015. This is a testament to the negligible return of Assyrians belonging to the other 34 villages.

The impact of the Islamic State assault was instantaneous. The south bank of Khabour was attacked first in the early hours of February 23, 2015. These towns were guarded primarily by the Khabour Guards, a local Assyrian militia. The

Khabour Guards forces positioned on the southern bank were bolstered by a contingent of Syrian Kurdish fighters from the YPG, in addition to airstrikes from the Syrian Army. The Khabour River served as a natural defense line against the attack, stalling the Islamic State's advance northward. Islamic State militants eventually advanced into the northern bank at the villages of Tel Jazeera and Tel Mesas, but failed to capture Tel Tammar.

Locals barely had time to defend themselves or flee; many of those on the southern bank entered the Khabour River in desperation and swam to the other side in order to avoid capture or death. The villages were evacuated, with most locals seeking refuge in Al-Hassakah and Qamishli. Hundreds of Assyrian civilians who were unable to escape in time—including men, women, children, and the elderly—were taken captive and reportedly taken to Sheddadeh and later transferred to Raqqa.<sup>18</sup>

An Assyrian woman from Tel Hurmiz interviewed by the Assyrian Policy Institute in Beirut, Lebanon stated, “We woke [on February 23, 2015] to the sounds of screams, wails, and gunfire. It was terrifying. It was a nightmare. There was no electricity and it was totally dark, so we didn’t know what was going on. We were afraid to go outside, but we gathered our documents and fled. We never returned.”<sup>19</sup>

Many initially believed the Khabour Region would be liberated within days of the February 23 attack, but the region remained partially-occupied for months. The overwhelming majority of Assyrians from Khabour fled the country, largely seeking refuge in Lebanon where they would apply for resettlement to a third country altogether during this period. Some were unable to leave Syria in the immediate aftermath of the attack due to the protracted captivity of their family members or relatives.

The majority of Assyrian hostages taken captive by the Islamic State were released in groups varying in number over the course of approximately one year, allegedly in exchange for ransom payments.<sup>20</sup> In September 2015, three male captives were killed by Islamic State militants while in captivity; their murders were videotaped and distributed online as part of the group’s propaganda campaign.<sup>21</sup> One female captive is believed to have been forced into marriage with an Islamic State leader and never returned.<sup>22</sup>

The Khabour Guards and YPG forces fought together to liberate the villages of Khabour. Much of the offensive occurred across the river; and many casualties were sustained. Following its liberation in May 2015, few Assyrians returned with the intent to rebuild.

Many were deeply traumatized and feelings of insecurity, in addition to widespread devastation, prevented the return of locals. Infrastructure was damaged to varying degrees, and Assyrian homes and properties were destroyed or looted. Further, the Islamic State targeted the economic bases of the Assyri-



The final 43 Assyrian captives pictured with Bishop Mar Afram Athneil following their release from ISIS in February 2016. (ACERO, 2016)



Abandoned Assyrian village in Khabour. (2016)

Many were deeply traumatized and feelings of insecurity, in addition to widespread devastation, prevented the return of locals.

Thus, by the time the southern towns were liberated, more than a century of Assyrian life in Khabour was more or less eradicated.

an community's existence in the Khabour Region. Agricultural lands, irrigation wells, and farming equipment were destroyed. Livestock was stolen. The Islamic State had also left the region heavily sown with landmines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in a final effort to prevent return.

Thus, by the time the southern towns were liberated, more than a century of Assyrian life in Khabour was more or less eradicated. Tragically, the events of February 2015 in Khabour are seen as the continuation of the cycle of genocide targeting Assyrians which drove them to the Khabour Region in the early 1900s.

## Part III: Assyrian Tangible and Intangible Heritage in Khabour

*Cultural memory explores the connection between time, identity, and memory in their three dimensions—personal, social, and cultural. It constitutes transformative historical experiences that define a culture, even as time passes, and it adapts to new influences.... Although cultural memory may seem like something stuck in the past, it is in fact dynamic: it is evoked in the present, referring to the past, and always viewing the future. Like other memories, it is contested and changes over time. This, however, does not mean that memories and remembering are untrue or false, but rather a process that is always unfolding and remains unfinished. As a unifying force, cultural memory allows groups and communities to build a narrative of the past and develop an identity of a nation or a sub-national community.*

— Helen Malko, “Heritage wars: A cultural genocide in Iraq”<sup>23</sup>

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines cultural heritage broadly as “the legacy of physical artefacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations.”<sup>24</sup>

Cultural heritage is usually understood to be the sites, movable and immovable artifacts, and other items that a particular group or society has identified as old, important, and thus worthy of conscious conservation processes. This is particularly true with regard to Assyrian heritage. However, this interpretation only comprises a segment of a people’s cultural heritage, much of which cannot be categorized in the same manner.

The term cultural heritage encompasses a number of categories of heritage which can be cultural property—which is often, but not always, old—or intangible culture.

The term cultural heritage encompasses a number of categories of heritage which can be cultural property—which is often, but not always, old—or intangible culture. Natural landscapes can also be considered part of cultural heritage, as people often identify with them.<sup>25</sup> For example, Khabour’s Assyrians often identify themselves with the Khabour River landscape.

Such items and attributes illustrate the distinctiveness of a group or society. They are indicators of the ways of living that a people developed, which are passed on from previous generations. They also validate collective memory. Table 1 provides examples of tangible and intangible cultural heritage.





Assyrian women gathered around a Khabour River mill. (Hanna Moshe, c. 1964)

Elements of Assyrian heritage must always be viewed in the context of the geographical region in which they were created and the unique experiences of the Assyrians who inhabited the area.

In addition to their use as places of worship, Assyrian churches in the Khabour Region were used as archival places and community centers in lieu of spaces designed to promote Assyrian culture and heritage.



An Assyrian wedding in Tel Hurmiz taking place during the construction of Rabban Pethyon Church. (1966)

Table 1. Examples of Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage

TANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE	INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE
Monuments; buildings; archaeological sites; historic places; cultural landscapes; holy sites; artifacts; heirlooms; works of art, literature, and music; manuscripts; traditional clothing; calendars; objects; tools; and so on.	Language; beliefs; rites; rituals; ceremonies, indigenous knowledge, social customs and traditions; religious traditions; folklore; oral history; techniques; performing arts; crafts; expressions; culinary heritage; and so on.

Assyrian cultural heritage and practices are deeply linked to their traditional lands, steeped in familial, historical, and spiritual stories and traditions. Elements of Assyrian heritage must always be viewed in the context of the geographical region in which they were created and the unique experiences of the Assyrians who inhabited the area.

Historically, Assyrian cultural heritage in the region—both tangible and intangible—has been destroyed, stolen, or suppressed as part of genocide and/or colonial processes. Such crimes have repeatedly occurred in their traditional homeland, which forms parts of modern-day countries of Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Syria.

## Assyrian Tangible Heritage in Khabour

While Syria afforded the Assyrians of Khabour relative stability for nearly a century, the Syrian Government has exhibited aggression towards Assyrian identity, and has long infringed on the cultural and linguistic rights of its citizens of Assyrian background. The Syrian Government prohibited the establishment of Assyrian cultural centers or organizations. Thus, most Assyrian cultural heritage sites in Khabour are church buildings, which became center to cultural norms and practices. In addition to their use as places of worship, Assyrian churches in the Khabour Region were used as archival places and community centers in lieu of spaces designed to promote Assyrian culture and heritage. The significance of religious cultural heritage in Khabour as symbolic of the Assyrian culture and certain aspects of it therefore cannot be overstated. According to Helen Malko (2019), “The community derives its shared identity and cultural memory from three cultural elements—language, homeland, and religion. The most important thread of cultural continuity has been the linguistic continuity of the Assyrian language, also referred to as Neo-Aramaic/Neo-Syriac, with heavy Akkadian influence.”<sup>26</sup>

Prior to the February 2015 attacks, the Khabour Region contained dozens of holy sites. Nearly every village contained a church; some villages shared priests. The majority of the Assyrians who inhabited the Khabour Region were adherents to the Assyrian Church of the East. However, a sizeable segment of the population were members of the Ancient Church of the East (formed after a schism

with the Assyrian Church of the East in 1965). The town of Tel Arbosh, located on the northeast end of Khabour, was the only town with a Chaldean Catholic majority. However, these Assyrians never identified as ‘Chaldeans.’ They were commonly referred to as ‘Catholics’ or *‘qalbayeh’* meaning ‘those who flipped.’ Assyrian patriarchal churches are generally given names of holy saints. Many of the church buildings were originally mud-brick structures; most of these structures were renovated and modernized over time. Like the villages themselves, the individual churches were often associated with a particular Assyrian tribe, and served as direct extensions of the churches from their originating villages in Hakkari.

Religious life along the Khabour River was vibrant. The biggest event of the year in each of the Assyrian villages was the festival or commemoration held in honor of the saint of the village church, known as a *dokhrana* or *shara*—the latter used for the date the saint passed away. The festival traditions varied by town, but generally included a massive feast prepared by local villagers and shared by all attendees, which often included residents of other villages, as well as music and dancing.

Table 2 lists the 35 Assyrian villages in the Khabour Region, as well as the name of the local church, and the current condition of the church after Islamic State occupation.

*Table 2. Assyrian Villages in the Khabour Region*

VILLAGE NAME	NAME OF PRIMARY CHURCH	STATUS
Abu Tina	Mar Shimun Bar Sabbae Assyrian Church of the East	Destroyed
Qaber Shamia	Mar Gewargis Assyrian Church of the East	Destroyed
Tel Ahmar	N/A	N/A
Tel Arbosh	Mar Gewargis Chaldean Catholic Church	Intact
Tel Baz	Mar Gewargis Assyrian Church of the East	Destroyed
Tel Ballouwa	Mar Kiryakos & Mar Shimun Assyrian Church of the East	Intact
Tel Brej	Mar Gewargis Assyrian Church of the East	Intact
Tel Damshesh	Mar Youkhanna Assyrian Church of the East	Intact
Tel Faida	Mar Kiryakos Assyrian Church of the East	Intact
Tel Goran	Mar Zaia Assyrian Church of the East	Intact
Tel Hafian	Mar Shallita Assyrian Church of the East	Destroyed
Tel Hurmiz	Rabban Pethyon Ancient Church of the East	Destroyed
Tel Jedaya	Mar Sawa Assyrian Church of the East	Intact
Tel Jazeera	Mar Younan Church Assyrian Church of the East	Destroyed
Tel Jumaa	Mart Shmoni Assyrian Church of the East	Intact
Tel Kepchi	Mar Gewargis Assyrian Church of the East	Intact
Tel Kharita	Mar Shimun Bar Sabbae Assyrian Church of the East	Intact
Tel Meghas	Mar Gewargis Assyrian Church of the East	Intact
Tel Maghada	Mar Kiryakos Assyrian Church of the East	Intact



A *dokhrana* held at Mar Khaninia Church in Tel Sakra. (c. 2005)

*Table 2. Assyrian Villages in the Khabour Region (cont.)*

VILLAGE NAME	NAME OF PRIMARY CHURCH	STATUS
Tel Mesas	Mar Gewargis Assyrian Church of the East	Intact
Tel Najma	Mar Sliwa Assyrian Church of the East	Intact
Tel Nasri	Mart Mariam Assyrian Church of the East	Destroyed
Tel Rumman (upper)	Mart Mariam Assyrian Church of the East	Intact
Tel Rumman (lower)	Rabban Pethyon Church Assyrian Church of the East	Intact
Tel Sakra	Mar Khaninia Assyrian Church of the East	Destroyed
Tel Shama	Mar Khaninia Assyrian Church of the East	Intact
Tel Shamiran	Mar Bisho Assyrian Church of the East	Destroyed
Tel Taal	Mar Odisho Assyrian Church of the East	Destroyed
Tel Talaa	Mar Sliwa Church Assyrian Church of the East	Destroyed
Tel Tammar	Church of All Saints Assyrian Church of the East	Intact
Tel Taweel	Mar Sawa Assyrian Church of the East	Intact
Tel Wardiyat	N/A	N/A
Um Ghargan	Mar Shallita Ancient Church of the East	Intact
Um al-Keiff	Mar Toma Assyrian Church of the East	Intact
Um Waghfa	Mar Kiryakos Assyrian Church of the East	Intact



Traditional Assyrian line dancing in Tel Hurmiz. (1955)

However—ethnically and linguistically a distinct people—Syria’s Assyrians were mistreated by the Syrian Government, whose policies imposed the “Arab nature” of Syria.

## Assyrian Intangible Heritage in Khabour

According to Helen Malko (2019), “Because they were incorporated into Muslim-dominated empires and states, Assyrians became gradually known by their ecclesiastical designations, undermining the uniqueness of their culture and their long history in the region.”<sup>27</sup> Under Ba’ath Party rule, Christian peoples in Syria were widely tolerated, and the government recognized major Christian holidays.<sup>28</sup> However—ethnically and linguistically a distinct people—Syria’s Assyrians were mistreated by the Syrian Government, whose policies imposed the “Arab nature” of Syria.<sup>29</sup> Assyrians were forced to recite an anthem that emphasized that Syria was an Arab republic.<sup>30</sup> Even so, Khabour’s Assyrians represent one of the least assimilated groups in the country, as they were able to maintain their traditions largely due to living in isolated territory.

Assyrians were not considered a threat to the Syrian Government primarily due to their small population. They generally tended to avoid politics and public life. The Syrian Government exploited fears of Islamic extremism to bolster its support among vulnerable minority communities. Even so, many Assyrians were critical of the regime.

The establishment of cultural centers or organizations that promoted a cultural identity other than Arab was prohibited. For this reason, Assyrian churches were used in lieu of such space, often under the guise of religious events or practices.

The Syrian Government has long infringed on the linguistic rights of Assyrians. Assyrians speak a Semitic language often referred to as Assyrian, Syriac, or Neo-Aramaic. Assyrians in Syria are not allowed to officially use their mother tongue. Private schools are banned from teaching the Assyrian language. Many Assyrians have alleged they were not allowed to register their children with traditional Assyrian names. Similarly, places of business were not allowed to register Assyrian names. Assyrian-language publications were banned, with the exception of religious texts. A number of underground Assyrian publications operated under these circumstances, such as the political newspaper called *Braqala d’Athra* (“Voice of the Nation”). The writers and journalists involved in such publications used pseudonyms, but were sometimes caught and arrested.

The only exception to these restrictions was extended to religious institutions. Assyrian churches were permitted to use Assyrian as a liturgical language. In Khabour, churches were used by local populations as spaces to learn their mother tongue. Assyrian language classes were offered at church on the weekends and in the summer.

Celebrations of Assyrian holidays in Syria were banned. For decades, Assyrians were prohibited from observing cultural holidays such as the Assyrian New Year (often called “*Kha b’Nissan*” or “*Akitu*”) which is celebrated on April 1 and Assyrian Martyrs Day (“*Sharwa b’Tabakh*” or “*Yoma d’Sahde*”) observed annually on August 7 as a day of remembrance. Only Christian religious holidays were permitted.

The explosive growth of the media in the 1980s is believed to have eased some restrictions against some Assyrian cultural rights, such as the right to celebrate the Assyrian New Year. In the mid-1980s, Assyrians in Khabour were permitted to mark the holiday for the first time in Syrian history. However, the celebrations were only tolerated provided they did not become political demonstrations. To celebrate the holiday, Assyrians in Khabour would dress in their national dress, perform folkloric dances, and share traditional meals.

“No one would dare celebrate the Assyrian New Year under Hafez al-Assad. We wouldn’t even talk about it publicly. But under Bashar, we could celebrate as long as we stayed away from politics. It was the best day of the year in Khabour, but we knew we were under close watch,” said a 67-year-old Assyrian man from Tel Sakra.<sup>31</sup>

Even with some restrictions lifted, event organizers were routinely arrested and interrogated. For example, a man from Tel Nasri who was involved in organizing Assyrian New Year festivities for several years alleged he was arrested on numerous occasions. He claimed he was held for days at a time, during which time he was interrogated and threatened; he said his passport was also confiscated



Ashur Dance Group performing at the Assyrian New Year celebration in Khabour. (2010)

In Khabour, churches were used by local populations as spaces to learn their mother tongue.



Assyrian New Year festivities in the Khabour Region where celebrants dressed as ancient Assyrian royalty. Collective weddings on the Assyrian New Year were common. (Bassem Tellawi, 2002)

as punishment. “The government did not want to risk negative media attention by cracking down on an event they did not see as a threat. Despite the fact that we knew we were being monitored, nationalistic sentiments were often expressed, and it was the organizers who would be punished for it,” he explained.<sup>32</sup> While the government permitted the celebration of the Assyrian New Year in recent decades, commemorations of Assyrian Martyrs Day were prohibited. Assyrian Martyrs Day marks the anniversary of the Simele Massacre of 1933. Though inspired by the tragedy of the Simele Massacre, the holiday has become a day of remembrance, honoring Assyrians who have been killed due to their Assyrian identity. Given that the holiday was nationalistic and political in nature, commemorations of Assyrian Martyrs Day were held in private. Activists would gather in secret, where stories and poems were read, and religious clergy would say prayers. As a native to Tel Arbosh explained, “Celebrating Assyrian Martyrs Day was a major risk for any Assyrian who chose to participate. The government wasn’t worried about Assyrians dancing and wearing our traditional dress, but they would never permit us to feed [Assyrian] nationalist sentiments.”<sup>33</sup>

The lack of government presence in Khabour following the start of the conflict in 2011 gave the Assyrians more freedoms, and the Assyrians in the region began marking the August 7 holiday publicly.

Generations of Assyrians were unified through community gatherings, which allowed them to transmit intangible heritage unto the younger generation—thus working to further promote Assyrian culture and identity. Oral traditions such as raweh—melodic, impromptu chants sung in groups by elder Assyrians—creatively passed down stories of their lives and often painful experiences of the generations before them. Some rituals and practices observed by Christian Assyrians stem from ancient Assyrian traditions. According to Helen Malko (2019):

Assyrian Christianity displays certain rituals and festivals that are unique to this community and link to its ancient heritage, including the Petition of the Ninevites during which members of the community fast for three days commemorating the repentance of the Ninevites at the hands of Prophet Jonah according to the Bible. Another celebration is the day of Nusardel (Feast of God), usually celebrated in Tammuz (July). Following the holy mass, members of the community throw water at each other in an act of cleansing the path of the God. This tradition most likely has its origins in ancient Assyrian and Mesopotamian rituals, such as those of the New Year. These and other festivals have been celebrated in Assyrian villages and towns for centuries and everywhere they live, including the diaspora.<sup>34</sup>

Despite the Syrian Government’s aggression towards Assyrian identity, Assyrians in Khabour were able to maintain their language and cultural traditions due to the relatively large concentration of Assyrians in the area living in isolation.

Despite the Syrian Government’s aggression towards Assyrian identity, Assyrians in Khabour were able to maintain their language and cultural traditions due to the relatively large concentration of Assyrians in the area living in isolation.

Immaterial elements, such as customs, oral histories, social practices, traditional craftsmanship, knowledge, and skills were transmitted from generation to generation. Khabour's expressed elements of their culture in day-to-day life and also at social occasions such as weddings, including rituals, traditional Assyrian hand-holding dances, and traditional dress. These factors further distinguished and established the Khabour Region as a unique ethnic enclave within Syria's social, historical, and cultural fabric.

# Part IV: The Destruction of Assyrian Cultural Heritage in Syria

*In addition to the abstracted sense of identity, heritage places and landscapes provide communities with a sense of place and belonging and help them to position themselves as groups and individuals in the cultural, physical, and social world. Places are socially constructed; they are politicized, culturally relative, historically specific. Heritage places, therefore, are not simply a representation of past human experience; rather, they also affect current experiences and perceptions of the world and may stand for a sense of identity and belonging for particular individuals or groups.*

— Helen Malko, “Heritage wars: A cultural genocide in Iraq”<sup>35</sup>

## Cultural Genocide

The concept of cultural genocide has never been legally defined or codified. While it lacks a clear or accepted definition, it is generally accepted that cultural genocide involves acts and measures undertaken to “destroy nations’ or ethnic groups’ culture through spiritual, national, and cultural destruction.”<sup>36</sup> According to Article 7 of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples:

Indigenous peoples and individuals have the right not to be subjected to forced assimilation or destruction of their culture.

Indigenous peoples and individuals have the right not to be subjected to forced assimilation or destruction of their culture.<sup>37</sup>

Assyrians have survived centuries of persecution and forced cultural assimilation at the hands of dominant groups across the Middle East, including Arabs, Turks, and Kurds, resulting in a drastic reduction in their population. The rise of the Islamic State thus posed a unique threat, considering the especially vulnerable position of Assyrians in their native territories, threatening what remains of their cultural identity. The methodical destruction of Assyrian cultural heritage by ISIS poses long-term consequences for the collective memory and identity of the Assyrian people, jeopardizing their very existence.

While the Islamic State’s campaign to alter the demographic composition of the territories under its control threatened all peoples of the region, marginalized peoples were particularly at risk. Helen Malko (2019) argues that the Islamic State’s destruction of cultural heritage is cultural genocide:

The task of the IS was not only territorial and political victory. The controlled population had to be deprived of a future and its cultural memory of a different, IS-free, past to be suppressed. The destruc-

tion of the local communities, their built environment, monuments, practices, and rituals would transform the land and its people and would make the IS conquest of the region permanent and irreversible.... Ethno-religious minorities were singled out and eradicated, their cultural values and practices systematically destroyed.... While the Shi'i Muslim community of Mosul was attacked, and its religious sites destroyed, IS assaults against the Assyrian Christians and Yazidis threatened not only their cultural heritage, but also their very existence in the whole region.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to the physical violence targeting minoritized groups, the destruction of their heritage was a major facet of the Islamic State's campaign. Eleven churches were destroyed in the Khabour Region alone, and a greater number of Assyrian heritage sites and places of worship were destroyed in Iraq:

With the eradication of the Christian population, historical churches and monasteries were blown up, crosses were replaced with IS flags, religious statues were smashed, and century-old manuscripts were burned and looted. In Mosul alone, more than 30 churches were looted and either partially or completely destroyed, and an estimated 40 churches and monasteries have been destroyed and looted throughout the villages in the Nineveh Plain. In addition to churches, Christian cemeteries in the villages of Bartella, Qaraqosh, Telkeppe, and Bashiqa in the Nineveh Plain were violated and demolished. The villages themselves were plundered, homes were burned and looted, and businesses were destroyed, disrupting a lifestyle and traditions that have survived for thousands of years in this region.

The IS also attacked and destroyed pre-Christian Assyrian heritage sites and artifacts, including the gates and walls of ancient Nineveh, the relics of Nimrud and its decorative wall reliefs and lamassus (winged bulls). While these sites and artifacts represent symbols of patrimony and national pride for all Iraqi people, they are places and objects directly related to the collective identity and cultural memory of the Assyrian people. For members of this group, Assyrian ancient heritage defines who they were in the past and are today and it is through this heritage that they project their future.<sup>39</sup>

The Assyrian Policy Institute maintains that the destruction of Assyrian cultural heritage by the Islamic State in both Syria and Iraq must be viewed within the context of ethnic cleansing and cultural genocide and that its perpetrators should be brought to justice. While periods of conflict have always seen cultural heritage placed at risk, deliberate destruction and theft of cultural heritage was conducted by the Islamic State in both Iraq and Syria. Islamic State militants targeted various places of worship and archaeological sites under their control, including heritage belonging to Assyrians. Immovable heritage was destroyed; movable material such as artifacts and historical objects were sold to finance Islamic State activities.<sup>40</sup>



The Islamic State... aimed to eliminate any trace of any civilization, culture, or religion that predates Islam and change the history of the region.

While it is often assumed that their actions were simply acts of mindless barbarism, the Islamic State's policy of destroying cultural heritage was underpinned by the group's harmful ideology. Indeed, the Islamic State justified its destruction of cultural heritage sites with its interpretation of Salafism.<sup>41</sup> Further, it aimed to eliminate any trace of any civilization, culture, or religion that predates Islam and change the history of the region.<sup>42</sup> The Islamic State's destruction of these sites was part of its broader propaganda campaign, which generated extensive media coverage and international notoriety.

## **Destruction of Assyrian Tangible Cultural Heritage in Khabour**

In addition to the human suffering wreaked by the Islamic State's atrocities, the Islamic State specifically and systematically targeted the culture, identity, and heritage of the Assyrian people as part of its policy of genocide and ethnic cleansing. Numerous Assyrian cultural and religious sites in northern Iraq and northeastern Syria have been destroyed. In Khabour, a total of 11 Assyrian churches were destroyed by the terrorist group, five on the north bank of the Khabour River and six on the south bank. Local inhabitants fled upon the arrival of ISIS forces in order to avoid capture and death; no one was present to defend many of the holy places. Evidence and eyewitness reports suggest that explosives were the primary method used to destroy the structures.

These churches were destroyed during the Islamic State's occupation of Khabour between February and May 2015. With the exception of Mart Mariam Church in Tel Nasri, which was destroyed on Easter Sunday in 2015,<sup>43</sup> the exact dates of destruction are unclear. While the majority of church structures along the Khabour remain intact, all Assyrian churches which came under the control of the Islamic State were ransacked, with texts and archives destroyed.<sup>44</sup> Locals believe that had the Islamic State's occupation of Khabour extended beyond the three-month period, additional churches would have been targeted and destroyed. Unlike the Assyrian patriarchal churches located in northern Iraq, there have been no efforts to restore religious sites in the Khabour Region, where repatriation seems highly unlikely. Most of the churches in Khabour that survived Islamic State occupation are no longer in use due to the lack of Assyrian return.

The following section provides images of the eleven Assyrian churches in Khabour which were destroyed by the Islamic State taken both prior and subsequent to their reported destruction. Images of these sites were provided by photographers who are not necessarily affiliated with the Assyrian Policy Institute.

*Mar Shimun Bar Sabbae Assyrian Church of the East*

**DESCRIPTION OF SITE**

Location	Abu Tina, Khabour, al-Hasakah, Syria
Importance to Assyrians	Abu Tina was inhabited primarily by Assyrians belonging to the Jelu tribe. Mar Shimun Bar Sabbae, in whose honor the village church was named, was an Assyrian bishop who served as the head of the [Assyrian] Church of the East from 320 A.D. until his execution at the hands of the Sasanian Empire in 339 A.D. after refusing to convert to Zoroastrianism. He is venerated as a saint in many Christian communions. The commemoration of Mar Shimun Bar Sabbae was recognized annually in Khabour on August 17 in accordance with the liturgical calendar of the Assyrian Church of the East.

**BEFORE DESTRUCTION**



**AFTER DESTRUCTION**



*Mar Gewargis Assyrian Church of the East*

**DESCRIPTION OF SITE**

Location	Qaber Shamia, Khabour, al-Hasakah, Syria
Importance to Assyrians	The inhabitants of Qaber Shamia were primarily members of the Dizen tribe. The village church was named after Mar Gewargis (Saint George) whose commemoration took place annually on April 24 in Qaber Shamia in accordance with the Assyrian Church of the East calendar. Several Assyrian churches along the Khabour River are named in honor of Mar Gewargis, including the church in Tel Baz, which was also destroyed by the Islamic State.

**BEFORE DESTRUCTION**



**AFTER DESTRUCTION**



*Mar Gewargis Assyrian Church of the East*

**DESCRIPTION OF SITE**

Location	Tel Baz, Khabour, al-Hasakah, Syria
Importance to Assyrians	The Assyrians who inhabited Tel Baz were members of the Baz tribe. The village church was one of seven churches along the Khabour named after Mar Gewargis (Saint George). The annual commemoration of Mar Gewargis was held in Tel Baz on April 24 in accordance with Assyrian Church of the East traditions.

**BEFORE DESTRUCTION**



**AFTER DESTRUCTION**



*Mar Shallita Assyrian Church of the East*

**DESCRIPTION OF SITE**

Location	Tel Hafian, Khabour, al-Hasakah, Syria
Importance to Assyrians	The inhabitants of Tel Hafian predominantly belonged to the Qodchanis tribe. The village church was named in honor of Mar Shallita, who was the saint of the patriarchal church in the Hakkari village of Qodchanis where the villagers of Tell Hafian originally came from. The commemoration of Mar Shallita was observed annually in Tel Hafian on September 19.

**BEFORE DESTRUCTION**



**AFTER DESTRUCTION**



*Rabban Pethyon Ancient Church of the East*

**DESCRIPTION OF SITE**

Location	Tel Hurmiz, Khabour, al-Hasakah, Syria
Importance to Assyrians	Tel Hurmiz was inhabited primarily by Assyrians belonging to the Tkhuma tribe. The village was the stronghold of the Ancient Church of the East in the Khabour Region. The church in Tel Hurmiz was named after Rabban Pethyon, a martyr for the church and revered saint. The annual commemoration of Rabban Pethyon was held in Tel Hurmiz on July 5 according to the Ancient Church of the East's ecclesiastical calendar.

**BEFORE DESTRUCTION**



**AFTER DESTRUCTION**



*Mar Younan Assyrian Church of the East*

**DESCRIPTION OF SITE**

Location	Tel Jazira, Khabour, al-Hasakah, Syria
Importance to Assyrians	Tel Jazira was inhabited predominantly by Assyrians belonging to the Eiel tribe. The village church was named after the Mar Younan. The commemoration of Mar Younan was held annually in Tel Jazira on April 26 in accordance with the Assyrian Church of the East's ecclesiastical calendar.

**BEFORE DESTRUCTION**



**AFTER DESTRUCTION**



*Mar Odisho Assyrian Church of the East*

**DESCRIPTION OF SITE**

Location	Tel Taal, Khabour, al-Hasakah, Syria
Importance to Assyrians	The inhabitants of Tel Taal were Assyrians belonging to the Tkhu-ma tribe. The village is named after Mar Odisho, “the anchorite,” who was the village saint in the Taal valley in Hakkari, where the Assyrians of Tel Taal originated. His monastery in Hakkari is one of the last of the surviving Assyrian monasteries in the region. <sup>45</sup> The commemoration of Mar Odisho was held in Tel Taal each year on August 6 in accordance with the Assyrian Church of the East liturgical calendar.

**BEFORE DESTRUCTION**



**AFTER DESTRUCTION**





*Mart Mariam Assyrian Church of the East*

**DESCRIPTION OF SITE**

Location	Tel Nasri, Khabour, al-Hasakah, Syria
Importance to Assyrians	<p>The majority of Assyrians from Tel Nasri belong to the Tyari tribe. The village church—which was one of the largest and most iconic churches in Syria—was named after the Virgin Mary. The commemoration held in honor of the Virgin Mary took place in Tel Nasri each year on August 15 in accordance with Assyrian Church of the East traditions. The festival held in Tel Nasri was among the most popular throughout Khabour; Assyrians from throughout Syria gathered in the town. Mart Mariam Church’s committee was also believed to be the most organized and most active in Khabour. The church reportedly contained one of very few relics in the Khabour Region: “A gold gilt reliquary which held a portion of cloth from the robe of the Virgin Mary—an item which was reportedly carried into exile in the 1930s from an Assyrian church in northern Iraq.”<sup>46</sup></p> <p>Mart Mariam Church was destroyed on the morning of Easter Sunday on April 5, 2015 after the Islamic State reportedly set off explosives.<sup>47</sup></p>

**BEFORE DESTRUCTION**



**AFTER DESTRUCTION**



*Mar Gewargis Assyrian Church of the East*

**DESCRIPTION OF SITE**

Location	Tel Baz, Khabour, al-Hasakah, Syria
Importance to Assyrians	The Assyrians who inhabited Tel Baz were members of the Baz tribe. The village church was one of seven churches along the Khabour named after Mar Gewargis (Saint George). The annual commemoration of Mar Gewargis was held in Tel Baz on April 24 in accordance with Assyrian Church of the East traditions.

**BEFORE DESTRUCTION**



**AFTER DESTRUCTION**



*Mar Sliwa Assyrian Church of the East*

**DESCRIPTION OF SITE**

Location	Tel Talaa, Khabour, al-Hasakah, Syria
Importance to Assyrians	The Assyrians of Tel Talaa belonged to the Sara tribe. The church was named after Mar Sliwa. The annual commemoration of Mar Sliwa was held in Tel Talaa on September 13-14 in accordance with the Assyrian Church of the East ecclesiastical calendar.

**BEFORE DESTRUCTION**



**AFTER DESTRUCTION**



*Mar Khaninia Assyrian Church of the East*

**DESCRIPTION OF SITE**

Location	Tel Sakra, Khabour, al-Hasakah, Syria
Importance to Assyrians	The majority of Assyrians from Tel Sakra belong to the Tkhuma tribe. The festival of Mar Khaninia was held annually in Tel Sakra on October 15 in accordance with the Assyrian Church of the East liturgical calendar.

**BEFORE DESTRUCTION**



**AFTER DESTRUCTION**



# The Destruction of Assyrian Intangible Heritage in Khabour

While destruction and damage to tangible cultural heritage can be easily documented, the damage to intangible cultural heritage is understandably less visible.

Intangible cultural heritage forms part of individual and collective identity and memory, strengthens social cohesion, and provides group with a sense of continuity. While destruction and damage to tangible cultural heritage can be easily documented, the damage to intangible cultural heritage is understandably less visible. Thus, the impact of the conflict in Khabour on the intangible cultural heritage of the Assyrians has been less widely considered.

The forced displacement of Assyrians from their homeland has significantly impacted memory, social experience, worship and cultural practice by denying Assyrians access to their cultural heritage sites. It has led to the ruination and disintegration of Assyrian social and religious structures. The mass migration of Assyrians to North America, Europe, and Australia and their integration into new communities represent another set of factors threatening the survival of Assyrian cultural identity. The cohesion of the Assyrian community in Syria and Iraq has been significantly affected by the atrocities committed by the Islamic State, resulting in considerable risk that Assyrian cultural identity and memory will disappear. Aside from the fragmenting of social cohesion on a macro level, the separation of immediate family members has disrupted family dynamics and threatened the transmittance of customs and household history onto younger generations—further contributing to the disintegration of cultural heritage on an individual level.

The Assyrians who returned to Khabour are deeply affected by their predicament and that of their community. The desolate atmosphere created by years of conflict is not conducive to celebration, and negatively affects the performing arts, such as dance, and festive social or religious events. The situation concerning these forms of cultural expression is complex in the context of a country that is now deeply fragmented and under the control of different political and military entities. Even so, Assyrian returnees have demonstrated resilience by continuing to mark important holidays. For example, in April 2018, the remaining Assyrians in Khabour gathered in the village of Tel Arbosh to mark the Assyrian New Year, recognized each year on April 1.<sup>48</sup> However, the lack of return to Khabour is discouraging and hope for a future for Assyrians in the region has all but vanished.

There is limited information available about the effects of displacement on Khabour's Assyrians and the Assyrian people in general. However, assumptions can be drawn based on previous studies. According to one study published by UNESCO which analyzed the impact of displacement on Syrian intangible cultural heritage:



An Assyrian family visits the ruins of Mar Sliwa Church at Tel Talaa on Christmas Day. (2015)



An Assyrian woman in the Khabour Region making bread using a tandoor oven. (2012)

The academic literature on refugees and displacement shows that people displaced by conflict may face violence, physical and psychological suffering, loss of property and livelihoods, and the death and scattering of family members. They may experience a radical separation from their places and communities of origin. All these factors inevitably induce changes in lifestyles and cultural practices. Several studies have also focused on displaced communities over the long term and found that, even in situations of geographic and/or social dislocation, these communities can display cultural resilience. Refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) have turned to various forms of cultural expressions that help them live through disasters. Such forms include inter alia rituals of grieving and mourning, collective practices of social bonding and remembrance, and the celebration of birth, marriage and other festive events. Within new environments, the performing arts or crafts skills can furthermore provide a source of livelihood, whereas traditional knowledge may be harnessed for survival.

An argument can be made that because ICH is embedded in social and cultural practices, representations, sense of belonging and identity, it ‘moves’ with its displaced bearers, who may use it to respond to social, economic, and psychological shocks. In exile, this ‘soft’ form of heritage may be central to the refugees’ collective memory, cultural identity, and resilience. The rupture of the socio-cultural fabric brought about by displacement, however, is likely to entail the dislocation of contexts and channels necessary for ICH expression. Importantly, the social, economic, security, legal, or political context within which people are displaced may, as a side effect, not be conducive for them to express their ICH. In such situations, it is likely that some expressions and practices will be eroded or lost, while communities, groups and individuals, will transform others, which also may start to carry new meaning.<sup>49</sup>



An Assyrian woman harvesting grapes in the Khabour Region. (2012)

Feelings of worthlessness and isolation are common among Assyrian refugees as they navigate transitional spaces in their displacement.<sup>50</sup> While they are able to maintain their distinct cultural and religious identity as they await resettlement to a third country, the pressures and uncertainties of life in limbo have had a negative impact on the mental health of Assyrian refugees. In these environments, daily survival takes precedent over anxieties about the survival of cultural expressions. However, Assyrians express attachment to their customs and traditions in displacement, and their cultural identity continues to inform basic day-to-day activities such as cooking or mourning rituals. This attachment can be seen as a psychosocial coping mechanism used to alleviate the stress and trauma that comes with war-induced displacement, as they adjust to new environments and realities.

The API collected the following statements from Assyrians forcibly displaced from Khabour:

Respondent 1 from Tel Hurmiz

*“Our customs and our language are all that remain. Everything else has been destroyed or taken from us.”<sup>51</sup>*

Respondent 2 from Tel Tammam

*“Our culture and traditions are the only things we can carry with us wherever we go.”<sup>52</sup>*

Respondent 3 from Tel Taal

*“Our culture is what has always united us across borders. It is the only thing that can keep us together now that we are separated from our lands.”<sup>53</sup>*

Assyrian artists have demonstrated resilience in their displacement as a response to the destruction of their heritage by recreating iconic pieces destroyed by the Islamic State or creating contemporary art inspired by their own experiences.

Fadi Khiyo, an Assyrian artist from Tel Jumaa, Khabour lived through the Islamic State assault in February 2015. His aunt and cousins were among those held captive by the terrorist group. Khiyo, now a refugee, describes his works as reflections on the experiences of the Assyrian people. “[My art] is inspired by all of the horrific things I’ve seen, all the stories I’ve heard,” he said. “Part of Daesh’s goal was to stop us from creating. They failed.”<sup>54</sup>

Attending church in displacement plays a significant role in maintaining identity and belonging for Assyrians. Most Assyrians from Khabour sought refuge in Lebanon, while smaller numbers fled to Jordan or Turkey. Both the Assyrian Church of the East and the Chaldean Catholic Church conduct religious services for Assyrian refugees in these countries, providing a space for worship and social interactions. These forms of cultural expression help them adjust to a new environment by providing a sense of familiarity and community.

Resettlement is the immediate solution for individual Assyrian families seeking conditions of security, stability, and equality, but it is detrimental to the collective identity and survivability of the Assyrian people. Ethnic enclaves have been built and sustained by Assyrian immigration in various countries where they are increasingly prone to cultural assimilation.

Ultimately, mass migration only further separates the Assyrians from their homeland, and in the process, destroys their social cohesion and results in considerable risk that Assyrian cultural identity will be permanently lost.



Assyrian artist Fadi Khiyo in his studio based in Qamishli, Syria. (Fadi Khiyo, 2015)

## Part V: Conclusion and Recommendations

*Destruction of shrines, churches, and ancient historical cities and art is an attack on places and symbols of memory that are linked to self-image and unity. Buildings and shared spaces are locations where groups and individuals come together through shared experience, where collective identities are forged, and traditions are invented and preserved.... As a tangible trace of past lives made permanent through building activities, cultural heritage sites provide evidence for the endurance of the human world in the face of the brevity of human life. Thus, what is lost is the evidence for endurance. No longer surrounded by a landscape of the past, peoples feel their present and future increasingly threatened.*

— Helen Malko, “Heritage wars: A cultural genocide in Iraq”<sup>55</sup>

The ongoing cycle of genocide, forced displacement, and dispossession targeting Assyrians has jeopardized the survival of the Assyrian culture, as well as traditions and practices central to their culture. Now more than ever, Assyrians require protection on all fronts from the systematic assault on their identity, as they are forced to depopulate their ancestral lands in the Middle East. Their cultural heritage is part and parcel to their identity, and it is one of the remaining claims that they can leverage in their rightful existential pursuit.

Any discussion of the atrocities committed by the Islamic State against the Assyrian people must also take into account the attempted destruction of their culture. There is strong evidence of the systematic intentional destruction of Assyrian tangible cultural heritage by the Islamic State in both Syria and Iraq, and the existence of such a policy is only confirmed by official publications of the Islamic State. These actions not only constitute war crimes, but were undertaken pursuant to a policy of cultural genocide. Such atrocities were designed to sever Assyrians from their past and erase all traces of their existence in the region.

While the threat of the Islamic State has been largely diminished, the threat to Assyrian cultural heritage across the region persists. Assyrian material heritage in countries like Syria, Iraq, and Turkey is grossly neglected and remains at great risk. The illicit trafficking of artifacts and cultural objects, the pillaging of archaeological sites, and the destruction and defacement of historical structures and monuments cause irreparable damage to the cultural heritage of a people. Cultural heritage is more than a legacy of cultural objects or traditions from the past: It is central to identity, social cohesion, and continuity and must be protected.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

- UNESCO should open investigations into the destruction of the cultural and religious sites presented in this report;
- Government authorities in Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Iran should be urged to ensure adequate safeguards for the protection and conservation of Assyrian cultural heritage within their jurisdiction and recognize the indigenous status of the Assyrian people;
- The United Nations, donor nations such as the United States, and non-governmental organizations should provide assistance—financial and otherwise—to the restoration of Assyrian cultural and religious buildings destroyed by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, prioritizing sites in areas where there have been significant rates of return among the Assyrian population;
- The United Nations, donor nations such as the United States, and non-governmental organizations should support efforts and initiatives to preserve the unique culture of ethnic and religious minorities targeted by the Islamic State.

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