

# Report Assyrian-European Fieldwork Delegation

18th of May - 22nd of May 2023



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## ***Introduction***

*“You have written a book, you have had a child, you have visited Babylon, now you can die.”*

*“The professor wanted to go to the museum: Do you have a subway?”*

*Journalist: no, we have taxis and militias.”*

These two citations were written down during the travels of an Assyrian-European delegation searching for ways to create more peace and security for the Assyrian people of Iraq. The first is a well-known saying, characterising the richness of Assyrian and Iraqi culture. It speaks of a person's life, of one's wishes to live a full and peaceful life for which you need cultural development, a happy family life and can enjoy the history of your culture. The second one was a joke that came up by coincidence in a conversation and characterised the current situation in the land. The intellectual stands for peace and the enjoyment of culture and modern life (the subway). But in Iraq there are still obstacles, which are given by the journalist, a person of rationality and everyday facts. The pun is a clash in the image of which means are the ways of travel to where you want to go, to prosperity. The professor names peaceful means, a vehicle that can transport a group, any group living in coexistence and diversity, but they are called out by the journalist as some utopian dream and naming not only taxis (individuality), but also armed forces as the current reality in moving towards reaching some place you want to go. But where one can dream, there is hope. And with hope, one can build further towards a future that might become reality. Hope is fuelling this delegation's endeavours.

In this report you will find an overview of the delegation's travels along several politicians, government officials and persons active in civil society. After the introduction of the members of the delegation, you will find a concise overview of the delegation's aims and a description of the status quo in the country of Iraq. Thereafter, an overview follows of the persons met and a detailed report of the conversations. The report concludes with points of accountability, which are the outcome harvesting of the journey, some points of reflection in the wishes for future PR-endeavours and a concluding oversight of costs made.

By writing this report, the delegation expresses its wish to be as informative as possible for any stakeholders involved and is available for further questions at any given time.

*Safety;*

The security situation of Iraqi Assyrians in their own residential area, the Nineveh plains, is deplorable.

The security situation of Iraqi Assyrians (Also knows and Chaldeans, Syriac, or by their common belief, Christian) in their own residential areas, the Nineveh plains, is deplorable. Polarizing groups, one aligned with the Shiite militias, the other aligned to the Kurdish militia are competing to gain control of the region at the expense of the natives of the area. This not only creates an unsafe feeling; the actual everyday life is lacking proper security.

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· *Budget*

The Nineveh Plains lies in what is called the 'disputed areas' of Iraq. They are located between the Kurdistan region and the rest of the Iraqi government. Given that it does not belong to either controlling group, it is effectively abandoned. The neglected areas went from bad to worse during the ISIS attack. During the ISIS presence, many houses, churches and roads have been destroyed. The reconstruction happens on the initiative of the inhabitants and no budget is made available to the Assyrian region. The national government will have to earmark funds to the Nineveh plains, in order to take the issues of the inhabitants seriously and have them gain perspective for a hopeful future.

· *Development*

*Education and healthcare sectors must improve. Support the Nineveh University, to protect the Assyrian language from further threats.*

*A hospital is necessary for the everyday and intensive medical care of Nineveh civilians.*

· *Genocide*

*To give the people hope and to be recognized, it is necessary to recognize the genocides that residents of the Nineveh plains have experienced: 1915 Sayfo, 1933 Simele and 2014 ISIS. The 1933 simele massacre was perpetrated by the Iraqi army as the first military action after the creation of the state of Iraq, so it is especially important that the new Iraqi government recognizes the massacre perpetrated in the past and to show that Iraq is turning a new leaf.*

· *Protection of history and heritage*

*There is an urgent need for the protection of Assyrian heritage sites in Nineveh, Nimrud, Arbil and Babylon. The Assyrians at the time of antique Assyria constructed sights such as the walls of Nineveh, the castle in Arbil, the castles of Nimrud and Babylon. These are the treasures of antiquity, and they are neither taught nor preserved.*

*The delegation spoke to Assyrian political parties as well, who are seen by the Assyrians in Iraq as their spokespersons. They too have shared alarming messages with the delegation. As far as they are concerned, a political and cultural genocide is now taking place in Iraq.*

## ***Delegation members***

**Attiya Gamri**, the Netherlands, member Partij van de Arbeid (PvdA, Dutch Labour Party)

**Khlapieel Bnyameen**, Iraq, journalist

**Prof. Efrem Yildiz**, Spain, professor of Middle-Eastern Studies, University of Salamanca

**Fareed Lazar**, Iraq, lawyer, diplomat

**Marene Elgershuizen**, the Netherlands, PES-delegate for PvdA, historian on genocide studies and post-conflict situations.

Diversity of the delegation represented in: age, gender, national and ethnic background, professions.

The Delegation from Europe uses the abbreviation DEU in this report.

## ***Aim of this lobby tour***

Assyria Foundation, the Netherlands took the initiative for this visit to Iraq. This fieldwork mission is aimed at strengthening the relations between the Assyrian community in Iraq and its diaspora mainly in Europe, the United States and other regions, and the political and community leaders of the nation of Iraq.

- Our long term goals are improving **the security situation** of the Assyrians (christian minorities) in Iraq, and other minorities which are the Assyrian and Yezidi people, mainly in the Nineveh Plains; to end all discrimination against minorities;
- **Implementation of article 125**: to have article 125 of the Constitution implemented and have the people's human rights guaranteed;

- **Budget** for reconstruction of the Nineveh plains;
- **Construction of Nineveh University and Hospitals** in the Nineveh Plains;
- **Recognise the 2 genocides on the Assyrians 1915 in Turkey and 1933 in Iraq;** to have the genocide of 1933 recognized by the State of Iraq and form a basis for cultural development of the christian minorities;
- **Establish the right to return to Iraq** for the Assyrian diaspora; in the end to have a durable and lasting peace in the country of Iraq, its neighbouring countries and thus making it possible for Assyrian diaspora to return if and when they should wish to do so.

## ***Who are the Assyrians in Iraq?***

Iraq is mosaic of ethnic and religious groups. The three largest demographic groups are Shia Arabs, Sunni Arabs, and Kurds Sunni. It is estimated that 75-80% of the inhabitants are Arab and 15% are Kurdish. Ethnic minorities make up to 5 to 10% of the population. Islam is the country's official religion. Particularly in the North of Iraq many religious, ethnic, cultural and linguistic minorities: Turkmen, Yazidi, Assyrians, Jews etc.<sup>1</sup>

In the Iraqi Constitution however, minorities are not being mentioned. It speaks about "compartments" of society, giving diversity a more neutral notion. This can, however, also give cause for blind spots in the government's policy. For example, Assyrians have not been recognized as a distinct minority, but rather as a religious minority. In the north of Iraq, Assyrians are often referred to as Kurdish Christians, whereas elsewhere in the country they are considered Arabs. In the census of 1977 and 1987, Assyrians were not allowed to refer to themselves as Assyrians, this had to be Arabs or Kurds.<sup>2</sup>

In Iraq it is clear that the security needs of Assyrian and Yazidi people are not being met. Discrimination happens throughout, which influences the chances and everyday life of the average Assyrian person in Baghdad and Arbil.

### **Cultural and Religious status quo**

Assyria is a region stretching from Iraq, through Syria, South-Eastern Turkey and Iran. Its centre lies in the Nineveh plains. There is no official recognition or legal enforcement of the region's name. The Assyrian language, also referred to as Neo-Aramaic or Syriac, is therefore not officially taught in Iraqi schools or universities and is considered by Ethnologue to be endangered.<sup>3</sup> Estimates of the Assyrian population vary from 3.3 to 6.3 million, the vast majority being its diaspora.<sup>4</sup> Assyrians want to create the Assyria Region Government in the Nineveh.

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<sup>1</sup> EUAA, 'Country Guidance Iraq 2021: Religious and ethnic minorities, and stateless persons', <https://euaa.europa.eu/country-guidance-iraq-2021/215-religious-and-ethnic-minorities-and-stateless-persons>.

<sup>2</sup> UNPO, 'Assyria: Human Rights situation in Iraq, Turkey and Syria', <https://unpo.org/article/741>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ethnologue.com/language/aii/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.unpo.org/article/7859>

Assyrians are mainly Orthodox Christians or Catholic Christians and are involved in interreligious dialogues in Iraq. A contradictory point is that Assyrian people are mainly referred to by their religious denomination (Christians), which ignores the fact that Assyrians are an ethnic group, a nation. Ignoring this point lies at the basis of not recognising the genocides the Assyrian people had to endure, for recognising a genocide means recognising an ethnic or national group.

#### Political situation

There are 5 seats meant for Christian minorities. However, they are not all occupied by Assyrian parliamentarians. The Assyrian community considers this to be a gap in political rights, because they are not represented in the parliament.

### ***Visited officials***

#### *Political and civil society leaders, officials and other affiliates:*

**Saad Salloum:** Chair MASARAT Foundation for Cultural and Media Development. Leading activist on local and international stage for interfaith dialogue, civil liberties and freedom of belief. Adviser of the Iraqi government.

**Prof. Kadhim Alsahlani:** adviser to the former Prime-Minister, vice-president of the Community Democratic Party and vice-president of the University of Kargh. Influential in Basra. One of the four leaders of the October 2022 uprising in Iraq.

**Dr. Ghandi Kazanzani:** Member of Parliament and leader of Progress Party, and Adviser to the Speaker of Parliament

**Babylon Party mr. Rayan Al Kaldani,** Leader of the party and Babylon Brigades  
**Aswan Keldany,** Member of the Parliament - Christian seat, Babylon Party

**MP Yonadam Kanna,** Rafidain coalition Chairman /Assyrian Democratic Movement in Iraq.

**Abnaa Al-Nahrain Party & ADM:** Assyrian political parties in Northern-Iraq.

Tuma Khushaba: member of board

Mikhail Benjamin: Chairman of the Iraqi Minorities Association, of 28 national NGOs.

Galeta Shaba: chairperson Abnaa Al-Nahrain, first Assyrian woman to be elected to regional parliament.

Ms. Lydia founder of the Assyrian women's organisations.

#### *Academics:*

**Dr. Firas Georgis Aziz,** prof. in political science - Baghdad University

*Religious leaders:*

**Sayyid Ammar Al-Hakim** - Al-Hikma National Movement

His head of the national PR office, diversity adviser: dr. Mohammed Husam Alhusaini

**Fr. dr. Ameer Jaje op**, director of Baghdad Academy for Human Sciences, consultant of the pontifical council for interreligious dialogue

*Political civil servants, advisers of the Prime-Minister:*

**Qasim Al-Arji**, National Adviser on Security

**Dr. Hazim Wattan & Qahtan Idan**: Advisers to the Prime Minister for Political Affairs.

## ***Day to day report***

Friday May 19th

Meeting with **Saad Salloum**: Chair MASARAT Foundation for Cultural and Media Development. Leading activist on local and international stage for interfaith dialogue, civil liberties and freedom of belief. Adviser of the Iraqi government.

Spoken of to be a possible upcoming politician and he is the first to talk about diversity in a way no one else has ever done. Visible figure in the media and is mentioned in various interviews.

PhD in Paradigm Shifting and the Responsibility to protect. Salloum is trying to get genocide studies established in Iraq and have books translated to English and Arabic.

We hold a conversation with Salloum about genocide prevention, which starts with hate speech between cultural groups. This is an important point for Armenians and Assyrians, because of their past genocides they experienced.

Salloum states the government is responsible for diversity management and the position of minorities. It is important that minority groups should have an amount of seats in parliament according to the size in Iraqi society. Minorities could get a veto-right, which you may use under certain conditions, e.g. in the case of land rights.

Assyrians have 5 seats now, but in Salloum's opinion they haven't been able to do much for the Christian minority. This requires more internal dialogue.

Salloum points out that minorities and majorities are mentioned in the Constitution. Assyrians do not want to be called a minority, because they are an indigenous people. The word "Component" is a more neutral term. But changing the word does not mean that reality has changed and how people look at each other is not yet the equivalent.

There must be a simple message, namely that Christians represent all minorities. Because they all are. Then there must be freedom of religion and belief. For that, it is necessary to talk to the religious leaders, not so much to the political leaders. This is necessary to create equivalence. Interfaith discussion implies also a favour of recognition, then one can omit formal recognition.

DEU: Because of the 2019 protests, a new generation with a sense of national identity of Assyria has stood up. The delegation from Europe proposes to bring these young people from the Netherlands and other countries to Baghdad for a meeting. Active Assyrians are highly educated and can bring new national awareness.

-Conversation with **dr. Firas Georgias Aziz**: Independent Assyrian parliamentary candidate. Professor at Baghdad University in Political Science.

Saad Salloum joins in on the conversations. Aziz has a more pessimistic story and calls the situation of Christians terrible and horrible. Reasons for this are many, amongst others the political Islam and conflicts with other cultural or religious groups. Aziz states that 2.3 million people already have left Iraq, because there is no chance for Assyrians and Christians in Iraq.

Saad thinks leaving is the easy option. One has to fight, work on your own psychology to stay positive, the young people need that.

The Assyrian security situation however is not in order. People are buying up and preparing to leave, because they fear for the future. The wish is that the government steps in to provide security for all people. Kurds have closed in their own area around a group of villages with a border and checkpoints. This possibility is considered in the conservation for Assyrians in the Nineveh plains, because we need a safe zone. It has already been requested in 2005, which didn't happen. It has not been realised, because of the conflict between the Arabs and Kurds about the Nineveh plains. In this discussion the Arabs and Kurds did not respect the wishes of the Assyrians. In 2010 a church with 80 people in it was bombed and still the government did not intervene. In 2014 Isis came to the Nineveh Plains. The Assyrians did not have any militia of their own and the Arabs and Kurds soldiers left the Nineveh plains, leaving the Assyrians to themselves.

It is important for Assyrians to have their own province and have it discussed in parliament, because of the allocation of budgets. Many times Assyrians have tried to organise a group of smart people and bring their point to the forefront, but the government is not listening.

DEU states that the Nineveh plains are a green ribbon, from where we should start.

The delegation from Europe offers to organise people, so Aziz can get support from Europe.

Aziz explains the Catholic/Caldenian Church has a lot of power and a big political network. However, Cardinal Sakko is a religious leader, not a political leader. He has good relations with the political arena in Iraq.

DEU points out that people already tried to kill Aziz in 2014, by placing a bomb under his flat. Aziz states it happens not even because people are Christians, but to change the sense of security and profit from it economically. When people are killed and threatened, they sell their house cheaply and militias will resell the house for a much higher price.

The delegation from Europe points out that this doesn't happen to Kurds, because several militias protect their own people. Assyrians don't have their own militias. No money, no supporters, no own security forces. Therefore they are vulnerable for changes in security situations, they are the canaries in the coal mine.

Aziz points out: We are not losing hope, because there was none in the first place. DEU adds that the Assyrians in Iraq, indeed, never had their human rights protected or guaranteed. A discussion follows about the developments and protests.

DEU mentions that back in the day, asking the survivors of the 1915 genocide if they would have had hope. Looking back now, those people would never have thought the Assyrian people would still exist today. Security forces in the Nineveh plains can give hope and a clear budget for reconstruction of the region would be urgent and necessary.

DEU mentions that if you are not capable of security, of killing, because you are going to be killed, you will never become a nation. We have to focus on a new generation, answering to Saad, but one must be able to protect your own home. You must protect your nation as you protect your own mother, otherwise there is no chance. We are against violence, but the right to self-defence is a reality. We must be aware of the fact that we must stand up for ourselves, not turn the other cheek. You attack me, I fight back. You respect me, I respect you. Because all other communities have their security arranged by employing militias.

DEU answers a question about a theory of progressive geopolitics. In Iraq's situation, political leaders look towards the European Union for investments and trade. Coming to trade agreements should not only be out of self-interest for Europe, but out of what other countries need as well. Europe is a powerful union, what can it do with that power? The EU should not only look inward for its strategic autonomy for resources, but reach out to countries like Iraq out of strategic engagement. This is a chance for Iraq to jump in and ask for trade and investment opportunities. Geopolitical language is what the European Commission is all about now.

Saad mentions he is coming to The Hague the next week, because he wants some minor amendments to the Iraqi Constitution to change the political system. He is doing a small tour, also visiting Germany, Brussels and Paris to make an inventory of what others might want and create a road map for a New Social Contract. He wants to talk to Europeans about what this roadmap should look like. Europeans who can play a mediation role, because they can position themselves in neutrality, the US cannot.

Prime-minister Al Sudani has already said that he accepts that road map, he is open to new developments. Laws compiled in 2004 and 2005 are not updated nor implemented, such as the rights of the Assyrians. This should happen now.

DEU asks about new Assyrian leaders. Aziz says no Assyrian political party exists and we have no open democratic system like in Europe. DEU mentions that Tur Abdin (South-East Turkey) was empty 30 years ago, but now there are 40 new houses in one village, built by people who came back from Europe. This happens in most villages in South-East Turkey. This might be done in Iraq as well.

The conversation is concluded by the question if the militias are sending Aziz hate messages. They are not, he answers, they have been blowing up his offices three times now.

A last question is posed about changing the discourse. For there is no conflict with the international community, would it be possible to represent the Iraqi Christian community?

-Visit to the Academy of Humanities: **Fr. dr. Ameer Jaje op.**, director of Baghdad Academy for Human Sciences, consultant of the pontifical council for interreligious dialogue, Dominican priest.

Lessons in arts, languages, music, on ecology since 2012. There is a summer school for the children, where 30 young people learn 3 days about ecology.

Where other programs are for the elite, this school is for all Iraqis, although more Muslims than Christians visit the school. Programs emphasise human values. The war has destroyed much of its awareness. The school is not recognized by the state, but they don't need that and now they are independent and free.

They do want to cooperate with the Ministry of Youth.

Students are very positive and we notice a positive atmosphere in the school. "Here I can breathe freedom", said one student. They can talk about anything they want, while at universities still a lot of taboos exist.

We've met several children, who study biology and music.

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We follow our day to Tahrir square. We are being interviewed by a journalist of a national TV channel.

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Next visit is to **Prof. Kadhim Alsahlani**: adviser to the former Prime-Minister, vice-president of the Community Democratic Party and vice-president of the University of Kargh. Influential in Basra. One of the four leaders of the October 2022 uprising in Iraq.

Alsahlani explains, Iraq's development from civil state to multi-ethnic state made Iraq very weak, that's why working for Iraq means that everyone works for their own ethnic group. We try to separate the separated. But 80% of the Iraqis believe in civil law.

DEU: Assyrians don't want more rights, but the same rights. We want to be equal.

But there are still small groups that do not respect other minorities, so we need extra security to protect Assyrians. Half a million are now in Europe. Because there is little security in the Nineveh plains, would there be safety then Assyrians would stay in Iraq and let the others in the diaspora come back.

DEU: we need people with money to invest, people who are culturally educated, philosophically, politically etc. and who want and can contribute to society. They want to invest in Iraq, but they will only come when it is safe. That gives Iraq a head start in their reconstruction. That every Iraqi has a place in Iraq. We learned from Isis, who could protect themselves and were protected. The Assyrians were not protected.

Alsahlani: Minorities must stay in Iraq or religious leaders will take over. So we have to support diversity, we want to protect more minorities, Yazidis, Christians, Turkmen etc.

Assistant of Alsahlani: Not only minorities have problems, all the cultural groups have many problems, such as the activities of militias and their connection with today's government. This attacks every civil mentality.

DEU: We are aware of that. But there is a big difference between the minority that has no chance and the larger groups that can defend themselves.

Assyrians are threatened, because they cannot defend themselves. They are leaving, that is their only way out and we do not want that as an outcome for the reconstruction of Iraq. Assyrians are the most vulnerable group in Iraq.

Alsahlani: Leaving is not the only solution. The return of Assyrians is also what we want. We are not just friends, we are brothers.

DEU: Article 125 of the Iraqi Constitution must be implemented. We are looking for friends who want to help us with this, not just the Christians who help only the Christians. There will be no more Assyrians if we don't hurry.

Alsahlani: This is a good idea to start with, this country is for everyone. No majority has the right to steal minority rights.

DEU: If you bang your fist on the table, many groups in Europe will invite you. Because so far no Arab party has done that.

Alsahlani: Our family has the same family as yours, because he was kidnapped several years ago. So when we talk about persecution, I can feel what that is about. Rights and security is not a theory, I know what it means. We would like to work with you with your political parties and NGOs.

DEU: We are talking about Kurdistan, their flag is not for us, because of the text and colours on the flag. Their name does not represent our history.

DEU: Kurdistan is only for Kurdish people, who take our Assyrian land. This country is ours too. We also do not want the Iraqi flag with Islamic text placed on a grave of any of us.

Alsahlani: These are good opinions, but they are not the priority right now. The priority now is to establish security.

DEU: When people can't live with their own people with the same language, the same way of life, that should be possible. When you build Iraq as a multicultural country then Assyrians will be able to make the best contribution, you know they are hard workers.

In addition to security, education is very important. The first language was Assyrian Babylonia, but this is now an endangered language. If we really believe, then this multiculturalism will be an example for the entire Middle East.

Alsahlani asks for connections in Europe, DEU offers a network in Europe to universities as soon as they start working on the security issue.

DEU: Soon there will be a major education reform in Europe's higher education system.

Great emphasis is then placed on multilateralism. Not so much bilateral, but at least 7 or 8 universities are working on a project.

So this is a new chance for Baghdad University.

This is also about continents, not just countries. Iraq can be the bridge between Europe and the Middle East. Salamanca is one of the coordinators of this new project. 281 universities participated under their leadership. Europe is the core, but they don't just want to work among themselves. They look for bridge countries to work with.

The Spanish ambassador in Baghdad already spoke about this, but he did not yet know with whom to arrange this, because he likes to do it face to face. This is not the only activity, we are already 800 years old. So a huge tradition in internationalisation, in all areas.

DEU: Much research has been done into civil society study and the process of reconstruction, post-conflict sustainable peace and meaningful full participation of women.

This is also in prevention of brain drain, which is very important for Iraq.

DEU asks about the position of women.

Alsahlani: Collaboration can be stronger through education and all mentioned points. Our university is quite new, founded in 2015, which is unlike 800 years old. We want to make it one of the most important universities in Iraq.

There are three colleges, one is led by a woman and a female assistant. The second college also has a female assistant. Percentage of women attending university is 40%.

Evening meeting with **Dr Ghandi Kazanzani**: Member of Parliament, leader of Progress Party, and Adviser to the Speaker of Parliament

DEU points out we want to come to Iraq more often, we want equal rights. Little by little small incidents such as deaths and a bomb on the church cause Assyrians to leave for Europe. How do we keep those highly educated Assyrians in Iraq? We want to be your voice in Europe. But then we want to have the Nineveh plains with security, not Kurdistan there. Also we want art. 125 implemented, for all minorities.

Kazanzani welcomes us and states he is known as a minority rights protector. Giving a historical background of Iraq, the current situation and a possible solution.

After the 2003 convention, a political vacuum has arisen. Shia have a religious identity as well as political background. Kurds have a national identity, which is much stronger and more important. Sunna have no political identity. This reflects on the minorities-theme. Then everything was under the umbrella of Iraqi national identity. We Sunna found no government that could guarantee our security. Then came Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups, so we had to look at the situation from a different angle. We were very tough with our leaders. No real political parties emerged from this, only the Iraqi Islamic party. Because there is no real political identity for Sunna, that is why there is not a single Sunni who always remained a politician, because they were always cut off. After 2014 came IS and in 2015 the Prime-Minister was changed under international pressure.

Heidel Abadi came to normalise religious conflict and problems, he wanted to heal scars. A new system came that when a GD or minister was appointed, then the job would not go to the former PM, but everything changed and now went according to the law. In 2018 Kazanzani became a candidate himself, because of the opportunity to change something.

After political agreement came a new PM, but he was not good, he thought himself to be the best for the situation. He was good at resolving religious conflicts though. It was a message to the people that they could protest against the system. In 2018-2020 he got himself engaged in dialogue between politicians and young people.

This is civil society's main point to work on. 100,000 Sunna are still in jail because. We have decided not to oppose the Shia leadership. We'll punish them under the table, though. Now we're at a level where we can force them to do things in terms of security. We do not argue with people who have good intentions, have the same religion, which is Islam. But what about the others, non-Islamic people?

There is less conflict now, before you had to campaign against each other to win as a Sunni or Shia candidate. Not anymore.

We wanted to stop. Now Kazanzani is not against the government in the media and public, we will be talking everything right, but under the table and personally we punish them.

DEU: There is a big difference between Shia or Sunni, and minorities, because as Assyrians we are not protected. We have lost our country to the Kurds. If an Arab kills my children, no one will protect us. But you protect yourself, so we ask for your protection too.

Kazanzani: I just explained the problems. First things first, we will not act like an earthquake, then every man will act for himself and that's what happened before. The government left us with our own problems. Shia can elect anyone, there are enough people and no resistance internationally to stop that.

To solve this problem we must destroy various conflicts and go for a civil state.

DEU: We talk about an earthquake, but the real victims are the Assyrians. We haven't had a chance. If we want to build Iraq as a multicultural nation, you can count on us. We not only want protection, but also we offer a lot. When we get our own territory, you know we will invest, you know us well to be hard workers.

We don't ask for anything extraordinary, but the opportunity just like any other group gets. Iraq can become an example. We can promote education with the experience of the University of Salamanca in internationalisation.

DEU: We have 15 villages in Nineveh and we want to protect them. We need a budget for that. For roads and a university in our own language. A small democracy exists among those 15 villages, that is what art. 125 in your own constitution entails. We ask for your help. When you do this, you and Iraq will set an example for the Middle East and to Europe. Half a million Assyrians can already be good-will ambassadors in Europe. We don't want the Peshmerga.

Kazanzani: You can take full rights. But how do you take a full right? There is an easy way and a difficult one. In any case, the pie of rights must be shared.

DEU: You are in power and neutral, secular. You can divide that pie. Let's write a short term and long term plan with you about a few villages.

Kazanzani: Those few villages are not a big problem. What do you need to be put in the Iraqi budget, state this and please be super fast. This needs to happen today or tomorrow, because he has to write a report for parliament to speak to the finance committee. If you want to have full rights, you have to be strong in Iraq's parliament.

DEU: I am a politician. I know that with four or five seats I don't have a majority. We will spread the message among us that one should look out to build a majority in parliament, a coalition. But to make our region attractive, we need a budget. If it's good enough, we'll come back. The group proceeds to talk about a drawing board, for a 10 year plan.

DEU points out: This is what it's all about, this is why the big companies invest in countries like the Netherlands. It is not low tax or cheap labour, it is security, an open democracy, where people's rights are guaranteed. So this would mean a historic step in the development of Iraq. When there are talks with Development Banks, you can bring this up.

Kazanzani: The problem of the Nineveh plains is really big. Every minority group lives there. There is the legal trade, but also "sabaya", kidnapping of women. Also, a religious Shia-route goes through, it's now canonised, because 1400 years ago imam Hussein died there.

DEU wants to focus on the villages and few big city's in the Assyria region.

Kazanzani: I must be able to translate everything into ground support. I support you because it is about giving all Iraqis the same rights. Every day it gets a little better.

The meeting is concluded by the agreement that the delegation sends their plan a.s.a.p.

Saturday May 20th

**Mullah Sayyid Ammar Al-Hakim** - Al-Hikma National Movement

His head of the national PR office, diversity adviser: dr. Mohammed Husam Alhusaini

Al-Hakim holds an exposition about the post-2002 situation. About how guests are sometimes shocked how different everything seems, they worried all rights would disappear per 2003. Others are very glad, because they look back on a history of genocides and murder. Also local forces with international backing are in Iraq, this brings benefits to some, because there is a feeling this would make Iraq a stable country.

However, doors were opened for terrorist groups and made the country into a trash place for several kinds of those groups. They attacked Shia, as well as Sunna. There were bombings. Under Shia was the highest number of casualties, but minorities had the highest percentages in victims. This is strange for a country like Iraq, because all peoples should be respecting each other, like they had always done so. Muslim children attend christian schools, some schools are even attended 80% by Muslims, because it is the practical choice, schools are in the neighbourhood. Diversity is a flower cup, it blossoms beautifully and it smells good. Therefore we don't say "minorities", we say "components", like in the Constitution.

Peoples or nations shouldn't be counted in numbers, for they are wholly part of our population. There are 5 groups, who all have representatives in parliament. We always negotiate with all leaders for the sake of diversity. Christians in Iraq are our method, our way towards the Christians in the rest of the world. In doing so, the Pope visited Iraq. Same counts for the Turks.

We are bigger than the borders of Iraq itself.

He wants to let the different groups of Iraq know that they are important, not second class citizens.

Al-Hakim talks further about how the West supported Iraq when Isis attacked. Al-Hakim says he talks a lot with several ambassadors, he urged them not to give out visa for people to just leave, but asked their support to keep people in Iraq. Because when Iraqis live in Europe or the US for three years, then almost never they would come back again. Also because education is so much better in Europe and the US. To replant a tree happens to be so much more difficult the second time, than the first time.

He talks about security on the ground, concerning minorities. How to rebuild villages that have been demolished by terrorists. The government tries hard, but the right level has not been met.

New political parties are coming up, but this time with more aggression, which makes it more difficult for people to come back.

There are also people who try to prevent migrants from coming back or use Internally Displaced Person's (IDP's) to get more votes in elections. Or use immigrants to get more money. Most importantly, a lot of people are not able to come back. the government is ready to get them back, but are prevented from doing so by some groups. He was shocked to have seen the bad situation in refugee camps, some houses have been completely destroyed, some others just abandoned. Members of parliament tend to use bad situations for their own gain. Hence, it is important to strengthen the central state. Iraq is on a better path, right now.

DEU: If we build in the Nineveh plains, we could create a small piece of heaven on earth. Assyrians can form Iraq's good-will ambassadors in Europe.

Concerning the post-war reconstruction of our country and the political situation, we see a chicken-and-egg situation. Rebuilding the country and gaining support are necessary for people abroad to come back to Iraq. Political support from the government is therefore crucial.

Iraq has the responsibility to get its government to act with more stability. But we still need the international and Western community. Certainly being Assyrians, we need security. Iraq needs to be the best on this point and we want to help you to make that dream come true.

DEU: We have to learn from our mistakes from the past to better the now, therefore we have to discuss the wrongs from the past. We have to believe, we need investments, we need cultural elites who want to return to this country. Kurds can defend themselves, Assyrians and Yazidi cannot. So why not give this small piece of Iraq to the Assyrians to rebuild the land, and in doing so become a part of Iraq. A multilingual and multicultural Iraq. This is what we offer you, when the people from the diaspora return. We are looking at the future.  
(repeats points from previous meetings)

Al-Hakim: The European Union also plays a role in this, for they are the basis for trade investments. We need business people who are willing to make those investments. there is a university in the Nineveh plains, we need possibilities to develop it. We can get permission for a private university.

He will talk personally with the Prime-Minister for investments, hospitals etc. These are good grounds for international support. He will support the people here and the people who are willing to come back to Iraq, even if it is for a short while or a summer.

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**Qasim Al-Arji:** National Security Adviser and Adviser in diversity and international relations.

Al-Arji: Iraq region is developing, there are difficulties, but we are progressing. Proud on diversity, which is our strength. Iraq's Gulf Cup team consists of people of several backgrounds, religions, ethnicities. Now we are on the point that sectarianism is being met with disapproval and rejection, it's opposed. Still there are problems, but als wisdom and rationality.

National identity and citizenship are necessary points. Respect for each other and accepting others are important. In 2003 a shrine of a holy Indian man was demolished. We had conversations with Jews in Iraq. Temples were being destroyed and damaged. He started to read about its histories.

Iraq is rich in diversity. We should be defending what is sacred to everyone, not just to Muslims. Now hate speech has been rejected. Security is a national task and mission. We thank countries that supported us. More tolerance in Iraq is needed. We must accept others as they are.

DEU: Half a million Assyrians are in Europe, they are sending me messages about the emergency of the Assyrians in Iraq. Security is number 1 for us. For example Dorah is empty, 1.5 million people have already left, also because the KDP takes land from Assyrians in Dohuk and Arbil region.

Al-Arji: Shia made a museum about Assyrians and wrote poetry about them.

DEU: Small groups of ISIS were going around Assyrian villages. So all the inhabitants left. We cannot protect ourselves and therefore need help.

Al-Arji: We protect everyone, that's our duty. Assyria is the great historical part of Iraq.

DEU: Isis have destroyed Nimrud. We want equality, thus we need help.

Al-Arji: The Pope was here, a year later he came again with an European ambassador. There is not only destruction in Iraq. And yes, it is important to make everyone feel safe, this is my message to the world. The Prime-Minister and his committee discuss these issues.

DEU: Thanks for your concern. All of Iraq must be safe. Assyrians, Nineveh people don't feel that.

When one is hungry, one starts looking for food and security here is needed instead of investment. We want to contribute and help.

DEU explains about European higher education and the possibility for an Assyrian university in Nineveh.

Al-Arji: In 2018 he was Interior Minister. A boy wanted to change his name because he was having trouble finding work. His name was Osama Bin Laden. Sunni or Shia? We didn't know that, but the name Ahmed worked well for both. But on his first day at work he got an electric shock and died, Al-Arji has visited his family in 2022.

Coexistence and a coherent community need security, but also health. Tells about how his 10-year-old daughter comes to sleep next to him when there is a thunderstorm. You guys, the delegation, are here for a push. More security means more stability.

DEU: For progressives and social democrats, taking responsibility is important, in the world at large that means international solidarity. Multicultural Europe had to learn to deal with many cultures, but we succeeded. There are also opportunities for Iraq. Wise people have bigger ears than mouths. We see that people like you can really do it, which means greater opportunities.

DEU: more representativeness in security forces are needed in the area where they work. So that people are not called to order by people from other groups.

Al-Arji: Keep in touch with the central government. There will always be a lot of problems, not especially in Iraq, but the Prime-Minister is very serious about the Nineveh plains.

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A secular political party, **Emtidat**, Teshrin movement. They first started in 1 city, where they won 9 representative seats, now they want to participate in elections throughout Iraq.

Emtidat is still suffering from traditional parties, also in the parliament. They believe in diversity and have put this theme in its articles, to commit itself to minorities.

They believe in working together to defeat the traditional parties.

DEU: Jeanine Hennis( UN \) issued a statement the other day that we must continue to support the government. What more should she have said?

Emtidat: She mentioned all negative things about the government, but offered no alternative. She did not give the right picture, the victims and corruption.

Emtidat believes that the presidential system should be changed, it is a possible solution, but there is not always a representative of every separate group. They want principles based on a united Iraq. Changes should come through democratic elections.

They want a united Iraq, which means also a united armed force. Assyrians suffered a lot, hence the civil state is the only solution. Through security we can provide that, we reject having guns outside the central government. So no militias should exist.

Their message for Assyrians: be united and contribute to others who believe in a civil state. Let them come back to their indigenous land, for you are the indigenous people.

DEU: As.-Eur. delegation asks them which ideology is Emtidat most closely related to?

Liberalism, progressive? Should the state pay for university and healthcare?

They reply they support women's rights, but their women colleagues were at a human rights watch conference during this meeting.

They have a saying: "Woman is half of the community, the other half too, she is the whole community." Everyone is equal under the law and here in Babylon the first laws were made. Now there are 25% women in parliament, that should be higher. Emtidat states it is their responsibility to be in every part of Iraq.

Investments are necessary to do, but there are also other things needed, like how to create a culture of living together.

As members of Emtidat, they also want to support the Assyrian community. Here is a starting point for several meetings and projects. We must accept the return of the Assyrian diaspora as our cause. So please keep in touch and visit each other. This will be good for Iraq.

DEU: Are you afraid for your life? As the people who protested in October?

E: each group has a different percentage of security. As a new movement, there is a risk.

They receive a lot of death threats, because they are an opposition group.

But we have free will, they say, and our decision is to do this, to choose this way. This movement hopes to achieve their principles from their agenda: a country for all Iraqis.

The delegation and party members visit the grounds of old Babylon. We receive a booklet with the history of the city, but it has not been updated for a long while. Education and information for Iraqi citizens about its history and Assyrian history can be better and more elaborate.

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Meeting with Christian Member of Parliament.

Mr. Aswan Keldany, Member of the Parliament, Babylon Party

Mr. Rayan Al Keldany, Leader Babylon Party

DEU leads the conversation about the alarming situation of the Assyrians in Iraq, Nineveh Plains. Safety is very important and clear budget. During ISIS presence, many houses, churches and roads have been destroyed. The reconstruction happens on the initiative of the inhabitants and no budget is made available to the Assyrian region. The national government will have to earmark funds to the Nineveh plains, in order to take the issues of the inhabitants seriously and have them gain perspective for a hopeful future.

DEU explains the security situation in Nohadra ( Dohuk) and Nineveh valley, where Kurds take Assyrian land. We want the security of the villages, our own police force, for example. After 10 years we will have a Christian region. If we have security, we get hospitals, schools, etc., then we can hold elections for our own parliament and our own prime-minister. The Assyria region Government should be realised.

Then we can show the world, Europe, that this Christian paradise has been created by us and they can recognize it.

DEU states his vision of culture and education, from his experience at the University in Salamanca.

DEU talks about human security, minority rights as the most important hurdle that still needs to be taken. Once established and lasting peace, then for Europe Iraq can geopolitically be one of the most important partners in the region on the basis of values, not just because of raw materials. Investments will come then.

MP speaks about new laws that are needed. He acknowledges DEU, if you want to see how the Assyrian language is taught in Spain, you also have to go to Iraq. If the delegation has any suggestions for new laws, let him know and we'll work together.

DEU; We would like to see the genocides recognised: Sayfo of 1915, Simele of 1933 and the 2014 by ISIS. Also we seek the implementation art. 125 of the Constitution.

MP.: Is the country ready for it? He expects that many will be against it. Article 126 is about Iraqi identity, the islamisation.

MP:

The parties now have the only real effect in parliament. We have many problems in parliament, but it is not shown in the media.

We have done a lot for the Christians, for the farmers. Short term, we're talking about reality and long term. Currently the Parliament is negotiations for about 15 billion for the reconstruction of the Nineveh plains. MP wants the minority minister to put more money into the Christian minorities. The talks about the law for the budget is tomorrow.

Sunday May 21st

Meeting with **Qahtan Idan and dr. Hazim Wattan**, both Adviser to the Prime Minister for Political Affairs.

The conversation continues about the delegation's letter of acknowledgment of the genocide. It is an appeal for the need for dialogue, to see each other, work with each other, and then trust each other. The urgency lies in the Assyrian emergency for safety.

DEU explains the importance of recognizing genocides for societies in post-conflict reconstruction periods, which can take decades. When a genocide is not being recognised, a people does not recognise a cultural distinctive people in its nation state. Therefore, the state can never be a true unity in the sought-after diversity of Iraq. Equality and open democracy comes with recognising one's history, also the lesser and sadder parts of it. It is a human right and a political right to be recognised in one's cultural and ethnic identity. The EU holds great importance to these rights and values.

Adviser 1:

Refer us for political advice in foreign affairs elsewhere by appointment.

They state that the government works together with academics and politicians. They want to arrange a meeting with the Minister of Education about this subject.

Assyrians originate from Iraq, the adviser makes clear, he is a historian himself. We must treat minorities in a special way, he says. The core of Iraq is its diversity. The Iraq Constitution confirms this by law. They would like to bring the Christians back to Iraq. This is a good sign for other compartments in the world, such as Europe. We are looking for ways to stimulate this diversity. Everything is in the responsibility of the government. The Prime Minister takes care of human rights, because we even have a separate Minister for Human Rights. Also he believes in justice for different peoples in Iraq. Also the Nineveh cause and Christians that live there are of high concern to the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister also ordered the Minister of Immigration to keep in touch with the people of Nineveh Valley, to look after their needs.

On the point of Genocide: all ethnic groups suffered from this, ethnic cleansing also took place among the Kurds, Shia etc.

They have associations to achieve community justice. We are searching and looking at others to do what we need to do.

This Prime Minister is really different from the previous one. This government is formed and based on a well planned coalition agreement. The Adviser received orders himself to deal with and help Mosul and Nineveh.

There should be more rights for the people and families who suffered from Isis, we have a plan to get equality.

They are fully willing to take your suggestions. Please, keep in touch, for you are the indigenous people of this land.

Adviser 2:

We strive for diversity in academics, diplomacy, and politics. He is a generation expert. Honestly, he says, we form a team with the Prime Minister, he is very serious about minority issues. The Prime Minister is concerned with human rights, therefore it is very serious for us to talk about this. You have already spoken to many political leaders, so thank you for this appointment made through Saad Salloum.

We also have embassies in Spain, we are in contact with them, and are very respected. In December 2022, we started at 8am and continued until 12am to write an article on the Christian cause, urging that displaced persons and migrants come back, plus we want to arrange an aeroplane for this. This is our public invitation to all Iraqi Christians in the world.

The Prime Minister is pleased with this recommendation. He says a flower bouquet full of colours is the diversity of Iraq. It is how things go with regime change like we've had in 2003, just like Spain had after their dictatorship. We asked the Spanish foreign minister how long it took before they had an acceptable constitution. They stated it took 40 years. But we are thankful that in Iraq, we've been at it for years. We are optimistic and serious.

It is an order from the Prime Minister to welcome and receive European delegations. During our last visit to Spain – because their situation is very similar to ours – we spoke to many, diverse organisations. Also to a centre especially for diversity, we should copy that.

About genocide. In Dorah/ Baghdad massacres were committed after 2003, against all Iraqi groups, not just Christians. 14 bombs exploded a day, so all suffered.

We need a lot of support from the European Union, we are open to all suggestions.

These are not just words, this is an order from the Prime Minister.

We ask the EU to support us, push to allow the population to return. Europe's situations after the Second World War and the French Revolution are good lessons for us.

Our support for Assyrians has started and we support you in your return. We need to talk about these expropriations of Assyrian properties and solve those problems. We must establish a new law for Assyrians and Christians, because now we are losing them.

1933 Genocide: We want to organise a conference, on all Assyrian topics. Social media is important, because it has an effect on people's mood.

The conference should be held without the old government, because they were responsible for the problems.

They state two important points: 1. Political stabilisation; 2. Security brings stability.

The Prime Minister hopes for a memorial for martyrs. We can organise a competition to design the monument.

DEU and Adv. 1 speak about the point of the same suffering of all peoples in Iraq. DEU repeats that we have people who want to invest in the homeland.

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Travelling to Kirkuk, Arbil checkpoint, KRG area.

Visit to the ADM & Abda Al-Nahrain political parties

Tuma Khushaba: member of board

Mikhail Benjamin: Chairman of the Iraqi Minorities Association, of 28 national NGOs.

Galeta Shaba: chairperson Abnaa Al-Nahrain, first Assyrian woman to be elected to regional parliament.

Ms Lydia Shumel founder of the Assyrian women's organisations.

There is little faith in the KRG. The parties have lost their seats to others, because of Kurdish and Arab votes. This is being organised beforehand to have the independent political parties lose their power in the political arena. In this way, the Assyrians do not maintain an independent voice in parliament. Thus, motions aiming for more rights for Assyrians often are rejected. The province of Nineveh still has not been officially recognised.

DEU talks about the current situation, the security issues and other mentioned problems. Everyone says Christians, nobody talks about Assyrians anymore. Talks about the different conversations we've had with officials and politicians. Last talk with advisers about the genocide and organizing a conference together. Also about security and reconstruction.

Families leave, because there are no jobs or security. There is no hope in general. There is a gap between different ethnic groups.

After 1933 our land was not lost, but after ISIS, the government first treated us as Christians, they ignored us.

The members present explain that the seats in the KRG regional parliament meant for Assyrians, are taken by other Christians, who are members of the KRG.

Tuma: there is no country Iraq, there is a government, with Sunna, Shia and Kurds. As an ethnic group, our meetings are respected. But it is not enough. There is no one on our behalf in the regional parliament itself. Arabs don't like us because of our religion. This work is the hardest, we feel a lot of pressure.

We must build bridges with others who do not believe in our cause. Sadly, democracy is not functioning well and openly. To be erased politically, this is the worst genocide. Assyrians are marginalised more and more, and they leave. The other groups, like Arabs and Kurds are fine with that.

Mikhail: These times show that we are divided into two groups. One that finds our situation to be well and who accept everything. They do not see what is happening to others in their

everyday life. Another group has a more negative view. This division has to change, we need unity.

Unfortunately group 1 is always growing and gaining power due to various reasons. But for technical issues, we have to do our homework, stay organised and deliver clear points. This is step 1 in advocacy. Second point is that this bridge between homeland and diaspora will help, because at the moment, there is no connection with Europe. You must speak for us, for we want support for a well-functioning democracy, which means protection of minority rights.

We have to do this, we have no other option.

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On the way to one last appointment, we drove along a huge mosque. Built for the Sunna Kurds in an Assyrian area, while hardly any Kurds live here. That is, of course, just political bullying.

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Monday May 22nd

End of tour.

### ***Outcome harvesting***

1. Invested in relations and gained trust amongst the several officials and others we've spoken to. Meaningful conversations lasting a consistent time to bring across all our concerns and needs.
2. Spoken commitment by several officials, that the government will provide more financial funds for the reconstruction of the Nineveh region.
3. Spoken commitment of the Adviser of Security Qasim Al-Arji: Importance of good relations; importance of security for all Iraqi people; bringing up the subject of the international conference on Assyrian culture and genocide.
4. Gaining the understanding of the need of the recognition of the 1933 genocide with all officials or at least an acknowledgement of the need to.
5. Broadening the networking of Iraqi Assyrian contacts and diaspora members in Europe.
6. Spoken commitment of Political Advisers of the PM to have a remembrance, recognition of the 1933 genocide, and to organise an official conference with international civil society members, academics, politicians, ngo's etc.; talks about a genocide monument.

7. Constructive contacts amongst the persons we spoke to, like the Security Adviser Qasim Al-Arji.
8. Social media attention for our mission from our own channels, like facebook, twitter, instagram, linkedin
9. Bonding amongst European and Assyrian members of the delegation, strengthening ties of the European delegation members with the Iraqi Assyrians.

### ***Wishes for future PR endeavours***

1. Reflection on PR strategy. A preparation with training and setting new goals and means towards it.
2. Brussels office to be definitely established. This is a practical endeavour, which requires more funding and professional employees.
3. Clear mapping of our worldwide network and activate representative persons in the diaspora.
4. Change roles of secretary of the report during lobby missions, when she/he is speaking as a member of the delegation. The report should be covering all things said, by all delegates to consider each one's contributions.





