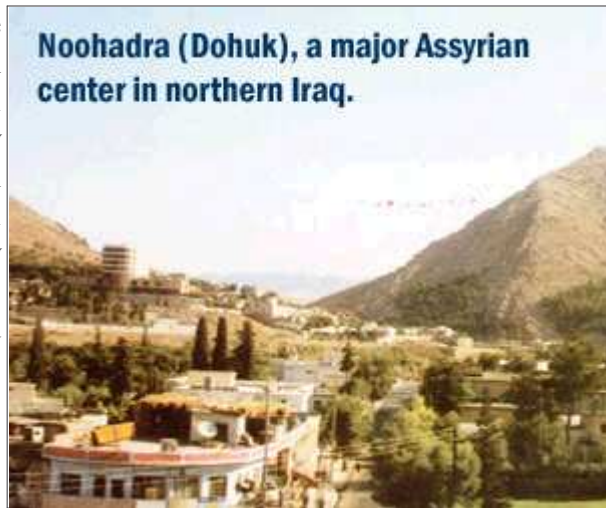
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Kurdish Resolution Threatens Assyrian Lands in Iraq

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An October 8, 2002 resolution adopted by the parliament in northern Iraq has raised concern amongst Assyrians regarding the potential formal and legal transfer of illegally expropriated Assyrian lands to their Kurdish squatters. The directive entitled "General Conditions for the Ownership of Illegally Obtained Lands" mandates the conditions necessary for official governmental land deeds to be granted to Kurdish squatters. According to the directive, all lands confiscated "prior to and until January 1, 2000" are targeted for ownership transfer. Both private and government owned lands are included in the resolution. The directive authorizes a State Planning Board dominated by Kurds to oversee the surveying of the subject lands including urban areas and their surrounding villages. The directive authorizes an appraisal of any occupied lands and stipulates that no land may be appraised for less than 50 dinars per square meter (approximately 3 US dollars).

Noohadra (Dohuk), a major Assyrian center in northern Iraq.



Kurdish squatters are entitled to purchase the land from the regional Kurdish parliament for the value appraised by their fellow Kurds in addition to a small service fee fixed at 14 dinars (approximately 1 US dollar) per square meter in urban areas, 10 dinars per square meter in surrounding suburbs, and 8 dinars per square meter in rural areas. The directive adds that the authority for the transfer of occupied lands to predominantly Behdanani tribal squatters rests on Parliament Resolution 5 in the year 2002 as well as the Prime Minister's directive number 1, in the year 2002. Committee branches are warned that failure to comply in a "direct and speedy manner" will lead to summary prosecution to the fullest extent of the law.

For the indigenous Assyrian Christians of Mesopotamia (also known as Chaldeans and Syriacs), the northern Iraqi provinces of Mosul, Arbil, and Dohuk constitute the very heartland of a nearly 7000 year Assyrian existence. Beginning with the creation of the modern Iraqi nation, Assyrians lost approximately 60 villages in northern Iraq following the massacre of Assyrian civilians in Simele and the surrounding villages by the Iraqi Army in 1933. Another 200 villages were razed along with scores of ancient churches -- some ancient treasures in their own right -- by the Iraqi government in the 1960's and 1970's. In other instances, prime Assyrian lands were taken by the government for a fraction of their market

value under the guise of "imminent domain." Following the Gulf War, lands from more than 50 additional villages were expropriated by Behdanani Kurdish tribes usually with direct ties to the Barzani clan. Those lands previously taken by the government were subsequently expropriated by the Kurdish paramilitary organizations who ostensibly took over the government in the northern "Safe Haven."

Assyrian concerns are understandable in light of a previous Kurdish track record of land occupation and expropriation. Almost universally, all of these lands still under Assyrian ownership were illegally settled by Behdanani Kurdish squatters. With some Assyrian villages still literally under paramilitary occupation, vulnerable Assyrian villagers who had earlier fled their razed villages have been unable to legally or forcibly reclaim their homes. Since the Gulf War and the establishment of the "Safe Haven," some Assyrians seeking to return to their home villages have been prevented either by Iraqi governmental or Kurdish security agents at the various checkpoints dividing the nation.

This most recent parliamentary directive has raised concerns that a new push by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) may purposely target Assyrian existence in the northern provinces. One Assyrian analyst who described the directive as the Kurdish version of the "final solution" to the Assyrian case noted "make no mistake, there are no Assyrian squatters or Kurdish squatters, for that matter, on Kurdish lands. Those rare cases are expeditiously resolved either by swift court action or a bloodbath. This law simply has the potential to transfer illegally expropriated Assyrian lands to Kurdish squatters. The decree has the potential to allow the Kurdish occupation forces to de facto confiscate Assyrian lands and sell them to their Kurdish supporters at a fraction of their real market value. None of the proceeds are ever seen by the legal Assyrian owners, but rather, go to fill the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) coffers. When seen in light of previous Kurdish land grabs, Assyrians are rightly concerned about the potential that this law will lead to the decimation of Assyrian existence in the northern provinces."

The Kurdish scheme has been simple but effective and has been accelerated since the UN administered "Safe Haven" allowed Kurdish paramilitary bands free reign in the region. First, Assyrian lands forcibly vacated by the government are settled by Kurdish tribesmen often tied to the ruling Barzani clan and almost always with the tacit approval of the regional authority. Assyrians attempting to return are often blocked from doing so and are threatened until they abandon hope for reclaiming their lands. Other Assyrian villages that are still inhabited such as the string of villages in the Nahla district are regularly besieged and attacked in an attempt to intimidate the Assyrians. ([AINA 10/16/1999](#)). When these midnight raids and beatings of unarmed civilians had been internationally exposed, village elders were rounded up and threatened into signing a KDP drafted letter denying the attacks ([AINA 1/21/2000](#)). With greater scrutiny from the international community including confirmation of the attacks by the UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) ([AINA 9/18/2000](#)), the attacks had lessened until earlier this year when a midnight grenade attack was reported by Mr. Aladin Khamis, Vice President of the Assyrian American National Federation (AANF) ([AINA 12/12/2002](#)).

In a December 14, 2002 letter to Vice President Richard Cheney, AANF President Atour Golani insisted that "This declaration allows illegal squatters/encroachers (predominantly Kurds) the opportunity to legally purchase land from the Kurdish government." Further, "the repercussions of this land expropriation devastates Assyrians of Northern Iraq who have been

illegally forced from their lands/homes since 1933, primarily those who recently lost their homes as a result of the 1991 no fly zone decree that prevented these families from traveling back to the North."

If ever so briefly, Assyrians had hoped for a new era of fairness and justice with the institution of the Safe Haven under international auspices in northern Iraq. The presence of the UN and US encouraged the [Assyrian Democratic Movement \(ADM\)](#) to join in the parliament in northern Iraq. Because the issue of Assyrian land claims against Kurds was so critical to Assyrians, an ADM parliamentarian, Mr. Francis Shabo, an Assyrian from the Chaldean community, was assigned to serve primarily in the adjudication of land disputes. Assyrian hopes for justice were, however, tragically shot down in the hail of bullets that killed Mr. Shabo on May 31, 1993. In their 1995 report on human rights abuses in northern Iraq, Amnesty International stated that regarding Mr. Shabo's assassination "the organization had received the names of people said to be linked to the KDP's First Liq who were allegedly responsible for the killings." Amnesty International's report concluded that "The security apparatus of the KDP, Rekkhistine Taybeti, and that of the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan), Dezgay Zanyari, are said to have units akin to assassination squads, whose members receive orders from senior party officials. There is also widespread conviction that such unlawful and deliberate killings could not have been perpetrated without the knowledge, consent or acquiescence of the leaders of these two parties, to whom the security and intelligence apparatuses are ultimately responsible." ([AINA](#))

Another Assyrian political analyst noted "The systematic and deliberate persecution, intimidation, and assassination of a people for the expressed purpose of eliminating them from an area -- in whole or in part -- constitutes the essence of the charge of ethnic cleansing." Moreover, "There is great concern over what the Kurdish motivation is in this case. However, unfortunately, there is no doubt what the outcome will be if this policy is allowed to be executed." Another commentator noted "Barzani must feel snug and politically protected as the US courts him and attempts to nail down his shifting alliances in the US drive to remove Saddam Hussein. Ironically, nearly every count of crimes against humanity leveled against Saddam Hussein apply to Masoud Barzani, as far as his treatment of Assyrians is concerned. With a change in government, there will soon come a time for redress since any prospects for a change in KDP policies remain remote.

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