

No equal rights - Victims of injustice

ASSYRIA FOUNDATION - NETHERLANDS

Fact-finding Mission to Northern Iraq

28 March – 4 April 2008



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Introduction

This report is made on behalf of the Assyria Foundation – Netherlands in order to have an objective analysis of the living conditions of the Assyrian people in Northern Iraq (Southern Assyria). This report is property of the Assyria Foundation - Netherlands.

I would like to thank all the persons who played a role in making this fact-finding mission a success, especially the persons in Northern Iraq, who entrusted me with their life stories. Also thanks to the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM), the Assyrian Patriotic Party (APP) Mr. Albert, the Assyrian Aid Society – Iraq, CAPNIE, the Red Cross – Erbil, UNHCR – Erbil and the Dutch Consul in Erbil, and Mr. Fuat Hussein, General Secretary of Mr. Massoud Barzani, and Mr. Kirkuki, member of the Kurdistan Regional Government.

Special thanks goes to the Dutch delegation and specifically Member of Parliament of the Netherland of the Christian Union Party, Joël Voordewind for their heartwarming commitment.

I also wish to thank the following people for helping make the publication of this report possible: Mr. Ninos Warda, Dr. Matay Beth Arsan, and Mr. David Chibo. Thanks should also go to Mr. Jaco Klamer for kindly permitting the use of his photographs in this document.

The Assyria Foundation of the Netherlands visited Northern Iraq in April 2004 & 2006 for a fact-finding mission to assess the situation of the Assyrian Christians there. The Foundation organized another mission to Southern – Assyria (Northern Iraq) this year to meet with various Assyrians in the area, not just community representatives, but also the local population and the huge influx of Assyrian Internally Displaced Persons (IDP's) so that we can make an objective analysis of the today's situation of the Assyrian Christians in their homeland where they have been living on for more than 6,000 years.

The recent fact-finding mission to Northern Iraq examined the condition of the Assyrian Christians (of different church denominations: such as the *Chaldean Catholic Church of Babylon*, the *Assyrian Church of the East*, the *Ancient Church of the East*, the *Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch* and *Syrian Catholic Church*. Besides these traditional churches a significant number of Assyrian protestant churches exist such as the *Assyrian Presbyterian Church* and other *Assyrian evangelical communities*). Particularly in the areas of the Nineveh Plains, Mosul, and the provinces of Erbil and Dohuk (Nuhadra). This short report aims to present, along thematic lines, the conditions and political circumstances where this vulnerable minority finds itself, and what the wishes of the Assyrians in Iraq are in order to secure their future in their homeland.

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Travel Itinerary

During our recent visit of April 2008 the focus of the trip was on the following regions:

- Dohuk (Nuhadra);
- Erbil (Arbil);
- Ankawa;
- Nineveh Plains villages and towns.

Among the persons we spoke to and consulted during our trip were:

- More than 250 Assyrian Internally Displaced Persons (IDP); fled from the violence in Baghdad, Basra and other Iraqi cities.
- Church leaders from the various major Assyrian churches such as the Assyrian Church of the East, the Chaldean Catholic Church and the Syriac Orthodox Church;
- Kurdish politicians;
- Assyrian politicians in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG);
- Assyrian political parties;
- Local Non-governmental organizations (NGO's) such as the Assyrian Aid Society (AAS) and Christian Aid Program Nuhadra Iraq (CAPNI);
- International NGO's such as the Red Cross and the UNHCR in Erbil (Arbil);
- Intellectuals & higher educated professionals such as doctors, engineers, lawyers, students, etc.;
- The Dutch Consul in Erbil (Arbil).

The Current Situation of the Assyrians in Iraq

Due to the current instability in Iraq, completely accurate population statistics for the Assyrians and other minorities are hard to come by. Nevertheless, there is a general consensus that prior to the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime there were an estimated 1.5 million Christians in Iraq, 95% of whom being of Assyrian ethnicity from above mentioned church denominations. Current estimates vary and some have estimated that as little as 400,000 Assyrians now still remain in Iraq. Despite the lack of such accurate statistics, one thing that is clear above all, is the catastrophic situation of Assyrian refugees and IDP's. As an example, recent statistics received from the Assyrian Aid Society in Iraq reveal that the governorate of Dohuk, as of January 2008, had received at least 6,562 Assyrian IDP families, the governorate of Erbil some 2,015 Assyrian IDP families, and the Nineveh Plains in the governorate of Ninawa (Nineveh) 6,238 Assyrian IDP families. This is in addition to the large number of Christians that have completely left the country as refugees and whose registrations with the UNHCR in Syria and Jordan are reported to be disproportionately high as compared to the size of their population. The Nineveh Plains towns and villages, a region between the city Mosul and outside the Kurdish controlled region (KRG), now houses more than hundred thousand Assyrians from different church denominations. This number can be much higher, due to the massive influx of Assyrian IDP's.

During a meeting with members of the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM), we were being explained that approximately 25% of the Assyrian inhabitants of the regions under Kurdish control in Northern Iraq have left since 1992 due to arbitrary killings of members of the Assyrian population and discrimination from the side of the Kurds. Well-known examples that affected the Assyrian community include:

- Francis Yusuf Shabo, an Assyrian Christian member of the Kurdish Parliament, high profile and charismatic member of the Assyrian Democratic Movement. Shot dead by armed assailants on the 31st of May 1993 as he approached his home in Dohuk (Nuhadra). No suspects were subsequently apprehended. No further serious investigation was done by the Kurdish rulers.
- Lazar Mikho Hanna, an Assyrian Christian member of the Iraq Communist Party's (ICP)

Central Committee for the Iraqi Kurdistan Region. Shot dead by armed assailants on 14th June 1993 near his home in Dohuk (Nuhadra). No suspects were subsequently apprehended.

- In the 2005 Iraqi Elections some Assyrian groups, such as the Assyrian General Conference (AGC – Slate 800), complained of being targeted and pressured by the KRG to stop campaigning. This culminated in the forced confiscation of 3,000 posters and 25 banners in the village of Mangesh in the Dohuk province by armed Kurdish militia.



The examples above seem to corroborate the allegations made by several Assyrians that the acts were perpetrated with the cognisance of the Kurdish ruling elite, thus resulting in:

- Impunity for the killer;
- No reparation or compensation for the victims;
- No reporting of such abuses by Kurdish human rights organisations;
- No reporting of such incidents in ‘independent’ Kurdish newspapers, such as *Hawlati*.



Photos: the *Zaya* family from Baghdad. The father, mother, brother & sister of the family were killed by terrorists. Their younger sister later also died, the cause of death being asthma from dust inhalation after sleeping in a graveyard for months after escaping Baghdad. They remain IDPs.

For these reasons it is fair to assert that the Assyrians have been and are continuously being discriminated by the Kurdish ruling elite in Iraq, now embodied in the KRG, with the clear intention to homogenize the area and empty it of its native inhabitants. This policy has proved that there is no place for any Christians or other ethnicities like the Assyrians in the Kurdish-controlled regions.

Legitimate, Formal Local Assyrian Police Force – Only mechanism for survival in the Nineveh Plains

The Nineveh Plains had a formal police force (battalion strength, 1000 men) approved in late 2005. Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) Deputy Governor of Ninawa Province in Mosul, Khisro Goran, blocked the decision in the Mosul Provincial Council. It was a decision approved by the United States Army Joint Operation Center and Iraq’s Ministry of the Interior. For 7 months there was excessive delaying on the part of the Mosul Governorate Council, particularly by Khisro Goran (who at one point directly accused Dr. Hunain Al- Qaddo and Yonadam Kanna of trying to establish a militia). The later two gentlemen are parliamentarians in the Council of Representatives of the Iraqi parliament whose political groups are not under the control of the KDP. On June 14, 2006, the Ministry of Interior and Nineveh Provincial Police Department confirmed receipt of “Document No. 5773”

outlining “Order 1793”. This order calls for the registration and commencement of training of 711 policemen for the Nineveh Plains. They were sent to Baghdad for training to avoid KDP intervention. However, the Iraqi trainers and officers were *Peshmergas* (Kurdish fighters) and intimidated the Assyrian men out of the program. Moreover, they were informed that through KDP control of the Nineveh Provincial Council, they would not be deployed to the Nineveh Plains as per standard policy, but instead sent to an area of Mosul controlled entirely by Sunni Arab insurgents, where neither US nor Peshmerga-Kurdish forces can effectively operate. This resulted in the abandonment of the effort by the police recruits, as intended by the KDP.

Economic Discrimination

The KDP and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) are enforcing a *de facto* economic embargo on the Nineveh Plains that is economically suffocating the area. Christian Assyrians are turned away from the crossings at Eski Kalak into Erbil and the Ma’athaia crossing to Dohuk. These strategic checkpoints where Assyrians are being turned away are the primary access points to secure essential food and non-food items that are no longer accessible in Mosul. This economic suffocation is being used to deprive people of basic goods and this strategy is working. Today, major towns of the Nineveh Plains have empty shops, unable to sell anything. Those with the right connections to the KDP, mostly forced to become member of this Kurdish party, are able to move back and forth, reinforcing the message that cooperation with the KDP is the sole basis for survival. We spoke with businessmen and women who told us that they have to pay a part of the money-income they earn on a monthly base to a member of the KDP. If they don’t do this, the business will be closed or they will receive threats from members of the KDP.

Cultural Discrimination

April 2006 Demonstration in Al Qush -

It is worth noting that in the Iraq Sustainable Democracy Project (ISDP) fact-finding mission conducted in March/April of 2006, a member of the mission and three other Assyrians were denied entry into Erbil, being told, “You Christians can go back to your Nineveh Plains.” This is believed to be part of a reprisal agenda for holding the Assyrian –“Akitu”- New Years celebration in the Nineveh Plains, a cultural testament of the region that it has an Assyrian and not Kurdish identity.

April 2008 Demonstration in Dohuk -

More than 100 buses were interned in Dohuk (Nohadra) for participating in the Assyrian “Akitu” New Years Parade. More than 25 persons informed us that the KRG and members of the KDP told them that if they participated in this Assyrian demonstration they will not receive any salary. Furthermore, we spoke with 8 persons after the demonstration that had been fired from their jobs because of participating in the Assyrian New Years demonstration. Also several KDP members approached many persons present at the event with questions. The questions were insulting and discriminatory and many individuals felt uncomfortable and left the demonstration.

Human Rights Abuses, including Murder, treated with Impunity

In interviews with many local leaders we were informed that many abuses directed towards the Assyrians are left unpunished by the KRG. Some of the examples commonly cited are as follows.

On May 31, 1993, Francis Shabo was killed in Dohuk, in front of his home. He was shot dead. Francis Shabo, an Assyrian of the Chaldean Catholic Church, was a Member of the Kurdish Parliament as a representative of the Assyrian Democratic Movement. He served as a member of the economic development committee, but was also specifically tasked to deal with Assyrian complaints of land return in Behdinan (lands of Assyrians that were confiscated and Arabized, but were resettled by Kurds

instead of returned to the original Assyrian owners). Amnesty International's investigation of the murder on Francis Shabo brought forth names of individuals belonging to a KDP internal security force. There was no investigation. The message given is that even Assyrians that are politically active and members of established political parties can be instantly executed with impunity.

On August 26th, 2005, KDP Peshmerga fighters shot Nabil Akram Ammona twice in the head at a gas station. The Peshmerga were wearing Iraqi National Guard uniforms. He was filling his tank when they forcibly took the nozzle from him to fill their vehicles. When he protested he was shot. At that point, Mr. Mattai Shamoun Zora Sha'ya rushed to Nabil's side, at which point he was also shot twice in the head. It is worth noting that this incident took place less than 48 hours after massive demonstrations in the Nineveh Plains against the draft Constitution because it artificially divided the Assyrian people



Photo: Assyrian widows displaying photos of their murdered husbands.



Photo: Mr. Eliyo. His son, Sarhaddon, was killed in Baghdad on 20 November 2004, at the age of 32.

along church-denominational lines (*Assyrians and "Chaldeans"*) by the Kurds. The message given is that if the Assyrian community expresses its own political aspirations, separate from the KDP wishes, members of those communities face execution, with impunity.

On July 17, 2007, 17 year-old Fadi Habash was driving his tractor, in daylight, with a friend along his family's farmland. A speeding truck passed by, carrying *Peshmerga* wearing Iraqi military uniforms. At random, they opened fire on the tractor killing Fadi, and continued speeding away. Various individuals witnessed this incident from the town of Bakhdede (also known as Qaraqosh or Al-Hamdaniya). That evening members of the local KDP office in the Nineveh Plains came to the family's home to offer condolences. There is still no investigation, nor a process of seeking justice for the victims except for condolences from the KDP attackers. The message given is that civilians in the Nineveh Plains, even outside the Kurdish controlled region (KRG), even if they are not politically active, and are not engaging in any activity other than pursuing their livelihood through farming, can be killed with impunity.

These three cases, among many, represent three scenarios where murdering of Assyrians takes place with impunity:

1. Purely political (assassination);
2. Civilian in an immediately politically sensitive context;
3. Purely civilian.

This is indicative of the desire of the KDP to use murder as a tool of control and intimidation against the community. The fact that these crimes take place with impunity is the single most powerful message received by Assyrians from the KRG.

Illegal Land Seizure

During the visit we spoke to different individuals who told us that Kurds had seized their land and this is well known by the KDP and KRG. There are over 130 illegal village and farmland seizures perpetrated by Kurds and facilitated (through active involvement or agreement) by the KRG authorities. In most cases, these lands were Arabized through various Iraqi government bombing campaigns and other methods of forced removal/relocation – to which a also many Kurds and others were subjected. From the early 1990s onwards, formal processes of trying to return land to their original Assyrian inhabitants met with complete neglect and active obstruction by Kurdish authorities. In some instances, the cases have been allowed to go to court, and in some of these cases the Assyrian victims have received favourable decisions. However, the KRG refuses to implement the decisions because in reality, the enforcement agents of such decisions are extensions of the dominant KDP and are part of the land seizure program. It is worth noting that this is transpiring alongside an aggressive and urgent program by the KRG to have land returned to Kurds that was Arabized by Saddam Hussein (e.g. Kirkuk). It places in stark contrast the KRG's approach to the illegal land seizures by Kurds, and politically active members of the KDP in stealing Assyrian lands. The cumulative effect of this agenda is to also take over the lands that were part of the Ba'athist land Arabization process that affected the Assyrian community (by keeping them away from their land) while providing rectification and returning of land for Kurds. There is one instance where redress was provided to some Assyrians and that is for the town of Fesh-Khabour. However, it is clear that this was one case, and is being used as a standard rebuke to those highlighting the extensive crime of illegal land seizure by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of Assyrian lands. It is worth noting that even Erbil International Airport has been built on a piece of land whose legal owner is an Assyrian Christian, but who till now has received no compensation for the loss of his property.



Photo: Assyrians celebrating the Assyrian New Year.

Redress and justice for the following cases are a small, symbolic start to resolving this critical issue:

- **Debade** – a town roughly 30-40 miles north of Dohuk City. The people leading the illegal land seizure there are led by Sayed Hussein Rajab. His sons and relatives, Abdullah, Osman and particularly Yaseen Rajab, are most actively involved. This case began in 1992-93, and in late August of 2007, the courts handed down a second decision in favour of the Assyrian landowners. This decision is not being enforced, as with the previous decision in their favour. Community representatives, such as Sami

Gewargis (the city mayor - “Mukhtar”), are being reminded that the constitutional and court system does not count for Assyrians.

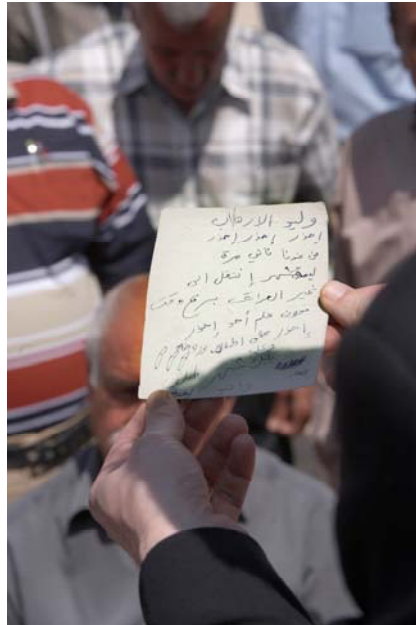
- **Sarsink** – After the traumatic and immensely tragic period of the “Anfal campaigns”, and the subsequent optimism created by America’s establishment of the no-fly-zone, many Kurds, Assyrians, Yezidis, Shabaks and others started to return to their lands. For some, lands were not ready for returnees. It is because of this that in the early 1990s, President Massoud Barazani asked if the Assyrian inhabitants of Sarsink could host Kurdish families in their town until the original hometown of the incoming Kurds could be rebuilt. In a spirit of hospitality, goodwill and good faith, the people of Sarsink opened their town to the “refugees”. Today, these Kurdish “refugees” have seized those lands, have built on them at an alarming rate and declared the town and its land theirs. This case is exceptional in that President Massoud Barazani himself is intervening on behalf of the Kurds seizing the lands. The Assyrians cannot reclaim their lands, cannot force the Kurds to leave and have now seen their town and its lands being Kurdified through a process of forced relocation under the supervision of the KRG’s President.

- **Dere/Coumaneh/Maristek** – These towns have had lands seized by Mohammed Mohsen Falah. He is the KDP’s regional head for the 8th District. His father, Mohsen Falah, is a Member of Parliament in the KRG’s legislature, and is father-in-law to Hoshyar Zebari, the current Foreign Minister of Iraq. At least 600 lots of substantial size have been illegally seized and placed for sale through Mohamed Falah, also facilitated by the Governor’s office based in Amadiya. Sizable portions of this stolen land also belong to two churches, St. George’s Church of Maristek and St. Odisho’s of Dere. There have been several court decisions in favour of the community, but the illegal land seizure, development and re-selling of the land by Mohamed Falah has not been stopped. Indeed, senior members of the KDP are directly related to the illegal land seizure.

- **Chembre Bethkeh** – In the Nahla region of northern Dohuk (Nuhadra), the town of Chembre Bethkeh has seen of half its village lands illegally seized by neighbouring Kurds. Due to the isolation of the area and other logistical difficulties, they sought redress through appeals to President Barzani himself. He assured the villagers that the problems would be resolved. Instead, the seizures have continued and cultivation of the land by the Kurds is going on.

- **Chaqala Khtatha** – This town’s native inhabitants have won two court decisions in their favour affirming that they are the rightful owners of the land. Vast tracts of their farmland have been seized by the Omar Karim family (he and his brothers). These men served as bodyguards for President Massoud Barzani and are able to operate in the area with impunity. Coinciding with the seizure of economically productive farmland, are illegal seizures within the village lands itself by Mr. Rashid Sadiq. As early as August 12, 1993, a special committee tasked to investigate this issue found that the land belonged to Assyrians from ancient times, and that the people of neighbouring Berifkeh had at that time already encroached on over 1 square kilometres of land. That process has continued to this day and remains unchecked and unresolved. In this specific instance, ISDP also became involved when contacted by an American working out of the American Development Center in Dohuk University, who was investigating the issue. He assured everyone the problem would be resolved. His second last communication to ISDP indicated that he found out from the Kurds that the land was being unoccupied, and so they used it to farm apple trees. Only when the land became commercially viable did the Assyrians return to claim it. At that point ISDP indicated its readiness to furnish import documents and duty receipts, along with the full project record on how the Assyrian Aid Society of America, Assyrian Aid Society of Iraq and the people of Chaqala planted and established the apple orchards in order to provide some means for the residents to survive. At that point, the last email from the American investigator indicated his inability to resolve the matter and that he was withdrawing himself from the entire affair. His emails, however, indicate that illegal land seizures did take place, to his frustration. Land theft and illegal land seizures have several significant primary impacts. It signals to Assyrians that while the Ba’athist Arabization agenda has ended, it is being replaced by a similar KDP

Kurdish agenda. Second, with court decisions in their favour and no implementation, it indicates a level of second-class citizenship that is inherently subversive with respect to their ethnic and indigenous identity. Additionally, it undermines their economic viability as they are deprived of the chance to prosper and grow through use of their land. Finally, in cases where all lands are taken, or there is open hostility from the Kurds seizing the land, it forces them into the larger cities (Dohuk and Erbil) where they face the same Kurdification pressures as they endured through Arabization programs which forced them into large cities such as Mosul, Baghdad and Basra (surrounded and spread thin demographically amidst a numerically dominant ethnic group).



Photos: The photos above are of Assyrian IDPs in the city of Telsqof in the Nineveh Plains. Many of the IDPs are bearing pictures of deceased loved ones who have been murdered.

Allowing Independent Aid Organizations to Operate

During the visit we spoke with the UNHCR and the Red Cross in Erbil. Up till the moment we spoke with these international organizations they stated that they never went to the Nineveh Plains and never gave any aid to the IDPs there, despite the fact that some estimate the number of IDPs there at 300,000! The UNHCR in Erbil provided us with the figure of 100,000 Assyrian IDPs. Although being aware of this information, they never did anything to address the needs of these IDPs. The Red Cross told us that they received information from the KRG that the security situation in the Nineveh Plains is very bad and therefore no aid can reach the Assyrians there. There are 2 local Assyrian aid organizations, namely the Assyrian Aid Society and the Christian Aid Program Nuhadra Iraq (CAPNI), that are the only organizations providing basic support to the 300,000 IDPs in the Nineveh Plains outside the KRG region. It must be said that some individuals get personal support from the Minister of Finance of the KRG, Mr Sargis Aghajan who is of Assyrian origin and is a high profile KDP member, although he is giving this support from his “personal” money and is not official aid from the KRG. During the visit we spoke with more than 250 IDPs and only 2 families that we interviewed said they received personal support from Mr Aghajan and the other 248 individuals never received any aid from international organizations.

Financial aid from the European Parliament or other EU countries never reaches the Assyrians. This money has been used as aid for Kurds and Arabs. The KRG received aid for IDPs but this never reached the Assyrians. In some documents we saw and heard that some “Kurdish Christians” received aid. The Assyrian Aid Society investigated this and received information that the Assyrians who filled the aid papers had been forced to write “IDP ethnicity: Kurds”, “IDP religion: Christians.” This means that there is a policy of assimilation and Kurdification of the Assyrians in the KRG region.

Assyrian Political Parties in Northern Iraq

In Dohuk (Nuhadra) and Ankawa we spoke with members of the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM), the only independent Assyrian political party that has gained a seat in the Iraqi Governing Council. They gave us an explanation of the political situation of the Assyrian political parties. The general impression was that the political parties that never write or speak about the discriminatory effects of the KRG’s policies will be awarded with positions in the KRG government. This is the reason why the ADM did not get any ministerial post. The last time the ADM had such a post was in 2006. We met with the leader of the Assyrian Patriotic Party (APP), Mr Nimrod Baito, who has been appointed Minister of Tourism in the KRG. It is worth



Photo: An armed guard defending Assyrian IDPs in Telsqof, Nineveh Plains.

mentioning that his party, despite being unable to secure any level of electoral support, was given a ministerial seat in the KRG. Mr Baito confirmed this information during our visit at his ministry in Erbil. We also asked him if he received any Assyrians that complain about discrimination perpetrated by the Kurds and the KDP. Mr Baito told us that there is no such discrimination and that he never heard any complaints since the time he has been minister. We told him that there is a contradiction between what we have seen and heard during our fact-finding mission and his explanation, which made him to tell us only about the land seizures problem. However, he immediately explained that also Kurds have similar problems with land ownership. He then proceeded to give us a map of “Kurdistan” which included the Nineveh Plains. This seemed to confirm the messages we had been receiving from people,

that the KRG wishes to incorporate the Nineveh Plains into the KRG, a fact acknowledged by Article 2(1) of the KRG Constitution itself. With this map, made in 2007, it was proved that **the KRG does not envisage an administrative unit for the Assyrians and other minorities in the Nineveh Plains, but rather wishes to control this area under their hegemony.**

Democracy?

The January 2005 and December 2005 elections demonstrated that the Assyrian Democratic Movement received the vast majority of the Assyrian support – earning approximately 75 percent of total Assyrian voters within Iraq and an overwhelming level of support in Out-of-Country votes. They achieved this level of support despite total disenfranchisement in the Nineveh Plains (where the majority of their voters reside). The media documented this voter fraud, intimidation and disenfranchisement – with key information coming from a United States Army Major from the Civil Affairs unit assigned to roll-out the Nineveh Governorate elections. Against all these odds, the Assyrian Democratic Movement (also the only Assyrian political party recognized under the Iraq Liberation Act as amended by President George W. Bush) received a level of electoral support that any political party in the West would envy in truly free and fair elections. Irrespective of this fact, the KRG has chosen to marginalize them by removing them from representative posts in the government and stifling their ability to assume their role as the representatives with the clearest electoral mandate to speak for the community. The clearest indication of this marginalization is that despite earning at least 3 of every 4 ethnically conscious votes and being the only Assyrian party to independently earn a seat in the Iraqi parliament, it has only been given 2 of the 5 seats reserved for Assyrians in the KRG’s legislature. This practice also targets Yezidis, Shabaks, and Turkmens, who are voicing similar complaints of artificial, KRG-funded political division of their communities.

Discrimination against Independent Assyrians NGOs

During the visit and the meetings we have had with different NGOs and individuals it is clear that there is discrimination of the independent Assyrian NGO’s who informed us that they never get any international aid for the projects they have. Furthermore, they are excluded from meetings with international organizations because all the visits of international groups are organized by either the KRG or the KDP. The most prominent and highly regarded independent Assyrian NGO is the Assyrian Aid Society (AAS), who has been working in Northern Iraq since 1992. During the meetings we had with the UNHCR and the Red Cross they informed us that they do not know nor have any contact with the AAS. They had no explanation for this. During the meeting with the AAS we were provided with an update of the AAS’s projects and activities and were left with the feeling that this is a genuine and reputable humanitarian organization that meets the humanitarian needs of thousands of persons despite having a modest annual budget of only \$1,500,000 coming primarily from the Assyrians living in USA, Canada, Europe and Australia. Outside of Iraq, we were informed that the AAS has good contact with some NGO’s in the EU such as SALT, Open Doors and Dorkas, and different churches.



Photo: Death certificate of an Assyrian man murdered in Baghdad.

During our visit we also received the following disturbing news. The KRG's Finance Minister, Mr Sargis Aghajan, is disbursing resources throughout the KRG and outside the KRG's official jurisdiction in the Nineveh Plains. He does this on a destructive basis. Only those groups that are promoting publicly the dominance of the KDP in the area are provided with resources. Assyrians, through decades of resistance to successive Iraqi dictatorships, worked and partnered with the KDP, PUK and others in trying to secure their democratic rights. During this time, they developed an array of political and civil society organizations with widespread acknowledgment as being legitimate, such as the Assyrian Aid Society. Others could only be created after the fall of Saddam due to their geographic location outside of the no-fly-zone. Some are quite new as a result of geography but wholly legitimate and representative in terms of their membership and credibility with respect to their origins, such as the Nineveh Center for Research and Development – located in the Nineveh Plains. The KRG and its Finance Minister have deemed fit to disburse no funding for these organizations to operate despite their track record and previous partnerships. Instead, Minister Aghajan has disbursed these public funds to new entities and organizations wholly connected to the KRG/KDP and as a result are suffocating standing organizations, as they weaken through official discrimination in the allocation of resources and grants to work. In the case of the Nineveh Center for Research and Development (NCRD, located in the town of Bakhdede in the Nineveh Plains), it was set-up after the fall of Saddam. Within months, Finance Minister Aghajan used KRG funded the establishment of the Syriac Center for Research and Development in Bakhdede to compete against the NCRD. Its sole defining feature is to say that “Syriacs” are not related to independent Assyrians and they are affiliated with the KRG/KDP – to whom the NCRD is not. This same pattern has taken place with respect to women's unions, student unions and many others – all of which now have KRG/KDP funded counterparts that are starving them out of existence through official discrimination by the KDP. Once again, the main goal of this initiative is not to contribute to Assyrian civic development, but to undermine, suffocate and ultimately destroy those organizations independent of the KDP. This is being done with official KRG resources under the official direction of the KRG's Finance Minister, Sargis Aghajan. The outcome has been to force Assyrians to accept that the only way any funding will reach them is if they also reject those civil society and humanitarian NGO's that have served them for so long but remained independent of the KDP.

Distortion of History and Damaging of Archaeological Assyrian sites

In the museum in Erbil (Arbil) we did not see any information about the ancient and rich history of Erbil (Arbil), which is linked to the Assyrians. Nothing that we saw gave any impression that there were, or currently are, Assyrians living in Erbil or other places within the KRG, or even that Erbil (Arbil) was an ancient Assyrian imperial city, reflected in the name's etymology (Ancient Assyrian: *Arba-Illu* = Four Gods). One way to erase a region's identity is by changing its historical names. This, for example, is what has happened to the city of Dohuk whose historical name is Nuhadra, an old Assyrian name for the region. In the history books at the Kurdish schools we did not see any information about the Assyrians and their heritage in the KRG region. Saddam Hussein who called the Assyrian King Nebuchadnezzar an Arab king used this same policy. Furthermore, the Iraqi consul in the Netherlands, a member of the KDP, claimed that Gilgamesh (a historical Assyrian-Babylonian mythical figure and epical hero) is Kurdish. Similarly, the Assyrian historical city of Nimrod is also claimed by the Kurds as being part of “Kurdish history”.

Khinnis

Khinnis is a world heritage site. It sits on the cliffs of Khinnis where Assyrian kings carved their huge images over the river on which they transported the massive Winged Bulls that adorned the entrances to major capitals such as ancient Nineveh, the capital of the Assyria (today's Northern Iraq and South Eastern Turkey). This site represents something sacred to the Assyrians, and is a testament to the millennia old Assyrian connection to the land and its role in Assyrian history. It is just one of many significant physical testimonies to the indigenous Assyrian identity that precedes Turkish, Kurdish and Arab claims to the land. Instead of seeing this as a part of the rich cultural heritage of Northern Iraq

and the KRG, the government of the KRG allows the massive cliff structures to be used as a jungle gym by picnickers who climb and jump on the structures damaging them. These are already in bad condition due to KDP's Kurdish *Peshmerga*, who use the images to shoot for target practice. During this fact-finding mission, we documented and witnessed Kurds climbing and knocking at the massive images as if it were a playground. More alarming, in order to provide shade to the picnickers who otherwise would sit in the sun across from the Khinnis engravings, the KDP was funding the dynamiting of the very cliff face where this remarkable contribution to world heritage and civilization is situated, threatening to destroy it. This is a direct result of cultural genocide, by condoning the erosion of the site and exposing it to civilian Kurds who do not know what it represents other than a form of exercise and amusement. There is also the more aggressive program of destruction by dynamiting the cliff face and weakening the structural integrity of the site. The destruction of this site would conveniently remove a massive, widely recognized, and remarkable testament to the presence of Assyrians and the Assyrian Empire in the area for thousands of years before any people that referred to themselves as Turkish, Kurdish or Arab ever arrived. Dr. Donny George, a professor and the former director of the Baghdad Museum, left Iraq because of threatening letters he received from the Islamic fundamentalists and terrorists. He now works at Brook University in the USA and has widely acknowledged this KRG policy of denial and distortion of Assyrian history.

Media

The Kurdish media never writes articles or reports on the discriminatory practices committed by the KRG against the Assyrians, including supposedly independent media outlets, which operate in the KRG such as the newspaper *Hawlati*. There is no freedom of expression for the media in Northern Iraq when it comes to the Assyrians. The Assyrian TV channel *Ishtar TV*, sponsored by the KRG, never shows any programs reporting the problems faced by Assyrians in the KRG. Even till now *Ishtar TV* fails to give the opportunity to any individuals who have problems with the KRG or KDP to speak on their programs. Furthermore, it also refuses to show coverage of any independent Assyrian activities, including cultural ones, the Assyrian New Year Parades of 2006, 2007 & 2008 being prime examples, despite the fact that in the last parade over 50,000 individuals participated. As a natural adjunct to the above points, *Ishtar TV* also fails to show any activities of the AAS, the NCRD or the ADM. Instead, they report on Mr Nimrod Baito and his policies and give air time only to Assyrians who are praising Mr Sargis Aghajan for the help he provides them.

It is thus fair to say that there are no critical or objective reports about the KRG in all media outlets under their control. As a testimony to this assertion, we had a Dutch TV crew with us during the visit preparing a documentary on the situation of the Assyrians. When we reached the Assyrian village Batnaya a few cars with members of the KDP approached us after a few minutes and stopped us from filming. We then had to pay \$150 to one of the KDP members to let us film. Even then we did not have the complete freedom one would expect. When we spoke with the IDPs from Baghdad we were continuously accompanied by KDP members who kept reminding the IDPs that they should speak good and positively about their situation. Even when visiting villages outside the KRG's jurisdiction, KDP members persisted in trying to elicit information from us regarding what we wanted to know and what questions we are asking.