

# Assyrians Under Kurdish Rule

## The Situation in Northeastern Syria



**ASSYRIAN  
CONFEDERATION  
OF EUROPE** ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

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## The Situation in Northeastern Syria

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The Assyrian Confederation of Europe (ACE) represents the Assyrian European community and is made up of Assyrian national federations in European countries. The objective of ACE is to promote Assyrian culture and interests in Europe and to be a voice for deprived Assyrians in historical Assyria. The organization has its headquarters in Brussels, Belgium.

Cover photo: Press TV

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## Introduction

Syria's disintegration as a result of the Syrian Civil War created the conditions for the rise of Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria, specifically in the governorates of Al-Hasakah and Aleppo. This region, known by Kurds as 'Rojava' ('West', in West Kurdistan), came under the control of the Kurdish socialist Democratic Union Party (abbreviated PYD) in 2012, after the strain of the civil war caused the weakened Syrian state to withdraw and leave the area under local militia control.

The 2012 PYD takeover of northern Syria is often described in Western media as the 'Rojava Revolution.' The governorates of Al-Hasakah and Aleppo are referred to by the PYD as the cantons of Kobani, Afrin, and Jazire. In March 2016, the PYD officially declared its intention to become an autonomous federation, a move rejected by the Syrian state and opposition groups.

The PYD's self-proclaimed Autonomous Administration maintains security through the Asayish, its police, and the People's Protection Units (YPG), which serves as its armed forces. The rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in summer 2014 has further boosted the Kurdish struggle for autonomy and brought international recognition and support to the YPG, as they have been successful in combating ISIL with the help of U.S support. Aside from their fight against ISIS, the Autonomous Administration has earned praise due to its inclusive constitution, adopted in 2014, which guarantees non-Kurdish communities protection, freedom of religion, and the freedom to use and teach their own language. Despite the democratic and inclusive language used by the Kurdish administration, severe human rights abuses against non-Kurdish groups have been noted by international human

rights organizations. Among them is Amnesty International, whose October 2015 publication outlines destructive campaigns against the Arab population living in the region.

Assyrians have experienced similar abuses. This ethnic group resides mainly in Al-Hasakah governorate ('Jazire' canton under the PYD, known by Assyrians as Gozarto). The largest city in Al-Hasakah, Qamishli, now serves as the de facto capital of 'Rojava', although Qamishli's population has historically been majority Assyrian and the city itself was established by Assyrians fleeing from genocide in the early 20th century.

Incidents against Assyrians are underreported. Kurdish-led media outlets, favorable to the Kurdish cause, prefer to minimize the severity of repression and its effects on and significance for the non-Kurdish populations. These outlets often provide information used by the mainstream media when covering areas of Syria dominated by the Kurdish administration. A recent report by NPR in the United States quotes a Kurdish man who was too "afraid of the Kurdish forces" in Hasakah to allow the reporters to use his real name.<sup>1</sup> Given that this state of affairs prevails among the Kurdish population, it should be no surprise that Assyrians, with their comparative lack of demographic, political and military clout, are in a weak position when it comes to speaking out against abuses committed against them.

This report addresses legal burdens, intimidation and violent incidents experienced by Assyrians under the Autonomous Administration, abuses which depict a pattern of attempted ethnic cleansing of Hasakah, overreaches by Kurdish forces, and retribution against Assyrian individuals and groups which refuse to join Kurdish organizations.

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1 NPR 2016



The Assyrians in Syria, often described in media only as “Christians” are concentrated in the Hasaka governorate in northeastern Syria. The Khabour region is composed of 34 Assyrian villages. Assyrians have also a significant presence in the nearby border town of Qamishli and in the provincial capital Hasakah.

## Double Burdens

Following the ‘Rojava Revolution,’ Assyrians, among other communities, are threatened by dual military service burdens caused by the presence of both Syrian state and Kurdish self-proclaimed authorities in their home areas. As the Syrian regime retains power in much of Al-Hasakah province, Assyrians remain subject to conscription into the Syrian military. Meanwhile, residents of Kurdish-controlled areas are required to serve in YPG militias. Neither administration recognizes the validity of service completed for the other’s forces, meaning that male Syrian citizens between the ages of 18 to 30 who completed their military service years prior to the PYD’s takeover can nonetheless find themselves forced to serve in YPG militias.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the threat of double conscription, the presence of two authorities in Hasakah imposes monetary burdens on the population. As subjects of the Syrian state, they are expected to continue paying Syrian state taxes and regular fees for shop permits and state authorization. The self-proclaimed Autonomous Administration, while not extracting taxes directly from individuals, nonetheless imposes import fees for those who bring goods from across state boundaries. For example, an Assyrian from Qamishli interviewed in Sweden recalls how he was forced to pay unofficial tariffs for the transport of building material and all other household goods from Damascus to Qamishli.<sup>3</sup> There are also fees imposed for construction and store permits.

The dual military service and monetary burden affect all citizens who need to cross be-

tween Syrian regime and Autonomous Administration borders. These issues are not exclusive to Assyrians, but affect them disproportionately as the majority of their population resides in a governorate divided between the two regimes. The hardship of potential conscription and additional taxes and fees on businesses and individuals limits the mobility and opportunities of those living at the crossroads of the two regimes.

In addition to these burdens, Assyrians also find themselves caught in the middle of conflicts between the Syrian state and Kurdish forces, as has occurred in both April and August 2016. The clashes between YPG and the Asayish against the Syrian state in August 2016 lasted a week and saw airstrikes by Syrian state planes against PYD-affiliated targets, leaving many even in the center of Qamishli without electricity and supplies.<sup>4</sup> Conflicts between the two authorities threaten the stability and safety of the region and leave Assyrians in a vulnerable position, further driving Assyrians to leave their homes and immigrate.

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<sup>2</sup> The National

<sup>3</sup> Interview with “Sargon”, 2016

<sup>4</sup> Interview with “Ninorta”, 2016

## Threats to Property and Private Ownership

Assyrian homes and lands have been exposed to looting and threats of confiscation by Kurdish authorities, similar to the takeover and demolition of Arab communities in the area south of Qamishli that has been well-documented by Amnesty International's 2015 report.

Assyrians from villages around the Khabur River fled from their homes after ISIL attacks in 2015. Upon returning, they found their homes had been looted of valuables and even furniture.<sup>5</sup> YPG members have been found to be at least partially responsible for the looting.<sup>6</sup>

In September 2015, members of the Autonomous Administration proposed a law that would have given the PYD rights over all homes and land left behind by those who fled. The PYD argued that this law would help it protect abandoned property, by allowing them to administer it as needed during the time it is uninhabited. However, Assyrians and other minorities opposed the law, seeing it as an attempt by Kurdish authorities to seize and occupy the lands of non-Kurds. The law would create additional difficulties for those wishing to return, and would disproportionately affect Assyrians as they are a community with high rates of emigration and flight.<sup>7</sup>

Anger at the threat of this law led 16 members of a variety of Assyrian, Armenian, and Christian organizations to release a statement condemning the law, highlighting the additional challenges it would impose on returning individuals and the threat to Christian communities it poses. The statement also speaks about the burdens of taxation and military re-

cruitment that the presence of two regimes has placed on the non-Kurdish communities of northern Syria.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the rejection of the law, the seizure of Assyrian property and businesses still takes place. Ashur Motors, for example, an Assyrian minibus company, was publicly expropriated by the Kurdish self-administration in January 2016, under the pretext that its business had dwindled owing to the war.

### OCCUPATION OF FACILITIES

Aside from threats to individual's rights over their property, the Kurdish forces occupy and utilize Assyrian facilities at will. In summer 2015, YPG forces occupied an Assyrian school in the Hasakah city center. Despite complaints by the school's management that their occupation would affect students' ability to start school, the YPG refused to provide a straight answer on when their occupation would cease.

The occupation of Assyrian areas and facilities has also been observed in the villages on the Khabur River. Early in 2016 YPG forces set up training camps in three villages, the largest of them in Tel Nasri.<sup>9</sup>

### KURDIFICATION ATTEMPTS WITH SCHOOL SYSTEM REFORM

The PYD has intervened in the school system in northern Syria by instituting the use of the Kurdish language as the teaching language, replacing Arabic. The PYD has also completely changed school curricula. While the PYD claims to be liberating the schools from the

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5 IB Times 12 March 2015

6 IB Times 6 July 2015

7 Kurt Haninke 2015 b

8 AINA 2015

9 AINA 2016 b

strictly Ba'athist history taught in Syrian state schools, they are merely substituting the old curriculum with an equally monolithic version that places the PYD's ideology and leader, Abdullah Öcalan, at the forefront.<sup>10</sup> The PYD seeks for these changes to apply to both state-run and privately owned schools, including Assyrian schools and church-run schools. In addition to replacing the previous ideological content of school textbooks with the PYD's political ideology, the PYD rewrites history via its school reform. Assyrian teachers in northern Syria have complained about historical and geographic inaccuracies being presented as factual in the texts. These inaccuracies include Assyrian location names being changed to Kurdish ones; the Biblical King Nebuchadnezzar's wife being described as a Kurdish woman; and maps that shrink the countries of Iran, Turkey, Syria and Iraq in favor of a 'Greater Kurdistan'.<sup>11</sup>

In line with the dual burdens outlined above, the presence of both PYD and the Syrian state has disrupted the school system, as before start of term in fall 2015 the Syrian state shut down schools teaching the PYD's curriculum in response to the PYD interference. The disruption caused by PYD in regional schools threatens to become a yearly occurrence, as at the start of the 2016-2017 school year there was again uncertainty regarding the opening of schools and whether Assyrian students would be able to attend schools in their area.<sup>12</sup>

#### **FORCED PAYMENTS FOR RECONSTRUCTION OF TURKISH CITIES**

Starting in August 2016 Turkey has made incursions into northern Syria and southern Turkey, resulting in the destruction of villages along the border. These incursions affected Turkish cities infiltrated by the far-left militant group, the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), among them Nusaybin, a city on the border with Syria. Following the destruction of Nusaybin, PYD officials imposed heavy additional fees on shops in the Hasakah region, under the guise of helping the PYD's 'countrymen' (in other words, the PKK) in Nusaybin. These fees were imposed on the Assyrian population as well, and ranged from between 100.000 to 3 million Syrian pounds.<sup>13</sup> These fees provoked outrage, as it is taking Syrian citizens' money for the reconstruction of a city across the border to which they have no official relation. In addition, the profound economic depression that Hasakah and Syria as a whole are experiencing as a result of the ongoing civil war means that the imposition of exorbitant fees takes an even heavier toll on a population that is already struggling to survive economically.

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10 Yosif and Nelson 2015

11 Die Welt 2016

12 Interview with "Ninorta", 2016

13 Ibid



## بيان للرأى العام

منذ أكثر من أربع سنوات يعاني وطننا سوريا من ظروف استثنائية عانى منها الشعب السوري بكافة مكوناته ويلات الحرب والدمار والإرهاب وبالرغم من كل ذلك بقينا نحن أبناء منطقة الجزيرة محافظين على مبدأ السلم الأهلي والعيش المشترك في وطننا بكافة مكوناتنا القومية، وبسبب الظروف الاستثنائية والأمنية أنشأت الإدارة الذاتية في منطقة الجزيرة وتشكلت مؤسسات إدارية مختلفة تقوم بإصدار قوانين وأنظمة بعضها غير مدروس بشكل جيد مما يؤدي إلى إيذاء مكونات اجتماعية وقومية بالرغم من أن مؤسسات الدولة تمارس صلاحياتها القانونية والإدارية والمالية والعسكرية.

**أولاً:** قانون إدارة أموال الغائبين والمهاجرين: من خلال اللقاءات والمشاورات التي تمت بين ممثلي المكون المسيحي في مدينة القامشلي وريفها من كنائس ومؤسسات وتجمعات مدنية وأحزاب سياسية توصلت إلى:

١- إن فكرة القانون تتناقض مع مبادئ حقوق الإنسان وحقوق المواطنة وحقوق التملك الذي هو حق شخصي مقدس.

٢ - إن محاولة تخوين المهاجرين (بوطنيتهم وقوميتهم) غير مقبول وطنياً وقومياً.

٣ - إن محاولة تشريع تشكيل لجنة والمسماة (القيّم على أموال الغائبين والمهاجرين) محاولة للاستيلاء على أملاك الغير بحجة استثمارها لصالح المجتمع والمتضررين.

٤- إن هذا القانون يشكل خطراً ديموغرافياً على المسيحيين بالكامل في منطقة الجزيرة بإحداث خلل ديموغرافي في السكن والتمليك أو محاولة الاستيلاء على الأراضي الزراعية والعقارات في الريف والذي تمثل فيه ملكية المسيحيين ما يقارب الـ ٣٥% وهذا يشكل تهديداً لمن تبقى ولمن هاجر وتخويه من العودة إلى الوطن.

٥- إن عدم بيع المسيحيين لأموالهم وعقاراتهم وتنظيمهم وكالات عامة أو خاصة لأقاربهم بإدارة أملاكهم حق مشروع قانوناً لا يجوز التشكيك فيه وخطوة في طريقة العودة إلى الوطن.

من هذا المنطلق ننظر أن هذه الممارسات ستؤدي إلى نشوء الفتن الطائفية بين مختلف إثنيات المجتمع لذلك نعتبر أنفسنا مدعيين شرعاً وقانوناً أمام المحاكم ودوائر القضاء المحلي والدولي للمطالبة بإلغاء هذا القانون.

**ثانياً:** قانون التراخيص ومحاولة فرض أجور تراخيص جديدة وضررائب أمر غير مقبول قانوناً لأنها قانونية وشرعية وصادرة من الدوائر الرسمية السورية ولا يجوز التشكيك فيها أو استبدالها وتحمل الناس أعباء مادية فوق طاقتهم.

**ثالثاً:** في قانون التجنيد الإجباري لا يجوز إجبار المواطن على خدمة التجنيد الإجباري في وطنه ودولته لجهتين مختلفتين.

**رابعاً:** إن التدخل في شؤون المدارس الخاصة بالكنائس الموجودة في منطقة الجزيرة لا مبرر له ومرفوض وذلك لخصوصية العائدية الإدارية والتربوية وما نلاحظه من ضغوطات على مدارسنا الخاصة في جميع المناطق ليس إلا تدخلاً يعرقل سير العملية التربوية والتعليمية لأبنائنا.

لذا نهيب بالجميع توخي روح المسؤولية في الإدارة والحرص بشكل كبير على مصالح الأفراد والجماعات وتنمى أن يعم السلام والأمان لكل أنحاء الوطن سوريا ومنطقة الجزيرة بكافة مكوناتها الوطنية والقومية والعيش بأمان وسلام ومحبة.

### الكنائس المسيحية والمؤسسات والأحزاب السياسية والتجمعات المدنية والهيئات الموقعة على هذا البيان

الكنيسة السريانية الأرثوذكسية	الكنيسة الأرمنية الأرثوذكسية	مطارنة الأرمن في الجزيرة والفرات
الكنيسة الكلدانية بالقامشلي	كنيسة المشرق الآشورية	الكنيسة الآشورية القديمة
كنيسة السريان الكاثوليك	الكنيسة الإنجيلية الوطنية	هيئة السلم الأهلي للسريان الأرثوذكس
المنظمة الآشورية الديمقراطية	الحزب الأرامي الحر	الهيئة السريانية للقرى الزراعية
التجمع المدني المسيحي	تجمع شباب سورية الأم	مؤسسة شباب المصالحة الوطنية

مركز الثبات المسيحي السوري

Copy of the statement issued by sixteen non-Kurdish organizations in northeastern Syria in September 2015 in response to confiscation attempts by the self-proclaimed Kurdish entity. See the following page for the English translation.

## Statement to the public opinion

For over four years our country, Syria, is struggling with tragic events. War, devastation and terrorism have caused all ethnic groups much suffering. But we, inhabitants of Al-Jazeera, have kept so precious nowadays ideals of peaceful coexistence between various communities of our province. Due to extraordinary situation and having safety in mind Local Self-Administration was created, together with number of institutions. Some of its regulations, however, are not properly prepared nor thoroughly measured. This causes valid concerns among various ethnic and national groups. While it is happening official authorities are still performing its fiscal, administrative, legal and military duties.

### Law on Emigrant Property

After careful consideration representatives of Christian communities in Qamishli agreed on following: Aforementioned Law on Emigrant Property is in violation of Human Rights Law, breaking fundamental Right to property. Under no circumstances can someone be labelled as "traitor" just for leaving their home. Efforts at creating "Institution for Emigrant Properties Redistribution and Management" is an attempt of expropriation real estate under a guise of helping those in need. These regulations create a dangerous precedence in proprietorship Law in the entire province of Al-Jazeera. Additionally this will cause substantial demographic changes directed at local Christians who will lose their homes. It's worth mentioning that nearly 35% of all real estate in the area is owned by Christians. Expropriation of properties will cause valid concerns amongst both those who fled and stayed, preventing the latter from ever coming back.

It's worth noting that the stance, taken by many local Christians, of not selling nor appointing a proxy for their properties is fully supported by both state and international law. Any claims of this being illegal are false. Taking all of the above into account we believe that such actions of the "Local Administration" will cause ethnic cracks and turmoil. In order to avoid it and to convince the responsible ones to abandon these regulations we hereby announce ourselves as plaintiffs and prosecutors for any and all cases under both state and international tribunals and courts of law.

"Procedure on issuing permits and licenses, new permits and licenses fees and taxes" is redundant and illegal. Already existing permits and licenses are absolutely valid. They were issued in accordance with the law by official Syrian authorities and did not lose their legitimacy. Demand for their replacement and new fees, often exceeding their holders financial capabilities, is unacceptable.

"Conscription Law". Demanding military service by organization without state legitimization is preposterous.

Any interference into church private schools in Al-Jazeera province is unacceptable. These institutions are sanctioned by administrative and education authorities. Pressure on these institutions is viewed as an interference in education and upbringing of Christian children and adolescents.

We appeal to everybody's sense of responsibility and ask for restraint when handling matters that could limit rights of both individuals and communities. Fundamental Human Rights have to be upheld in order for peace and safety to once again grace all of Syria. We are hoping for continuous, peaceful coexistence of all Al-Jazeera inhabitants, regardless of their faith, ethnicity, nationality and culture.

### Signatories:

Syriac Orthodox Church  
Armenian Apostolic Church  
Al-Jazeera and Euphrates Armenian Diocese  
Chaldean Syrian Church in Qamishli  
Assyrian Church of the East  
Assyrian Ancient Church of the East  
Syriac Catholic Church  
Syriac Orthodox Civil Peace Committee

National Evangelical Church  
Assyrian Democratic Organization  
Aramean Free Party  
Assyrian Committee on Rural Agricultural Land  
Christian Civic Union  
Mother Syria Youth Association  
Youth Institute for National Reconciliation  
Center for Syrian Christian Youth

## Intimidation and Violent Reprisals for Self-Determination

Assyrians in Khabour and the city of Qamishli have organized into independent militias and police forces since the outbreak of civil war, in order to protect Assyrian-dominated areas and demonstrate Assyrian self-determination over their land. Among these militias are the Khabur Guards (Natore d'Khabur) and the Gozarto Protection Forces (GPF), as well as the Sootoro (to be differentiated from the YPG-aligned Sutoro). However, Assyrian attempts to independently control and protect Assyrian areas have been challenged by the Kurdish forces, with several violent incidents erupting between Kurdish and Assyrian groups.

### ASSASSINATION OF DAVID JENDO

In April 2015, David Jendo, leader of the Khabur Guards, was assassinated after having been taken from the home of Elias Nasser, a fellow Khabur Guardian, by five YPG militiamen around midnight under the pretense of holding a secret meeting. Nasser was severely injured but survived. His home was subsequently robbed of money and all its weapons.<sup>14</sup>

The testimony of the survivor pinned the responsibility to YPG-allied men, who were subsequently arrested. Although Kurdish representatives insist that these YPG members acted on their own, at least two of the assailants were known to Nasser as repeat harassers of the Khabur Guards. Jendo had publicly spoken out against the YPG's looting of Assyrian homes in 2015, a possible reason for why he was directly targeted. It is likely that without the survival of Elias Nasser the assassination would have

remained a cold case or been automatically pinned on ISIL, a strategy used by the Kurdish authorities to muddy their own involvement and hinder further investigation.

Following the assassination of Jendo, pressure continued to build on the Khabur Guards to cease organizing independently and collaborate with Kurdish forces. By summer 2015 the group announced its intention to put down arms, as a protest and rejection of Kurdish pressure.<sup>15</sup> The demobilization of the Guards of Khabur is a sign of the constraints put on Assyrians who attempt to organize independently.

### WUSTA GUNFIGHT

On January 12 2016, a gunfight broke out between YPG and GPF members in the predominantly Assyrian neighborhood of Wusta, in Qamishli. GPF members had imposed checkpoints around the neighborhood as a security measure following the December 30th bombings (to be covered later in this report).<sup>16</sup> Civilians in the Wusta area also fired back at the YPG, a sign of the strong local support for the GPF and local perception of the YPG's attack as illegitimate. The January militia clashes lasted several hours and resulted in one Assyrian GPF and three Kurdish YPG deaths as well as several injuries. Assyrian organizations in the diaspora protested following this event, considered an overreach by the YPG and a hostile attempt to impede on Assyrian self-determination in a predominantly Assyrian area.

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14 Kurt Haninke 2015 a

15 Al-Masdar 2015

16 Al-Jazeera English 2016

### ARREST OF ASSYRIAN PRIEST

In February 2015, Kurdish militia members arrested a priest in the town of Al-Malikiyah (also known as Derik by both Kurds and Assyrians). The priest, Gabriel Dawud, was visiting on behalf of the Assyrian Orthodox Church to report on the situation of Assyrians in the town. Arrested along with Dawud were nine other individuals, among them members of Assyrian militias and other independent Assyrian groups.<sup>17</sup> The reason for their arrest was trespassing into a Kurdish area, although both Syrian and Kurdish forces had been notified of the visit in advance to prevent complications. The priest and the other nine Assyrian individuals were eventually released after several hours of detainment. The incident appears to be another attempt to intimidate Assyrians and constrain their movement in Kurdish-controlled areas, as well as prevent scrutiny of the Assyrians' situation.

### KIDNAPPING OF GPF FIGHTERS

On April 20th 2016, a Gozarto Protection Forces car was stopped on its way to the airport of Qamishli. The three Assyrian GPF fighters inside the vehicle were taken away by the YPG along with the car they were stopped in. On April 22nd, another GPF Assyrian fighter was arrested while on his way to the GPF military training center. Members of the PYD aligned Assyrian group working a checkpoint he passed on his way to the academy had disclosed his whereabouts to the Kurdish Asayish.<sup>18</sup> The Asayish arrested him shortly thereafter.

All four GPF fighters were released on April

26th, a development which was publicized by the PYD-aligned Assyrian group as an accomplishment although in the second case it had been PYD-aligned Assyrians in Qamishli who were responsible for the kidnapping in the first place.<sup>19</sup> Highlighting the release of these GPF fighters is an attempt to propagandize for the PYD-aligned group in Syria despite its work against Assyrian community interests.<sup>20</sup>

### ATTACKS AGAINST ASSYRIANS

In September 2016 Agenzia Fides reported on continued intimidation of Assyrians and other Christian groups by Kurdish militias, including through expulsions and looting of homes and churches as well as assassination threats against clergy.<sup>21</sup> A Catholic archbishop in Hasakah reports having narrowly survived a targeted shooting. He pins this assassination attempt on the Kurdish militias, as the area in which the shooting occurred was solely supervised by them at that point in time and the nearest jihadist outpost was located more than 20 kilometers away. The archbishop's testimony also points to a continued blurring of boundaries between Kurdish and ISIS, as areas once controlled by ISIS are now under Kurdish jurisdiction but many residents who remain were formerly ISIS militants.

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17 AINA 2015 a

18 Assyria TV 2016 a

19 Hujâdâ 2016 b

20 Assyria Tv 2016 b

## Violent Incidents

### BOMBINGS

On December 30, 2015, bombings occurred in three popular Assyrian-owned restaurants in Wusta, the central neighborhood of Qamishli. The attacks killed 16 people, among them 14 Assyrians, and injured dozens more. YPG officials immediately assigned blame to ISIL,<sup>22</sup> although the style of the attacks differed from ISIL's usual modus operandi. Unlike most ISIL bombings, which are perpetrated by suicide bombers, the Wusta explosions were found to have been committed through explosive devices in backpacks left inside the restaurants. The alacrity with which ISIL was blamed and the dissimilarity of the explosions with the pattern of the vast majority of prior ISIL bombings raised the suspicion of Assyrian organizations, which have questioned the YPG narrative for the bombings and have sought further investigation into the matter.<sup>23</sup>

The December bombings were followed by twin bombings in the same quarter of Qamishli on January 24th, 2016. Three Assyrians were killed and 20 injured. The bombings again did not follow the ISIL pattern, renewing suspicions of PYD or Syrian regime complicity in the attacks.<sup>24</sup>

Further attacks in 2016 have targeted Assyrians in the Qamishli region, with similarly unclear perpetrators. Grenades have struck near Assyrian restaurants and churches on March 7th and May 15th<sup>25</sup>. Both of these attacks resulted in minor injuries and neither appeared to have a clear target, but rather were intended to threaten and scare away Assyrians.

A larger attack occurred on May 21st, 2016. Three Assyrians were killed by suicide bombings in the vicinity of one of the restaurants that was the site of the December bombings. The suicide bombings followed a grenade attack in the same area.<sup>26</sup>

### PROVOCATIONS

There have also been incidents of Kurdish forces provoking ISIL into attacking Assyrian villages. The German newspaper *Die Zeit*, reporting on the flight of Assyrians from the village of Tel Goran on the Khabour River, notes how the villagers had carefully cultivated neutrality with both ISIL and Kurdish forces through negotiations and payments to both sides. The period of neutrality was shattered when Kurdish fighters entered and shot at ISIL targets from neighboring villages, an act that forced Assyrians to flee in order to avoid ISIL retribution.<sup>27</sup> Following the attacks, the village has completely emptied, with its former population scattered throughout the world.<sup>28</sup>

Assyrians from Tel Hermiz, another village on the Khabour, have also reported deliberate provocation of ISIL by Kurdish forces. In Tel Hermiz, Assyrians were approached by ISIL and ordered to put down the cross from their church and cease ringing the church bells. Assyrians complied, hoping to avoid conflict with ISIL. Less than a week after Assyrians had put down the cross, YPG and its Assyrian affiliate, the Syriac Military Council (MFS), entered the village and instructed the community to replace the cross and ring the bells, assuring them that

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21 Agenzia Fides 2016 b

22 Reuters 2015

23 Hujâdâ 2016

24 Agenzia Fides 2016 a

they would be defended from any ISIL retaliation by the YPG. Despite these assurances, ISIL entered the village shortly thereafter, killing members of the Assyrian militias before kidnapping 270 Assyrians from Tel Hermiz and neighboring villages.<sup>29</sup>

Kurdish forces' deliberate incitement of conflict between the Assyrians and Islamic State militants suggests interplay between Kurdish and ISIL interests. Assyrians, who could pose a threat to Kurdish nationalist interests, are disappearing from northern Syria without the need for direct Kurdish involvement.

#### AMUDA CASE

Amuda, a town in Al-Hasakah, is another town in Hasakah governorate that used to have a significant Assyrian presence, but is now over-

whelmingly Kurdish, with only one Assyrian family left in recent years. This Assyrian family ran successful restaurants and cafés, but they came under threat from Kurdish authorities to give up their businesses, which the head of the family refused to do. In May 2015, one of their restaurants was bombed, with no human casualties but resulting in complete destruction of the structure. The family immediately sold their businesses and moved from the city, in fear of further violence or threats.<sup>30</sup> This family's plight illustrates the clear pattern of intimidation and violence faced by Assyrians who challenge Kurdish ambitions, not only those who take up arms in self-defense but also those who simply exist in those areas which Kurdish authorities wish to seize and Kurdify.



David Jendo, Assyrian leader in the Khabour region was assassinated in April 2015 by Kurdish members of the YPG.

25 Assyria Tv 2016 c

26 Hujâdâ 2016 c

27 Die Zeit 2016

28 Ibid

## ‘Divide and Rule’ Strategy: Parallel Organizations

The self-proclaimed Autonomous Administration and its military arms have Assyrian affiliates. These groups are frequently pointed to as proof of collaboration with ethnic minorities and of approval by those ethnic groups of the PYD and its autonomy. The main Kurdish-allied Assyrian militia is the Syriac Military Council (abbreviated MFS), a military offshoot of the Syriac Union Party. The MFS declared its intention to join the YPG in late 2014. Although MFS and Kurdish-allied Assyrian militias claim to represent Assyrian interests, their existence and actions are contentious.

Assyrians in Hasakah province have already independently established groups and militias to protect their territory and interests. Assyrians in Hasakah also have a history of political organization from before the Syrian Civil War. One of the oldest Assyrian political parties, the Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO), has its headquarters in Qamishli. The establishment of YPG-allied Assyrian groups diverts funding and support from independent Assyrian groups to parallel organizations that protect Kurdish interests. These parallel groups also take members away from the main Assyrian organizations, further dividing Assyrians in Hasakah and preventing cooperation among them, leaving the population weaker and less able to defend their areas.

These PYD-affiliated Assyrian groups are linked to a broader movement known as Dawronoye (“revolutionaries”), a group that arose in the 1980s in Turkey. In The Dawronoye are linked to the PKK.<sup>31</sup> Dawronoye establish or-

ganizations and militias parallel to those independently established by Assyrians, organizations that are co-opted by Kurdish parties in exchange for monetary support to their leadership.

The effort to divert attention from independent Assyrian groups to YPG affiliates is noticeable in the latter’s choice of names. For example there is an independent Assyrian militia called Sootoro (Assyrian: ‘protection’) operating exclusively in Qamishli since 2012. By the end of 2013, a split in the group created a similarly named YPG affiliate Sutoro, which operates more widely in Hasakah.<sup>32</sup>

By supporting splinter Dawronoye groups and upholding them as the representatives of the Assyrians, the Autonomous Administration further weakens Assyrians’ efforts towards self-determination. The Assyrian population is further divided; independent organizations are left more poorly funded and less supported. As a result Assyrian interests are pushed to the wayside. The disregard for Assyrian interests by MFS is noticeable in its absence as a signatory on the statement regarding the administration law and various other abuses. MFS representatives attended the meeting where the statement was approved, but were the only group that refused to sign.<sup>33</sup>

MFS’ militia has also participated in the looting of Assyrian homes in Tel Tamer under the guise of ‘search operations’, after the village’s occupants had fled from ISIS<sup>34</sup>, a further sign of the MFS’ indifference towards the Assyrian population it purports to protect.

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29 Ide, Poli and Metin 2015

30 Lundgren 2015

31 Drott 2015

The MFS has also tried to claim martyrs from independent Assyrian militias as its own. Such an event occurred in February 2016 following the martyring of an Arab member of the Khabur Military Council during an attack on ISIS in Shadade, to the south of Hasakah prov-

ince. MFS members took his body and declared him a martyr for their own organization.<sup>35</sup> They subsequently beat members of the Khabur Military Council who objected to the MFS' actions, and publicly denied the existence of the Khabur Military Council or Guardians of Khabur.



Assyrians in Sweden during a demonstration in the Swedish capital Stockholm on 16th January 2016 against the YPG attack targeting Assyrians in Qamishli. The woman is holding a picture of Gabi Henry Davud, Assyrian fighter from the Sootoro force killed by the YPG.

32 A similar pattern can be observed in northern Iraq, where the independent militia Nineveh Plain Protection Units and the KRG-allied Nineveh Protection Forces are both present.

33 Kurt Haninke 2015 c

34 Middle East Eye 2016

35 Assyria TV 2016 d



## Conclusion

The PYD's inclusive rhetoric and constitution and its militia's success against ISIL have earned it praise and support from Western media and spectators. Despite the PYD's insistence that it is open to a multi-ethnic population<sup>36</sup> and its self-presentation as an equitable and progressive administration, in comparison to regional dictatorships and Islamist groups, it remains an authoritarian Kurdish nationalist party at its core. Its treatment of Assyrians and other non-Kurdish communities that present an obstacle to a unified Kurdish region is a reflection of this ethos.

The atrocities documented in this report are part of a purposeful pattern with the long term aim of weakening the non-Kurdish components of northeastern Syria demographically, politically, economically and militarily. This kind of low intensity and low profile oppression doesn't create headlines in the media but the long term impact is very serious for the affected communities. The challenge for media actors, human rights groups and activists is to reveal the systematic nature of these atrocities.

Western military support for the YPG is inseparable from an endorsement of the PYD's project of ethnic partition, which poses a significant threat to the survival of non-Kurdish peoples under its control. Although mainstream media and Western supporters depict 'Rojava' as an oasis of hope and democracy in the Middle East, it is critical to look beneath the inclusive language and heed the reality on the ground, where Assyrians and other non-Kurdish groups face repression and violence.

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