

Position Paper (II)

ChaldoAssyrian Churches In Iraq

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The Assyrian Academic Society
<http://www.aas.net/aasmain.htm>
E-mail: info@aas.net

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Sargon Donabed, *Remnants of Heroes: The Assyrian Experience (The Continuity of the Assyrian Heritage from Kharput to New England)*, Chicago, The Assyrian Academic Society Press, 2003. ISBN 0-9744450-7-X.

Odisho O. Barazana, *Shinne D Asqoota (The Difficult Years)* written in the contemporary language of the Assyrians, Chicago, The Assyrian Academic Society Press, 2003.

The Chaldo-Assyrians of Iraq: the Indigenous Christian Minority at Risk (AAS in conjunction with Human Rights Without Frontiers, Int.), February 2004. (available as PDF)

Chaldo-Assyrians of Iraq & the Iraqi Interim Constitution [Transitional Administrative Law (TAL)], Position Paper (I), March 2004. (available as PDF)

Iraq lost an important ethnic group in the 1940's and 1950's when 120,000 native Iraqi Jews were removed. Without urgent safeguards against the problems posed by unchecked KDP armed militia's in northern Iraq, the other non-Muslim indigenous ethnic community of Iraq, the Chaldo-Assyrians, will also disappear. p. 2.

The KDP has opened an office in Baghdeda (Qara Qosh) which has a population of 30,000 Chaldo-Assyrians and no Kurds. Similar war-lord type action, reminiscent of the problems in northern and western Afghanistan, are taking place in other Chaldo-Assyrian villages. Such action puts psychological pressure on the Christians to leave while extending Kurdish control. p. 5.

One of the older peshmergas at the barracks laughingly remarked that, "The church was once yours, but is now ours to do with as we please." It is used as a stable for sheep during the winter. p. 10.

The other impediment to information dissemination about the Chaldo-Assyrians has been the real and documented physical danger of retribution. Those who have disseminated information contrary to Kurdish claims of good relations with Chaldo-Assyrians have seen retaliation against family members and associates still in northern Iraq. p. 8.

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Executive Summary

1. The ChaldoAssyrians of Iraq represent one of the oldest known Christian traditions in the world. But their presence in northern Iraq is endangered because of past pressures from Arab nationalism and the new forces of Kurdish nationalism.
2. ChaldoAssyrian churches and monasteries, destroyed over years of war and Kurdish tribal fighting in the region, remain neglected due to the prevention of ChaldoAssyrians from returning to their villages, now being occupied by Muslim Kurds.
3. The full extent of the destruction of Christian edifices in Iraq is not known because of the current deliberate intimidation and punishment of those who collect and disseminate information about the repression of ChaldoAssyrians in northern Iraq.
4. Without far greater international scrutiny of the preservation of the rights of the indigenous ChaldoAssyrians, and their right to return to their ancient villages, this Christian community and their historic edifices will not survive.
5. If the compact population of the ChaldoAssyrians in Iraq is destroyed, scattered or forced to convert to Islam, in keeping with prior patterns, the last major Aramaic speaking population of the world will disappear.
6. The ChaldoAssyrians deserve special protection as a unique Aramaic cultural entity, an endangered Christian community, and the most persecuted ethnic indigenous to the Middle East.

The ChaldoAssyrian Christian Community in Iraq

The list of churches and monasteries provided in this document represents only a portion of the more than two hundred Christian edifices which have been destroyed, mainly in northern Iraq, between 1961 and 1989. These sites continue to be neglected due to the prevention of the ChaldoAssyrians from returning to their villages. Since 1992 the northern no-fly zone has been under the control of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) which has passed laws simplifying legalization of Kurdish squatter rights on ChaldoAssyrian owned property (see Appendix C). These properties include farmlands, village homes, stores in large and small towns, small manufacture, and public institutions.

Because the Kurds are Muslims (mostly Sunni but some Shi'a), they have little regard for the preservation of Christian sites, some of great antiquity. In order to assert their rights over northern Iraq, they have also engaged in major re-writing of ancient history, laying claim, for example, to the three millennia history of Arbella (Arbil), a pre-Christian and Christian Assyrian site, the well-documented capital of the kingdom of Adiabene, a post-Empire Assyrian kingdom.¹ At the same time the "soft ethnic cleansing" of Christians (together with Muslim Turkmens and the large number of ethnic Kurds who do not follow either the KDP or the PUK) means that the ChaldoAssyrians are being actively prevented from return to their villages.² The term "soft" as opposed to "hard" or violent ethnic cleansing refers to the legal, economic and political means used to prevent the return of internally displaced ChaldoAssyrians to their homes.

Iraq lost an important ethnic group in the 1940's and 1950's when 120,000 native Iraqi Jews were removed. Without urgent safeguards against the problems posed by unchecked KDP armed militia's in northern Iraq, the other non-Muslim indigenous ethnic community of Iraq, the ChaldoAssyrians, will also disappear.

¹ See for example the description of Arbil at the World Monument Fund in which a thousand years of Assyrian history of Arbil are ignored. <http://www.wmf.org/html/programs/iraerb.html>.

² Anthony H. Cordesman. *One Year On: Nation Building In Iraq* (A Status Report) Working Paper, Revised April 16, 2004, p. 7. Cordesman uses the term "soft ethnic cleansing" with regard to Arabs and [other] Kurds in the north but it applies even more to ChaldoAssyrians who tend to be ignored in much US discussion on Iraq.

Current Conditions of ChaldoAssyrians

Contrary to expectations, the US led military intervention in Iraq, has not been followed by improved conditions for Christians in northern Iraq. Due to US over dependence on Barzani (KDP) and Talabani (PUK) led Sunni Kurdish support in the north, there continues to be a reluctance to address the lack of legal and cultural rights of ChaldoAssyrians. US reliance on hotels in Barzani-held towns like Dohuk for the two week rest and relaxation afforded to US military personnel further complicates the ability of the Coalition Provisional Authority to demand that Kurds abide by international standards in their treatment of the ChaldoAssyrians, the indigenous people of Iraq. Whether the transfer of sovereignty to Iraq, partial or otherwise, will improve the situation remains to be seen, particularly if the US military presence continues to leave the Kurdish controlled areas to the management of the Kurdish militia and two political parties, to the exclusion of others, without adequate American or international oversight.

At the same time, international funding agencies for internally displaced persons rarely take into account the needs of the ChaldoAssyrians, often for lack of information.³ NGOs are often overwhelmed by demand from Kurds for such funds, demands strengthened by media coverage. ChaldoAssyrian NGOs in the north which attempt to present applications for funding of rural development projects confront the problem of passing through a “soft” barrier of local Kurdish administrative obstacles that prevent their needs for reconstruction aid to reach international funders.

Finally, the ChaldoAssyrians of Iraq, whose numbers reach the total figure for the population of Finland (over a million), are often neglected precisely because they are more socio-educationally advanced than their neighbors. Women’s literacy is high, a part of the pattern of a less patriarchal-ruled Christian society. They achieve a higher level of education and participation in the workplace, professionally and otherwise, and consequently tend to have smaller families than their more restricted Muslim neighbors. Whereas total Iraqi population is growing at a rate close to 3% per year, and Kurdish population growth rate may be even higher, the ChaldoAssyrian population has either remained static or continues to decrease due to emigration. The Diaspora which began in the 1960s when Arabization policies adversely effected this ethnic, non-Arab, group, may well include an additional half million persons whose roots lie in the villages to which they and their kin cannot return as yet.

Because of the pressure from Kurdish peasants who move onto their lands, backed by armed militia, and the pull of the job opportunities in Arab dominated cities, there is serious concern that ChaldoAssyrians, though the more urbane, educated and enterprising of the population of the north, will be forced to leave. Without the mechanisms available from internationally initiated development projects, the temptation to leave the north, and even Iraq, fall heavily on the community.

³ See in particular, John Fawcett and Victor Tanner. *The Internally Displaced People of Iraq* (Brookings Institution - SAIS project on Internal Displacement, October 2002) who stress the lack of information about numbers yet treat Assyrian information with suspicion in contrast to Kurdish information. The authors relied on personnel from the Washington Kurdish Institute. Pp. 14 and forward.

The Future of Churches and Monasteries in Iraq

Christianity in Iraq dates back to the earliest days of the apostles and its spread in the Aramaic speaking world. The ChaldoAssyrians of Iraq remain the world's largest compact safekeepers of the living Aramaic derived language, classical Syriac and its contemporary spoken and written forms. ChaldoAssyrians are also the heirs of church traditions that retain not only the Eastern understanding of Christian precepts, but also the archaic hymns and chants, fasts and feasts, as well as customs, that link pre-Christian Mesopotamian social and cultural history to medieval eastern Christianity.⁴

For example, a very important fast within this tradition is the ancient Rogation (or Fast) of the Ninevites (a three day fast preceding Lent). For this Aramaic speaking Christian community, the Rogation of the Ninevites commemorates the Biblical repentance of the population of the Assyrian capital of Nineveh upon the behest of the prophet Jonah.⁵ No other Christian group in the world relates to this pre-Christian occasion or sees the Fast as part of its heritage. To uproot the ChaldoAssyrian community from its indigenous home in northern Iraq would be to erase an as yet little known civilizing historical feature in the human experience.

The Nineveh plain, where the oldest known ChaldoAssyrian villages date from the height of the Assyrian empire, extends from Mosul (ancient Nineveh) to Dohuk (medieval Bet Nohadra). Through until the 13th century, convents as well as monasteries dotted the landscape. For historically evident reasons, convents have largely disappeared and monasteries are hardly the robust institutions of the pre-Islamic period.⁶

Most of these churches (and villages) were located in the Dohuk governorate, one of the districts of the Mosul Lewa (province) divided in 1970 by the Baathist regime in order to placate Kurds at the time of the compromise represented by the National Front. Mosul province was divided into the Nineveh governorate and the Dohuk governorate. The division of Iraq into eighteen provinces (or governorates) dates from that time. This division of Mosul province separated ChaldoAssyrian villages from each other administratively and allowed for the parts that the Kurds came to control, as a result of civil war, to be Kurdified, either by moving in Kurdish populations or by insisting that ChaldoAssyrians self-identify as “Christian Kurds.” A similar process took place in the truncated Nineveh province where ChaldoAssyrians came under legal and economic pressure to self-identify as Arabs. By 1977 the indigenous, Aramaic speaking ethnic ChaldoAssyrians of Iraq were completely dropped from the official Iraqi census and referred to only as Christians (Arab and Kurd). So far as

⁴ Simo Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies: State Archives Of Assyria - Saa 9* (University of Helsinki Press, 1997).

⁵ The “tomb of Jonah” is reputed to be in the town of Alqosh (35 km east of ancient Nineveh), which until a few months ago when the KDP moved in, had been a completely ChaldoAssyrian town. Many Assyrian subclans and proper names carry the name of Jonah, rendered “Yonan” among the ChaldoAssyrians. When Iraqi Jews fled the north and Iraq from 1948 onward, the ChaldoAssyrians of Alqosh undertook the upkeep of the “tomb of Jonah”.

⁶ The monastic traditions that sustained clerical training having been weakened in the Islamic period. The renewal of educated clergy has only been revived under Western tutelage, particularly through the actions of the Roman Catholic Church, dating from the 19th century. In August 2002, Sister Cecilia, one of only two Chaldean nuns of a convent in Baghdad, was found with her throat cut (see AINA <http://aina.org/releases/2002/cecilia.htm>). A ChaldoAssyrian nun from Iraq today lives in a convent at Boston College.

the Baathists were concerned, ChaldoAssyrians no longer existed as an ethnic group, indigenous or otherwise.⁷ Kurds too, in preparation for the playing the enhanced role in a future Iraq that they have come to enjoy, have consistently tried to block ChaldoAssyrian participation in opposition councils.

Given the favoring of Arabism by the Baathists, and American favoritism toward Kurds, the current direction of Iraqi transitional politics bodes ill for the preservation of the ChaldoAssyrian community or its ancient Christian monuments. The Interim Iraqi Constitution or Transitional Administrative Law (TAL), adopted in March 2004 by the Interim Governing Council, and signed by Ambassador Paul Bremer, further promotes Kurdish interests. TAL has not only awarded Dohuk, Arbil and Sulaymaniyah provinces to the Kurds, but has also opened the door for Kurds to claim significant parts of Nineveh province, and two others (Kirkuk and Diyala). TAL allows the Regional Kurdish Government to retain control of any geographic part of the six specified northern provinces where they exercised control on 19 March 2003, the day before the US led invasion.⁸ This provision allows for discrimination not only against the Christians, represented by the ChaldoAssyrians, but also against the Turkmens of Iraq and the ever persecuted Yezidis, a non-Christian, non-Muslim community with religious traditions that may well pre-date the introduction of Christianity.

Taking advantage of the legal loophole provided by the Kurdish bias in TAL, in recent months, Kurds have begun moving their armed militias and political party offices into ChaldoAssyrian villages previously not under their control. This paves the way for the inclusion of one third of Iraq's provinces into the Kurdish region. If this Kurdish plan is allowed to succeed, nearly all of the ChaldoAssyrian villages of the Nineveh plain would fall under Barzani control, as would the future of the churches and monasteries. For example, the KDP has opened an office in Baghdada (Qara Qosh) which has a population of 30,000 ChaldoAssyrians, and no Kurds. Similar war-lord type action, reminiscent of the problems in northern and western Afghanistan, are taking place in other ChaldoAssyrian villages. Such action puts psychological pressure on the Christians to leave while extending Kurdish control.

Specifically to avoid such an outcome, given the recent decades of the repression of ChaldoAssyrians under Kurdish rule (and the centuries of Kurdish tribal leaders dealing with their Christian subjects as virtual serfs) the ChaldoAssyrians of Iraq are pressing for self-rule on the Nineveh plain (where they make up a continuous and substantial portion of the population) so they can maintain their indigenous culture in Iraq.⁹ They desire direct access to the central government in

⁷ Throughout the 1970s and 1980s Baghdad worked internationally to weaken any Assyrian international action. Assassination of leadership (in France especially), poisoning of delegates at international for a (Sydney, Australia), and prevention of Assyrians to officially become UNECOSOC affiliated NGOs (in Geneva) are some of the actions instigated by the Baathist Iraqis.

⁸ TAL article 53A reads, "The Kurdistan Regional Government is recognized as the official government of the territories that were administered by that government on 19 March 2003 in the governorates of Dohuk, Arbil, Sulaimaniya, Kirkuk, Diyala and Neneveh. The term "Kurdistan Regional Government" shall refer to the Kurdistan National Assembly, the Kurdistan Council of Ministers, and the regional judicial authority in the Kurdistan region."

⁹ At the historic Baghdad conference convened on 22-24 October 2003 by Chaldean, Assyrians and Syriacs included the following in its Final Declaration. "The Conference stressed the need to designate an administrative region for our people in the Nineveh plain with the participation of other ethnic and religious groups, where a special law will be
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Baghdad rather than through the Kurdish Regional Government. In this manner they can conduct their own cultural affairs and restore their religious structures to prevent the desecration occurring elsewhere in northern Iraq.

established for self-administration and the assurance of administrative, political and cultural rights in the towns and villages throughout Iraq where our people reside.”

Information Gathering about Christian Sites in Iraq

While there has been a flood of information about Kurds in Iraq, little information filters out about the ChaldoAssyrians. This is due to both financial reasons and to more sinister reasons having to do with intimidation. A more insidious reason is the support given to Kurds internationally due to their being regarded as a useful means of accessing Iraq and its resources.

Financially, the ChaldoAssyrian community has had no access to the sources of money available to Ma'ud Barzani and his KDP. In the aftermath of the first Gulf War, the KDP gained control over Iraq's trade across the border with Turkey and with Syria by working with Saddam Hussein in August 1996 to oust the rival PUK and gain control of most of the northern "free" zone of Iraq. This is how the KDP came to control both legal trade and the smuggling of oil products in particular.

Kurds have also benefited from the largess of the international aid community, specifically from the UNDP which, until the bombing of the UN headquarters in Baghdad in August 2003, operated on a lavish scale in Dohuk, Arbil and other northern towns. Chiefly engaged in administering the 13% share of the oil-for-food program in the northern no-fly zone, the UNDP paid scant attention to ChaldoAssyrian needs while it lavished urban and rural development moneys on re-enforcing Kurdish settlements, many on ChaldoAssyrian lands. Thus, international donors have become complicit in displacing Christians in Iraq.¹⁰

Taking advantage of the money flowing in from trade and smuggling as well as international aid, from the mid 1990s on, Kurdish tribal leaders have invested in large scale international organizations that promoted both lobbying and information channels about Kurds in Iraq specifically. In Washington alone, the Washington Kurdish Institute, manned mainly by non-Kurds, since 1996, has succeeded in providing a vast amount of pro-Kurdish information while at the same time facilitating access to US funding for Kurdish causes. No less engaged in similar activity has been American University where the (Mulla) Mustafa Barzani Chair, established in 1999 with an endowment of \$2 million, promotes Kurdish activities through the "Center for Global Peace".¹¹ The hiring of well-placed consultants who promote Kurdish interests in the popular media and in policy circles also expands favorable attention to Kurdish causes.

In Diaspora, Christians originating from Iraq might yet succeed in disseminating information about ChaldoAssyrian rights abuses. But several obstacles confront them. The denominational church institutions, bolstered by the Islamic concept of dhimmi governance through religious leadership,

¹⁰ For example, Eija-Riitta Korhola (PPE-DE), Member of the European Parliament, in March 2004 posed the WRITTEN QUESTION E-1029/04 formally, to the European Commission (the EU executive branch) with regard to the fair distribution of aid in Iraq to the ChaldoAssyrian community. (See Zindamagazine.com for May 16, 2004).

¹¹ The series of conference that have been convened in Washington DC, generally funded by the Kurdish program at American University, while advertised as focusing on Iraq, end up being Kurdish oriented with little or no opportunity for any other Iraqi groups to express opinion. Turkmens and Assyrians in particular are confined to comments, if lucky, and in the case of Assyrians, usually there is a Kurdish motivated Assyrian planted in the audience who is ready to contradict any subject brought forward by Assyrians or non-Assyrians who question the good relations between Kurds and Assyrians which the Kurds insist is the case. This happens at conferences in Europe as well. See the program for the June 11, 2004 conference at <http://www.american.edu/academic.depts/acainst/cgp/>.

have extended its divisive force into the present. These fissures in the ChaldoAssyrian community became a tool of policy under Saddam Hussein and have been more or less successfully adopted by the Kurdish parties for the past two decades.¹²

In contrast, the structure of Kurdish parties, along hierarchical, tribal lines, enforces a discipline based on medieval concepts of loyalty and clan. This has functioned to create a high level of obedience to leadership such as Mas'ud Barzani and earlier, to his father Mulla Mustafa Barzani. The political notion of inherited leadership has long been discarded in the ChaldoAssyrian community thus allowing for more democratic, if less disciplined, means of leadership choice.

The other impediment to information dissemination about the ChaldoAssyrians has been the real and documented physical danger of retribution. Those who have disseminated information contrary to Kurdish claims of good relations with ChaldoAssyrians have seen retaliation against family members and associates still in northern Iraq. The dissemination of documentation about illegal land confiscation is a case in point. Such retribution, even against priests, has occurred on such a large scale in northern Iraq, that information about the Christian community, and about churches, must be gathered in secrecy. How to disseminate the information without danger to those who collect and transmit it remains a serious problem with no apparent solution. Without the full cooperation and understanding of western institutions and media, ChaldoAssyrian voices cannot be heard and are, at some institutions and organizations, actively suppressed.

¹² For a sample of a directive from the Iraqi intelligence services to use the churches as a means of dividing and penetrating the ChaldoAssyrians, see http://www.zindamagazine.com/iraqi_documents/documents/Z-10004.html.
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Christian Churches and Monasteries in Iraq

This partial list of churches and monasteries is not inclusive. It does not include, for example, the church at Bekhma (near Aqra, a region of major population displacement) where now cattle are kept, the site in Semele which the Arabs call ‘der’ indicating it to have been a monastery in the recent past (and where local Christians continue to find skeletal remains of the victims of the 1933 Semele massacre), nor more significantly, Rabban Hormizd, the ancient stone monastery outside Alqosh on the Nineveh plain which was bombed so severely that many of its magnificent epigraphic memorials, dating from a hundred centuries ago, have been shattered. These memorials were some of the most precious classical Syriac stone carvings in the world. They lie in a makeshift museum in Alqosh in desperate need of restoration.¹³

Some of the edifices listed below, now turned to rubble, had considerable historic value due to their antiquity and continuous use by the members of the several indigenous Christian denominations in Iraq that have historically made up the ChaldoAssyrians. Readings of historical geographies, as well as the colophons of Syriac manuscripts, provide clues to the early dates of some of these religious buildings even when foundation or reconstruction inscriptions lie under rubble.

In the rush to destroy these churches, manuscripts of considerable antiquity may also have been destroyed. The history of the destruction needs to be collected from oral sources so that the whereabouts of the precious manuscripts may be retrieved. This is part of the history of Iraq and a witness to its diversity, no matter what forces of ethnic uniformity may arise.

Much like the destruction of religiously associated structures in Bosnia or in Kosovo (as late as 2004), the wanton destruction of churches “to widen roads” or because they were located near security buildings speaks to the animosity toward an indigenous ethnic group turned into a minority in its historic homeland. It is not unlikely that permission to rebuild these churches will be denied on a religiously prejudiced basis given the direction of present ethnic chauvinism in the north of Iraq.¹⁴

These churches were mostly razed in the course of destroying villages, forcing the villagers into internal displacement at strictly guarded refugee camps, into major cities to take shelter with other ChaldoAssyrians, or into flight to Europe, Australia or North America. Many of these villagers cannot return home due to lack of funds for reconstruction of their homes, schools, roads and other infrastructure, as well as legal barriers hastily constructed by Kurdish administration. These legal barriers continue to be built in the KRG where representation in the Kurdistan National Assembly for non-Kurds (ChaldoAssyrians and Turkmens) is negligible (5 ChaldoAssyrians out of a total of 105 members).

¹³ An appeal to the US National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) for funding to preserve rare Syriac materials under the special funds for Iraq allocated by Congress has been refused on the grounds that these materials are of a religious nature and not held at “public” institutions.

¹⁴ The two Constitutions authored by the KDP were adopted in October 2002 by the Kurdistan National Assembly (see page 10 for a discussion of the legality of this body), one for the north and another for all of Iraq. Article 19 of the first states that all members of the Assembly must swear by Allah, and the second in article 7 clearly states that there is a state religion and it is Islam. Human Rights without Frontiers report on “The Kurdish ‘Vision’ for the future of the Christian community.” <http://hrwf.net>.

Fear that new elections would require representation for the rest of the Kurdish parties in the north, and fairer representation for ChaldoAssyrians and Turkmens, has meant that those elected 13 years ago for five years (in 1992) still control the supposedly democratic body. Fear of the revival of intra-Kurdish tribal fighting that claimed thousands of lives through 1998 also prevents new elections. The Kurdish parliament therefore, is hardly a democratic institution, but rather another instrument to allow Barzani (and Talabani) to exercise unchecked power. Moreover, the areas under KDP and PUK management function as Kurdish controlled military zones funded in part by US money allocated in 2002 to support opposition to Saddam Hussein. The combined militia presence and illegal legislation confirming squatter rights worked to prevent the return of ChaldoAssyrians to their villages to reclaim centuries old churches.

Emboldened by strong US support for Kurds who are represented in the West as both oppressed and now democratic, Kurds flagrantly taunt ChaldoAssyrians about their loss of homes, villages, and religious edifices. An Australian Assyrian whose family has been forced into refugee status, while visiting a cave monastery outside Aqra, got the following response from Kurds in the area, “The church was once yours, but is now ours to do with as we please.” It is used as a stable for sheep during the winter.”¹⁵

This list of churches testifies to the strong Christian presence in northern Iraq which has systematically been diminished. Today only about 1/2 million ChaldoAssyrians remain in northern Iraq of the more than one million that lived there at the start of the rule of Saddam Hussein. The other 1/2 million ChaldoAssyrians still in Iraq live in major towns like Baghdad, Mosul, Kirkuk and Basra. They have benefited little from the oil-for-food program under which many Kurdish villages in the northern no-fly zone were reconstructed. While the KRG applied funds to reconstruct over 2,600 Kurdish villages, less than 5 ChaldoAssyrian villages have obtained any sort of government reconstruction support. On the contrary some local reconstruction efforts by the Assyrian Aid Society and others to bring electricity to a few villages, were bombed by Kurds.¹⁶ Due to the political difficulties and economic discrimination that ChaldoAssyrians meet in the north today, their villages are being taken over by Kurds.

The forced dispersion of Christians from the northern region of Iraq, and the prevention of their return will mean the decay and destruction of more of the remaining historic Christian structures.

¹⁵ Nicholas al-Jeloo writes about this visit to Bekhma and other village sites in the area in a forthcoming (2004) issue of *Nineveh* magazine.

¹⁶ AUA Newswatch, October 22, 2002 and *Assyrian Star* (Vol. LIV, no. 4) Winter 2002, p. 5.
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Organization of This List

The list of churches has been organized according to region. The regional organization demonstrates how these churches (and the villages in which they were located) were destroyed in several deliberate military campaigns: 1977-78 when the ChaldoAssyrians were no longer considered as an ethnic group and hence removed from the census. The second wave of destruction comes in 1987-1988 when the Iraq-Iran war began to draw to a close and Baghdad could turn its full attention to the north. In 1987 came the poison gas attack at Zewa, where much of the opposition was encamped (the Assyrian Democratic Movement, the Communist Party of Iraq, and Kurdish groups). The more familiar attack at Halabja followed by eight months in the spring of 1988 when the ANFAL campaign was in full swing.

Mar and Mart, the terms preceding proper names like “Maryam,” are the masculine and feminine forms, in Aramaic/Syriac, for “saint.” The ChaldoAssyrians of Iraq form the last compact community in the world that has retained this Biblical language for over two thousand years.

Source of Information

This list of churches and monasteries has been compiled by the Information Bureau of the Assyrian Democratic Movement (Zowaa demokrataya aturaya as it is named in the indigenous Aramaic language). For further information about this organization, please consult <http://www.adm.org>

For a map showing the location of Christian churches and monasteries located on the Nineveh and Dohuk (Nohadra) governorates, please see http://aina.org/maps/1961_villages.htm. For those in the Arbil (ancient Arbella) governorate, see <http://aina.org/maps/1961avillages.htm>. (included here as Appendix A)

Sample List of Churches and Monasteries Destroyed

1. Mar Zaya Cathedral: Baghdad (Karradet Mariam area).

The biggest eastern church. *Destroyed in early 1985.*

2. Mar Yousip Khnanishoo Church: Arbil (Harir).

May have dated from the 6th c. CE*. *Destroyed 1976 to "widen the main road" in the town.*

3. Mar Yaqoob Monastery of the Chaldeans Catholic Church: (Mar Yaqoo village).

Built 1400 years ago. *Destroyed in 1976.*

4. Mart Maryam Church: (Sardashte village).

Built 50 years ago. *Destroyed in 1977.*

Dohuk Governorate, Upper Barwara District

5. Mar Moshe Monastery: Upper Barwara (in Lower Jakalah).

Built ca. 800 AD year ago. *Destroyed in 1977.*

6. Mar Gewargis Church: Upper Barwara (Dooreh village).

Built ca.800 AD. *Destroyed in 1977.*

7. Mar Qayoomah Monastery: Upper Barwara (Dooreh village).

One at the most venerated monasteries. Built ca. 900 years ago. *Destroyed in 1977.*

8. Mart Maryam Church: Upper Barwara (Mach village).

Built this century. *Destroyed in 1977.*

9. Mar Younan Church: Upper Barwara (Aqreh village).

Built recently. *Destroyed in 1977.*

Dohuk Governorate, Nerwa district

10. Mart Maryam Church: Nerwa (Welah village).

Recently built. *Destroyed in 1977.*

11. Qadishtah Shmoneh Church: Nerwa (Welah village).

Built recently. *Destroyed in 1977.*

12. Mar Khnana Monastery: Nerwa (Qaroo village).

Built 7th c. AD. *Destroyed by Iraqi bombers in 1977.*

13. Mar Qoryaqos Church: Nerwa (Qaroo village).

Built 1300 years ago. *Destroyed in 1977.*

14. Mar Zakka Church: Nerwa (Bash village).

Built recently. *Destroyed in 1977.*

Dohuk (ancient Nohadra, seat of an early bishopric)

15. Mart Maryam Church: town of Dohuk (Giribass area).

Taken over by the regime in 1982 to prevent its use by Assyrians, claiming that it was located near the headquarters of the security services in the city.

16. Orphans' School of the Chaldean Catholic Church: Dohuk (Keli Zaweta).

Taken over by the regime and used as a military camp for the "popular army."

In Dohuk Governorate, District of Sumel

17. Aba Sarabion Church: Sumel (Badleh village).

Recently built. *Destroyed in 1984.*

In Dohuk Governorate, Amadia District

18. Mar Audisho Monastery: Amadia (Dereh village).

Built 1300 years ago. *Destroyed in 1988.*

19. Mar Kardagh Church: Amadia (Dereh village).

..... *Destroyed in 1988.*

20. Mar Yohanna Church: Amadia- Sarsing (Dawoodiya village).

..... *Destroyed in 1988.*

21. Mar Yousif Monastery: Amadia (Derigne village).

Built 1400 years ago. *Destroyed in 1988.*

22. Mart Shmoni Church: Amadia (Betbade village).

..... *Destroyed in 1988.*

Dohuk Governorate, Nahla/Eqra District

23. Mar Gevargiis Church: Nahla-Eqra (Hizane village).

..... *Destroyed in 1988.*

Dohuk Governorate, Semele District

24. Mar Daniel Church: Semele (Bakhetme village).

..... *Destroyed in 1988.*

* The foremost authority on the physical geography of Christians in northern Iraq is J. M. Fiey, O.P. He suggests that the original church was destroyed by the forces of Tamerlane in 1310. This church may have been a replacement for the destroyed church. *Assyrie Chretienne: Contribution A L'etude De L'histoire Et De La Geographie Ecclesiastiques Et Monastiques Du Nord De L'Iraq - Volume I* (Beyrouth, Imprim).

Appendix A

ChaldoAssyrian Villages of North Iraq (ca.1961)

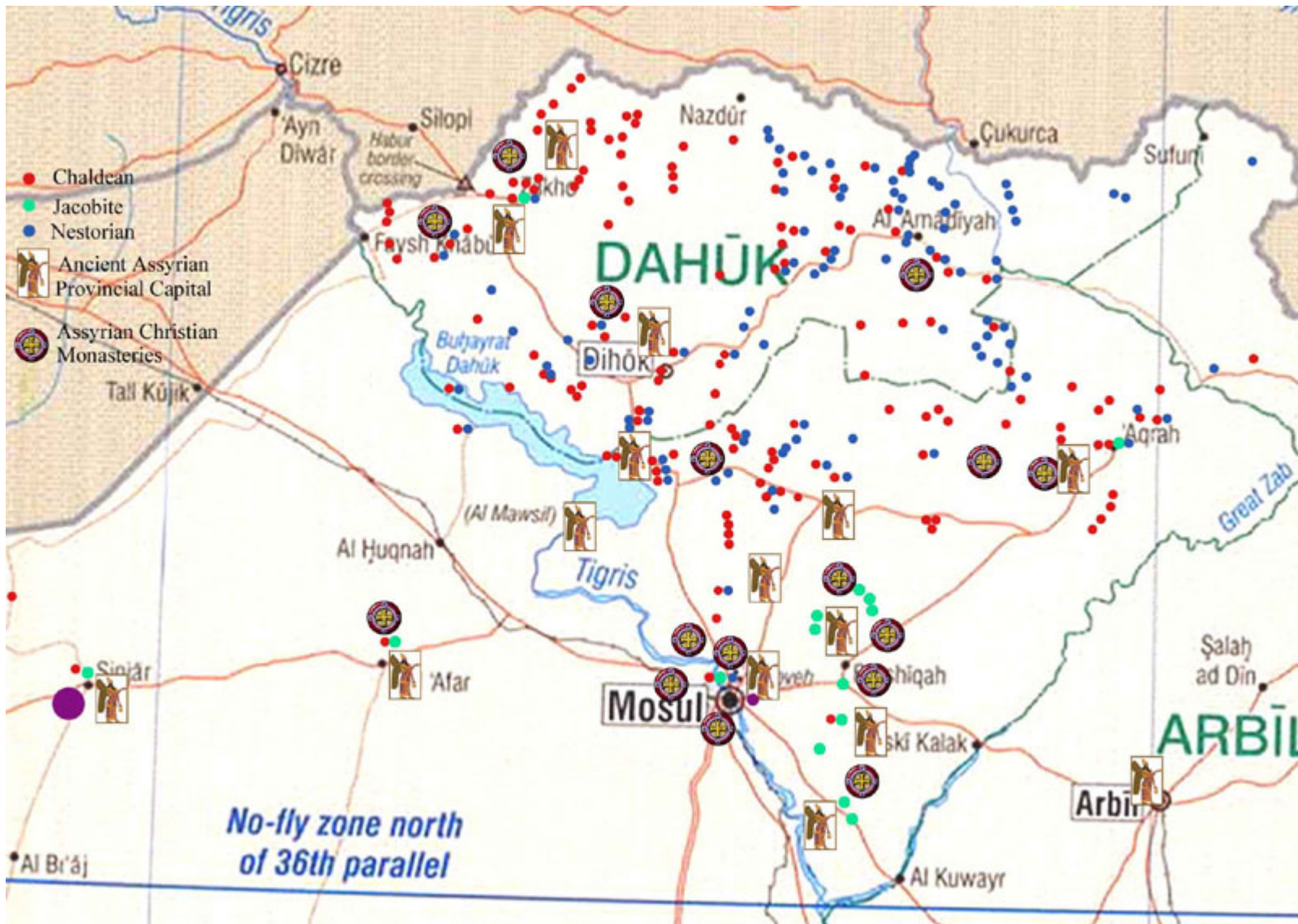
This map indicates the location of many churches and monasteries before the systematic destruction of ChaldoAssyrian villages commenced in northern Iraq. In Iraq, as elsewhere in the Middle East, some congregations have shifted from one denomination to another over recent centuries. For example, Khalil Gibran (1883-1931), best known as a Lebanese Christian poet, was born in a village outside Beirut which until the 1860s, when it converted to Maronite (Catholic) from Jacobite (Orthodox). Hence Gibran refers to himself as “an Assyrian boy.” ChaldoAssyrian churches with Protestant denominations are newer and are located in Iraqi cities such as Baghdad.

The references to denominational names on the map are as follows:

Chaldean refers to buildings that fall within the Chaldean Catholic Church, a 16th century uniate off shoot of the Church of the East. The Chaldean rite is an eastern rite, conducted mainly in the Syriac language. Chaldeans are the most numerous of all Syriac speaking people in Iraq. The Chaldean Patriarchate remains in Iraq. They also form the largest body of recent refugees from Iraq throughout the United States, and may number as many as 300,000 in the US alone. Chaldeans are particularly concentrated in Michigan where they are often erroneously included as “Arab-Americans” in order to enhance the figures for this mainly Muslim community in Michigan.

Jacobite refers to the Syriac Orthodox Church. The patriarchal See of this apostolic church today is located in Damascus, whereas formerly, prior to the near destruction of the Assyrians during World War I, it had been in Mardin (now in Turkey). Until the 1950s, the Syriac Orthodox Church had been known as the “Assyrian Apostolic Church.” Jacobite refers to an early Church Father, Jacob of Edessa (633-708). This church follows a monophysite Christology which sets it in the same theological school as the Copts and the Armenian Orthodox and thus distinct theologically from all other Christians. It is a bastion of classical Syriac language traditions.

Assyrian refers to the religious structures associated currently with the Holy Apostolic and Catholic Church of the East, the church that originally took Christianity and the Syriac Aramaic alphabet to China in the 7th century. The previous patriarch of the Church of the East was stripped of his Iraqi citizenship and forced into exile in Cyprus in 1933. Later, he moved to England and then finally to the United States. His successor lives in Chicago.

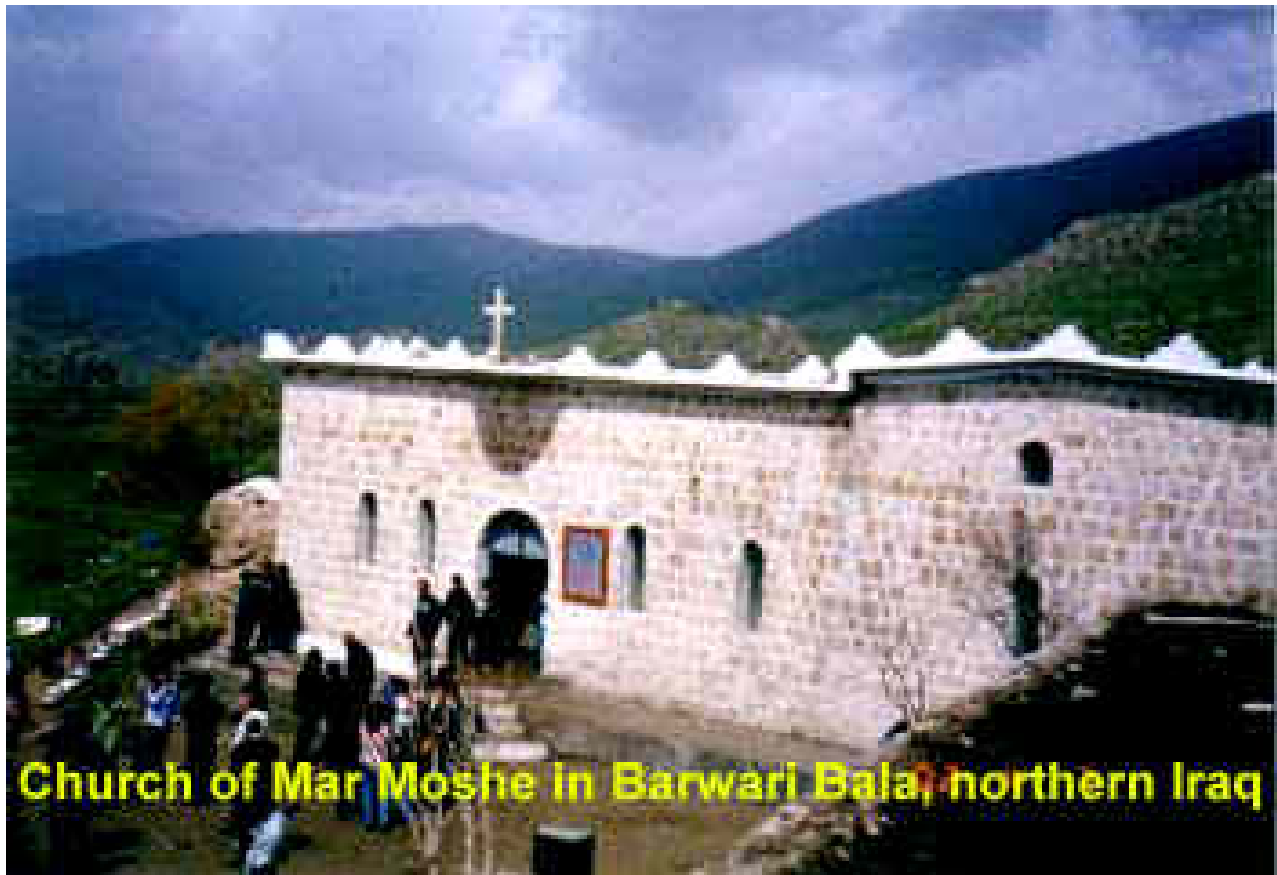


Appendix B

Some Images of Christian Monuments in Iraq

1. Mar Moshe Church Upper Barwari, Dohuk Governorate

Located in the hills, and built in the architectural style of Eastern Assyrian churches found throughout the Zagros mountains, examples of this kind of construction may be seen as far east as northwest Iran (Mar Toma church in Baloolan is an example.) Mortar and local shaped stones give these structures the appearance of fortresses, as do the parapets at the top reminiscent of the walls of Nineveh. Historically the churches had to be used for protection from marauding Kurdish tribesmen. But when the defenders were overpowered, the village population taking refuge in the churches were sealed inside and the interiors set ablaze. During World War I, when the Ottoman-organized but Kurdish manned Hamidiya irregulars attacked Christians, thousands of Assyrians lost their lives in such churches turned into tombs. Photo courtesy of the Assyrian International News Agency at <http://aina.org/releases/2002/oppositiontalks.htm>.



2. Mar Zena Church Baghdeda, Hamdaniya District, Nineveh Governorate

Built on a “tel” or mound of probable archeological significance, dating from about the 4th century, Mar Zena is located in a small town of about 5000 homes. A structure in continuous use by the Christian worshippers, the ancient building has been renovated many times throughout its history to the extent that the fortunes of the community could afford. Most Christian churches in ChaldoAssyrian villages that have come under Muslim rule have been restricted in appearance and require special permits for any repair. Expansion is usually not permitted.



3. Mar Behnam Monastery Hamdaniya District, Nineveh Governorate

Located about 20 miles southeast of Mosul and 4 miles from the ancient Assyrian city of Kalhu (Nimrud) situated between the Tigris river and the upper Zab. Constructed of local stone called *billan*, this monastery dates to about the 4th century. Its massive wooden doors are adorned with verses written in the Estrangelo style of the Syriac alphabet that was used especially for epigraphy. This monastery contains over 50 rooms, statues, an underground path to the site of Kalhu, a sanctuary, and an ancient burial site for high church dignitaries, saints and priests. It is currently used for spiritual retreats by Christians. Photo courtesy of the Assyrian International News Agency (www.aina.org), (2004).



4. Rabban Hormiz Monastery Alqosh, Nineveh Governorate

A well known stone monastery located 26 miles north of Mosul in a chain of mountains called Qardu famous in Middle Eastern sources for being the locale of Noah's ark. Rabban Hormiz (Monk Hormiz) Monastery became the official residence of the patriarchs of the Assyrian Church of the East (wrongly called Nestorian) between 1551 and 1804, although it also served as the patriarchal burial site before the end of the 15th century. Shown here is the Epitaph of Patriarch Elia VIII (d. 1617) © Amir Harrak (See Further Readings, p. 23, for his article about these funerary inscriptions). See also *Assyrian Star* Vol. LIV, no. 3, Fall 2002, p. 9.



Appendix C

The following press release appeared in March 2003 and was issued by the Assyrian Information News Agency. The text plus relevant illustrations may be accessed at <http://aina.org/releases/2003/landtransfer.htm>.

Kurdish Resolution Threatens Assyrian Lands in Iraq

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).

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.

Further Readings

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