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# VULNERABILITY AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN ARMED CONFLICT

INTERNATIONAL ASSYRIAN WOMEN'S CONFERENCE

HOSTED BY KATI PIRI MEP (S&D)

**CONFERENCE REPORT**  
OCTOBER 2016



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The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization.

UNPO wishes to extend its thanks to all those who made the conference possible,  
in particular our co-organisers and co-sponsors.



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## 2 • Foreword

*A devastating and protracted humanitarian crisis is currently ongoing in Syria and Iraq, with brutal violence and chaos forcing millions to flee their homelands and leave everything behind. Women and children make up the majority of the displaced population; as victims of displacement, they experience additional challenges and vulnerabilities, such as sexual, physical and psychological abuse and trauma.*

*The Assyrians, an ethnic and religious minority, whose traditional homeland comprises parts of northern Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran, have seen their already precarious situation deteriorate since the advance of the so-called Islamic State. In this context of war, not only ISIS forces and commanders, but reportedly also Iraqi Security Forces, Popular Mobilization Units and Kurdish Peshmerga have committed war crimes prohibited under international law. Like other women from minority components, Assyrian women are particularly vulnerable due to the double challenge of being a woman and belonging to a minority group.*

*Despite the perilous journeys and inhumane experiences women fleeing violence have to endure, this conference confirmed that there are courageous women and positive initiatives that seek to make an empowering difference in the lives of those affected by armed conflict. Organised jointly by the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), the Assyrian Women's Federation of Sweden and Kati Piri MEP (S&D), it offered a much-needed platform to raise awareness of the experiences and work of Assyrian women in conflict zones.*



**Marino Busdachin**  
**UNPO General-Secretary**

### 3 • Conference Programme

- **Opening remarks**

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Ms **Kati Piri**, Member of the European Parliament (S&D)

Ms **Johanna Green**, UNPO Programme Manager

Ms **Nursel Awrohum**, Head of the Assyrian Women's Federation of Sweden

- **Guest Speakers**

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Ms **Santa Essa** on behalf of **Bahija Dawod Nisho**, Assyrian Woman Union Secretary, Nohadra, Iraq

Ms **Norma Zeito Saadi**, Member of the Central Board of the Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO), Director of the Assyrian Women Committee, Qamishli, Syria

Ms **Sabah Elia**, Active member of the women's section of the Assyrian community in Södertälje, Sweden, relative to several ISIS captives in Syria

Ms **Februniye Akyol Akay**, Midyat Syriac Culture Association, Assyrian Research Centre Association, member of the union of Democratic Local Government in Mardin province, Turkey.

- **Discussion, questions, comments**

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- **Closing remarks**

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Ms **Attiya Gamri**, President of the PvdA Women's Movement in The Netherlands

## 4 • Opening the Conference



### Welcome Speech by Kati Piri MEP

It is a great pleasure for me to host this meeting and as a member of the Foreign Affairs and [substitute member of the] Human Rights Subcommittee, I am glad to be able to speak on this topic and to exchange views with you today.

Today we will address Assyrian women - and on one hand their vulnerability, on the other hand their empowerment. Let me start by saying that this is an important topic to discuss. The countries that formed the Assyrian homeland, mainly northern Iraq and northeast of Syria, are unsafe. And therefore we need to act urgently. The United Nations have

reported widespread, serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, committed by ISIS and associated groups, in particular against minorities, ethnic and religious groups.

These groups have been targeted by both fighting sides, as they find themselves caught in the middle of different political and religious power constellations. The Assyrian women not only face security issues and dangers involved in this condition but they are also more vulnerable to sex trafficking and sexual violence than men. Criminal gangs smuggle and find them easy targets due mostly to their vulnerable status.

They bear the brunt of the humanitarian crisis, mass displacement and terrorism, and therefore it is of utmost importance that we direct our attention to the alarming situation of political and religious freedom of Assyrian women in the Middle East. The European Parliament has repeatedly expressed its commitment to freedom of religion and the fundamental principles of human rights. However, this is not sufficient.

Yes, women have not been spared any aspect of the brutality of the Syrian conflict but they are not merely passive victims. They can and may well be the backbone of the Syrian reconciliation. But we must ensure that they have impact; the inclusion of women in the peace talks allows plans to be made that sow the seed of a sustainable solution. The establishment of the UN Women's advisory board to the UN Special Envoy for Syria is a powerful step in this direction. And today we are surrounded by experts who can all enlighten us on the situation of the Assyrian women and it is a great pleasure for me to pass the floor on to Ms. Johanna Green, who is the UNPO Programme Manager. Thank you.

## **Opening Remarks by Johanna Green, UNPO Programme Manager**

I am honoured to welcome you, on behalf of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) to today's International Assyrian Women's Conference on Vulnerability and Empowerment of Women and Children in Armed Conflict. First of all, I wish to thank Kati Piri and her office for their support in convening this event, the Assyrian Women's Federation of Sweden for their collaboration, and of course all our guest speakers and participants who have come from afar to partake in today's event.

UNPO is an international, democratic and non-violent organisation, founded at the Peace Palace in The Hague in 1991. We currently work to give a platform to 42 different minorities, indigenous peoples and unrecognised or occupied territories across the world, among them the Assyrians – an ethnic and religious group indigenous to an area covering what is today parts of Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey. This area is known as the cradle of civilization but has become the heart of a devastating conflict that is leading to the vanishing of the ancient peoples of the region and to the destruction of a millennia old history and culture.

On 10 June 2014, ISIS captured the city of Mosul in Northern Iraq, and almost immediately thereafter began to drive

Assyrians out of the city and destroy Christian and non-Sunni institutions. This incident triggered Western media interest in the humanitarian crisis unfolding in Syria and Iraq, with brutal violence and chaos forcing millions to flee their homelands and leave everything behind.

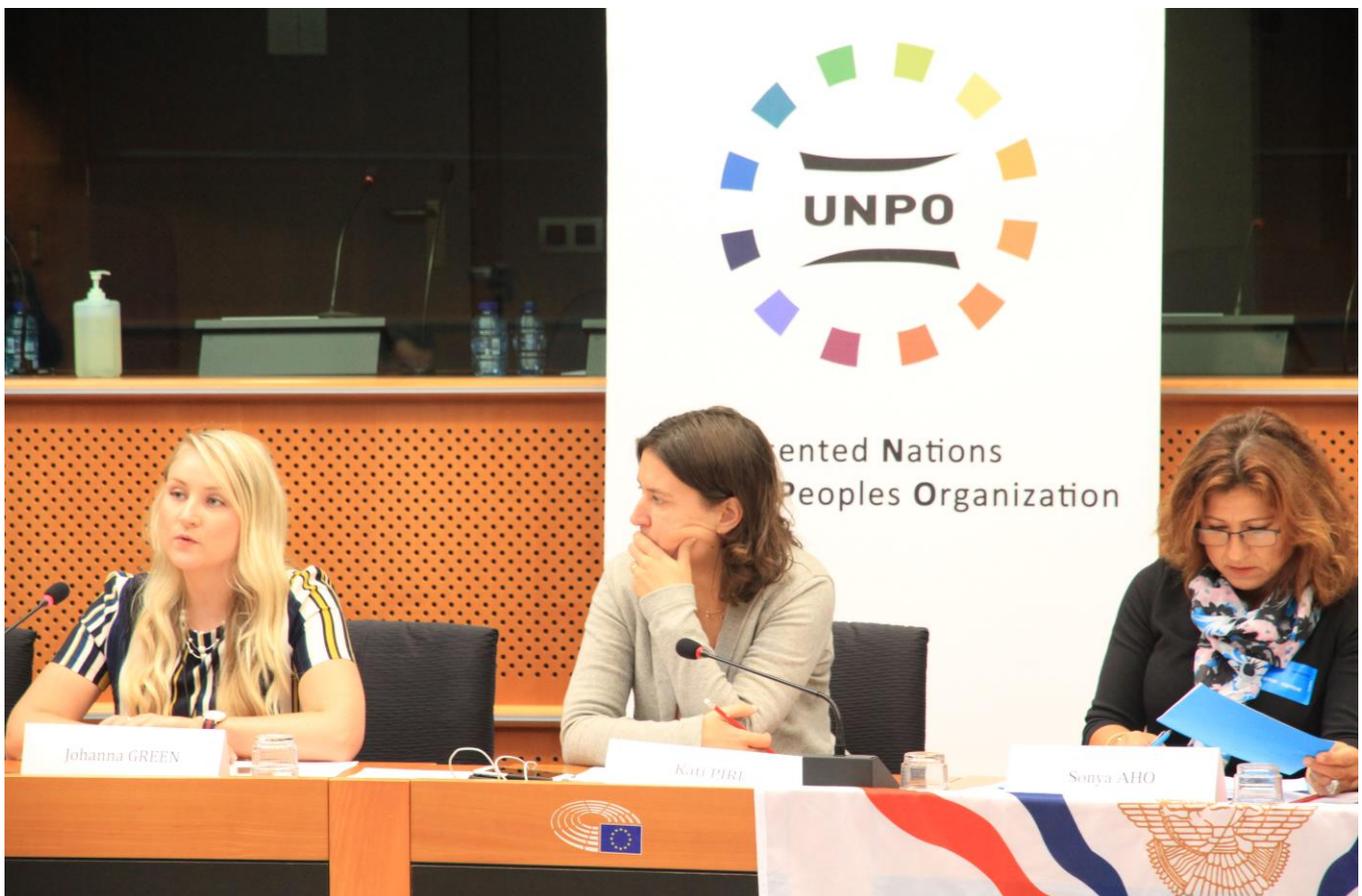
Since then it has become a major preoccupation of Europe, mainly for two reasons: the so called 'refugee crisis' that broke out in the summer of 2015 and the numerous attacks carried out by ISIS on European soil, including here in Brussels in March of this year.

While some positive steps have been taken by the European Parliament, for instance in February this year it passed a resolution characterizing ISIS deadly

campaign against religious minorities as genocide, an important stone remains unturned - namely the role of women and children in this conflict - and this is why our conference today is so important.

Women and children make up the majority of the displaced population; as victims of displacement, they experience additional challenges and vulnerabilities, such as sexual, physical and psychological abuse and trauma, as well as an increased economic burden. Assyrian women and children are particularly vulnerable due to the double challenge of being a woman or child and belonging to a minority group.

And while it is crucial to recognise the plight of Assyrian women in war we must



not overlook the vital role they can play in rebuilding society: Conflicts often force women to organise themselves to safeguard basic necessities and to carry out activities related to, for example, education and healthcare. And in the long run, these activities play a key role in ensuring lasting peace.

In other words, the voices of women – those severely affected by violent conflict and struggling courageously and creatively to build community from the devastation – must be heard in order to realize peace with justice. Because women’s stories go beyond headlines to capture the nuance of complex situations, thus providing a more complete understanding of conflict and an avenue to its transformation.

I am therefore very glad that we will have the chance to hear the stories of several courageous Assyrian women present today – and once again wish you a warm welcome on behalf of UNPO.



## Opening Remarks by Nursel Awrohum, Head of the Assyrian Women’s Federation of Sweden

I also want to welcome you to this International Assyrian Women’s Conference - which has a very important and relevant topic of today.

We have planned and worked for this conference to be reality for a very long time.

We wanted to draw attention to the outside world, to what is happening with our Assyrian sisters and children during this ongoing war. It feels almost unreal to be here in the European Parliament.

In fact, we have been trying to organize an international conference about the Assyrian women in armed conflicts for almost three years now.

We first planned a conference in Iraq but just ten days before the conference, the IS-war broke out. The following year, the conference was planned to take place in Midyat in Turkey. All the plans were ready, tickets and rooms booked, the speaker invited - then fighting and bombing on the border between Syria and Turkey started and the Swedish Foreign Ministry advised us not to go to this area.

Since last year, the plan has changed. We organized the conference in a safer place in Europe, and where can it be safer than in the European Parliament in Brussels?

We, who are living in exile, have the choice to be where it is safe, secure and peaceful. But that's no choice for many of our sisters and children who are living in the middle of a war, where violence and insecurity are everywhere. They are not safe anywhere, they have nowhere to hide. Even their home has become a prison or a torture chamber. Those who manage to escape are taking great risks on the dangerous routes to Europe.

But there are Assyrian women who are still fighting and making great efforts in their home countries to help other vulnerable women and families in need.

Some of these women we have invited to this conference. You will soon hear their stories about the difficulties Assyrian children and women face in armed conflict areas such as Iraq, Syria and Turkey.

Here at the conference there are also Assyrian activists and representatives of women's organizations from Sweden, Holland, Belgium and Germany.

We, Assyrians, are an ethnic, Christian minority that is often caught between various fighting parties in for example Northern Iraq, Syria and Turkey. The situation in these countries is chaotic, especially since the so called Islamic State ISIS came. Although it is always the men who are leaders of armed conflicts, it is mainly women and children who suffer the most damage. It is also mainly women and

children who are victims of the most serious physical and psychological crimes in war. Rape and other sexual violence against women and children are used as a strength meter and weapons in the conflict. For the Assyrian women there is a double threat, partly because they are women and partly because they belong to an ethnic and religious minority.

Right now a devastating and humanitarian crisis is going on, affecting the Assyrians in Syria and Iraq, and even in Turkey. This is nothing but a new genocide - aged 2016 - against Assyrian people.

The ongoing genocide has forced millions to flee, of which the majority is women and children.

Despite all the difficulties, there are many brave women who embark the dangerous journeys, women who are vulnerable to sexual violence or even die, because they want to provide security for their children. There are also brave women who do wonders for other vulnerable people. They are a positive force for those who have no choice but to stay in their home countries.

Some of these women who make a difference every day for those affected by the armed conflict are invited to speak on this conference. We are very happy that these women are among us today, even though they had some difficulties to get here.

Once again, a very warm welcome!

## 5 • Speeches

### **Santa Essa, on behalf of Bahija Dawod Nisho, Assyrian Woman Union Secretary, Nohadra, Iraq**

Excellences, Ladies and gentlemen, Dear Friends Good morning,

First of all, I would like to thank you for inviting us and giving me the opportunity to speak on behalf of our people and to explain their suffering. They have lived just like all components of the Iraqi society, in conditions much worse than have been shown in the media outlets or NGO reports. On behalf of the Iraqi People, we thank you for your sympathy and the solidarity you have shown towards our suffering, but we hope and we need more. We need practical, concrete, binding recommendations and decisions in order to alleviate the suffering and to improve the current catastrophic situation.

During recent history, the women of the Assyrian community were subjected to violations and to most heinous crimes, including the Genocide perpetrated in 1915, during the First World War, by the Ottoman Empire with the help of its auxiliary Kurdish units. During that era our people were subjected to systematic planned massacres and ethnic cleansing. Women were killed or kept in captivity as “Sabaya” which means sexual slaves. They were abused and sold as sexual slaves.

In 1933, our People was subject to massacres decided by the Iraqi Government where thousands were killed, 20.000 were displaced to the Khabour region in Syria and more than 5.000 innocent women, children and elderly people were killed or burnt.

These crimes that amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity were not met by any condemnation from the International Community which led to the reenactment of these crimes.

Because our voice had been neglected, we paid a huge price for the reckless conflicts and racist policies since World War I up to the eighties.

The wars waged by the dictatorial Iraqi regime against the Kurds, Shia, Iran and Kuwait, caused the destruction of our



villages and region and led to the displacement of our people, and to the death of thousands of young men, thousands of widowed women and many orphans who need care from the government. And the world kept and still keeps silent about those crimes.

After the change in 2003, the weakening of the State authority and the rule of law, lead to the spread of armed groups and mafia militias, which carried out violence, murder on the basis of religion or ethnicity, kidnapping, and imposition of unlawful taxes.

The discrimination policies, imposed on the regions, targeting Christian businesses and churches, all these factors encouraged most of our people to flee the region and threaten our very existence in our historical land.

After June 2014 and the takeover by ISIL of the city of Mosul and the towns of Nineveh province, the Iraqi army and the Kurdish Peshmerga forces withdrew and left our people alone to face ISIL which destroyed the villages and the region. Women had to flee and again women went through a huge suffering: their fathers, husbands, brothers and children were killed, they were taken into captivity as “Sabya”, sexually abused, enslaved and sold as sex slaves.

There are many tragic stories which are unbearable in regards of human values and ethics.

The account of the elimination of the non-Muslims began with marking the letter “N” by Daesh terrorist members in 2014 on the doors of our homes, which symbolized that the owner of the house is a Christian and ended with the deportation of more than 180,000 of our people from the city of Mosul, killing thousands of others, and with the fate of dozens of women remaining unknown. But our people that were unable to leave the city had to pay a fine which ranged between \$85 and \$150 depending on the person’s age. This fine was also imposed on business owners. Those who refused to pay saw their property confiscated, and ISIS started killing them or at best deporting them and stripping them of their personal documents. As a result, many have become without identity and without affiliation.

As I mentioned, the women bear the largest share of suffering, their number exceeding more than 51% of the more than



3 million displaced people in Iraq. Many of them have been subjected to abduction and captivity, murder - especially Yazidi women in Kojo and other areas. One of the stories is the story of Ikhlas whose home was raided by Daesh and forced her to leave because she refused to change her religion to the religion of Daesh, so they burnt her daughter alive in the bedroom where she was hiding.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen in my country people are burned alive. Sorry for the harshness of the story. The women left the city of Mosul and arrived at displacement camps in Erbil, but their suffering did not end - the biggest suffering lay ahead in terms of living conditions in refugee camps, where they were exposed to extreme climatic conditions, hunger and exploitation of the host society, as well as physical exploitation and abuse. The absence of proper care and responsibility of the government and local and international authorities as well as the conditions of homelessness, led many women to commit suicide in the camps. There are many recorded cases of women from different backgrounds taking their lives to end their ongoing suffering and trauma. Other women have chosen to escape to safety, but it was only a new beginning for their suffering as they fell victim to human trafficking networks, and some of them lost their lives in the Mediterranean during their escape flight.

The decades of war and violence brought about radical changes in Iraqi society and family, and took women back thousands of years. I cannot find a clear date for the first sale of a human being in the market, but in my country, but now the sale of women takes place in markets. In Iraq, which is sliding into a new war, women have found themselves on the frontlines of the conflict, and in the midst of an extremist ideology battle, they are the first victims in all cases.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am talking on behalf of Chaldean Syrian Assyrian people, those who consider us once a minority, and at other times a component, and once marginalized without a label. We are the people who have a history of 6766 years and are considered the cradle of civilization, the civilization of Sumer and Ziggurat of Ur and civilizations of Babylon and Assyria, the civilization that taught the world the letters, and legislated the laws that have brought the Code of Hammurabi, to regulate power and deliver justice in society. Yes, my ancestors gave all this to the world. And yet I wonder what the world gave us in return.

Today, we need a legislation of new laws and to develop a new strategic plan, to deal with women and family problems and human rights to correspond with the guarantor of the status of women in society and international standards. And to demand to rehabilitate women who have been suffering under the captivity

and intimidation of "Daesh" terrorist members and help them to overcome these cruel experiences and reintegrate them into the community.

And the legislative and executive institutions involved in the government, which have shown scarce attempts to help, should pay adequate attention to the issue of women in general, as this government depends on the activity of civil society organizations and NGOs, which face many obstacles.

We are here to come up with the required solutions to the psychological and social problems of women; to mobilize public support for their case; and to safeguard their dignity, while securing their future and that of future generations. We hope our conference launches further support and assistance from your organizations, parliaments, and civil society institutions in Europe to provide us with experience and capacity-building to enable women in underdeveloped communities to do their part to achieve emancipation, reach

prestigious positions in society and be free from exploitation and slavery - just like fellow women in developed countries.

Ladies and Gentlemen, in the end I raise the true voice high, the voice of my people and my sisters. It is the duty of all of us to stand in solidarity and defend the oppressed whatever their race and region.

I thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak and for your kind attention, and wish positive interaction with the requirements of the current stage and the consequent of future results.



**Norma Zeito Saadi, Director of Assyrian Women's Committee, Qamishli, Syria**

First, on behalf of the Assyrian Woman Committee in Syria, I'd like to give sincere thanks to the Assyrian Woman Confederation in Sweden, and the UNPO for inviting us to attend this conference.

And thanks also to the European Parliament which hosted us and encouraged us to express the suffering of the Syrian women in general, and the Assyrian in particular.

Ladies and Gentlemen, warm greetings to you from Syria, the land of the alphabet and civilizations. Syria that derived its name from its native people, Assyrian people who were the first to build its culture and civilization.

This distinguished country has been suffering from a painful crisis for nearly six years. The crisis aborted the Syrian mind and body, changed its programs and destroyed the Syrian structure. It shattered the dreams of freedom and dignity. This country has been disrupted by regional and international interests. It has been suffering from chaos, murder, and religious and national terrorism, which killed nearly 300,000 people and twice that number of wounded and maimed, hundreds of thousands of prisoners, and more than four million refugees in refugee

camps in neighboring countries and camps around the world. Nearly six million people have left their homes and governorates to other safer areas. In addition, a large destruction hit the infrastructure and caused an economic collapse, as well as the suffering of the people from siege, poverty and homelessness.

Dear attendees, this destruction affected all the sectors and components of the Syrian people, but the biggest impact was on the Syrian women and the Assyrian women, because, in accordance with the oriental traditions and culture, the woman bears the major parts of tasks and responsibilities of the management of her house and family. So, under the Syrian crisis, she suffers an additional distress which appears in:

- 1- The migration of her children for safety and escape from conscription in a civil war which they are not convinced of it, in addition to the migration of her family and relatives.
- 2- Her sense of depression, bitterness, frustration and oppression caused by the martyrdom of her husband or children.
- 3- Severe shortages of the most basic materials such as food and medicine; and excessive prices for those materials if available, and the increase in the unemployment rate, in addition to

constant interruption to water and electricity supply.

4- Constant concern about the safety of her home and children because of the suicidal explosions, and the continual fall of explosive shells into residential areas, as well as kidnapping and robbery.

5- Her fear about the future of her children because of the closure of many schools and universities in some of the Syrian governorates, cities and villages.

6- The lives of those refugees in neighbouring countries camps added an additional level suffering, where the denial of the minimum requirements of healthy living, environmental pollution, overcrowding, deviations, and psychological illness which resulted in camps may affect the behaviour and mental health of their children, as a result of extortion practiced against women.

What affected the Syrian woman in general, has affected the Assyrian woman in particular and was worse for her. She has been suffering with her people from prejudice and injustice according to religious and national levels. Therefore, she has been the first to call for constitutional reforms since the start of the Syrian revolution in order to achieve her dream to achieve a democratic, multiple and secular system, that ensures the legitimacy of her national rights equal

to all the components of the Syrian people. As she demanded new laws which ensure equality with men in all rights and duties, and cancel all forms of violence and discrimination against women as guaranteed in the human rights and the relevant international agreements, notably the "CEDAW" Convention.

This dream crashed after months of the start of the Syrian revolution due to its transformation to an internal military conflict and a devastating internal civil war, and a scene of regional conflicts. The borders were crossed by terrorist groups as "ISIS", "Jabhat al Nusra"

The Assyrian people were one of the victims of the damage in this conflict. "ISIS" and "Jabhat al Nusra" also invaded the areas of our presence, kidnaped, killed and displaced acts. Firstly, "Jabhat al Nusra" invaded the town of Maaloula and kidnapped its nuns on September 7, 2013, which its people still speak Aramaic - Syriac. Then, "Jabhat al Nusra" invaded the town of Sadad in the end of 2013, and "ISIS" invaded the town of al Qaryatayn on August 7, 2015, and they kidnapped 230 of its inhabitants. As well as, "ISIS" made two attempts to invade the city of al Hassake - the first and second were on June 25, 2015. The most serious of these attacks was the invasion of 34 Assyrian villages along Al Khabur river on February 23, 2015. It kidnapped 235 civilians, including 86 women and 39 babies, and

killed dozens and displaced more than 1,300 families followed by the bombing and burning churches, homes and farms that were funded by al Hassake governorate in various agricultural crops.

What increased the confusion and pressure on the people of al Jazeera in general, and on our people in particular were the orders and decisions taken by the so - called "the democratic resume administration". It was found by the Kurdish Democratic Confederation, the PYD on January 20, 2014 and worked as an authority in fact. It worked as a parallel to the official state authority in all fields, as well as forming their own army and police, known as YPK, and "Asaish". It imposed conscription, which led to the migration of most of the young people. The citizens became under the weight of pressure of two contradictory security and political authorities in the same time and

place and they both were supposed to ensure the citizens' stability and safety.

Four suicidal explosions hit the Christian neighborhoods in al- Qamishli during this year. Another attempt targeted a large popular crowd on June 17, 2015, headed by the Holiness Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church to erect a monument in al Qamishli at the centennial of the Syriac Genocide "Sayfo". The result of all these bombings and invasions was hundreds of dead and wounded people. This includes the residents of the city of al Hassake, including our people who witnessed the latest tragedy from 18 to 25 August, 2016. There were clashes between the Syrian forces from one side and the PYD forces from other side. The clashes included a mutual bombardment of heavy weapons and the use of warplanes by the government. The results were dozens of dead and wounded civilians, destruction



and burned houses and properties of the citizens, and spread terror.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Despite of these painful events and tragic status in this country, the Assyrian woman, as usual, had to work as dictated by her duty to protect her family, city and country with her partner. Here I would like to mention some of the things which were achieved through the Committee of the Assyrian Woman in the in the province of Hasaka and surrounding cities during this difficult stage:

1- The committee worked primarily to strengthen the sense of belongingness to the homeland, and the consolidation of the education of the civil peace including the values of peace, brotherhood and love among all the components of the society. The Committee built good relations with the institutions of our churches, and participated in the committees of the Civil Peace to maintain peace and safety and to avoid involving in seditions and disputes.

2- The committee focused on cultural, legal, social and medical women's and children's activities. It participated in law symposiums belonging to the civil society.

3- We have held meetings with parties and gatherings of our people, and accepted invitations from the associations and parties of our partners in the region.

4- We have met the needs of the poor families and the displaced people from al Hassake, Al Khabour Assyrian villages, Aleppo and from other cities. It offered them baskets of food, including milk for children, drugs, and furniture with the support of the Assyrian Association for Relief and Development in Al Qamishli. It provided them with free places to stay in, entertainment activities and psychosocial support for displaced and non-displaced children, as well.

5- It visited the Assyrian and non-Assyrian wounded citizens who were injured because of the explosions and shells. It offered them the necessary assistance, and presented sympathy and consolations to the families of the martyrs, too.

6- Our committee participated in a conference organized by the Assyrian Women Confederation, in Sweden, where it clarified the status of the Assyrian women in her homeland.

7- We have also participated in a conference called "The Assyrian Chaldean Syriac Consultative Meeting" held in Madrid in September 2014, at the invitation of the Cordoba Group, expressing its humanitarian and national demands in the next Syrian Constitution.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Finally, the main message in my speech is to assure that we believe that the

suffering of the Syrian women, the Syrian people and will not finish without a peaceful and negotiating solution. The solution will come through the political process which has been taking place in Geneva to implement the UN Security Council resolution 2254, and all the relevant international resolutions. Therefore, we hope that the international community, the European Union countries at first, and all international organizations concerned with human rights, including the UNPO will put pressure on the parts of the conflict and the supporting countries involved in the conflict in order to continue a peaceful and negotiating process and abide by its content and make it successful.

As we believe that there is a duty and an important responsibility fall on the institutions and parties of our people abroad. They should provide our people who remain in the homeland with financial support as well as emotional support. They ought to work together to come up with a unified strategy to protect and support our people's steadfastness. They have to ensure its existence and freedom, in addition to his national and democratic rights as an authentic people.

We reiterate our sincere thanks to the conference organizers, and we wish you every success to ensure the Assyrian women's rights in Syria, in our homeland and overseas

## **Sabah Elia, Women's Section of the Assyrian Community in Södertälje, Sweden**

In the early morning of the 23rd of February (2015), 228 Christian Assyrians from the village of Tel Shamiram were taken away by ISIS. Many of them were children and adolescents. Among these persons 22 were close relatives of mine - 18 of whom were women or young children. My relatives told me that around 4:00 am on February 23, the doors of the houses were suddenly broken. The whole village had gathered outside my grandfather's house. Then they were taken away by ISIS. The houses of my relatives and of my father were then razed to the ground with a tractor. Afterwards the houses were burned to the ground alongside the village church which was next door to my father's house. The day after the residents of Tell Shamiran had been kidnapped, we tried feverishly to make contact with any of my other



relatives who still live in Syria and Lebanon.

Eventually we managed to get hold on a cousin whose parents had also been kidnapped. She told me that she had called her father's phone (my uncle) and that a member of ISIS had picked up: "They are none of your business any longer, they belong to us now," said the voice on the phone. At first we did not know anything about their whereabouts, but after three months we heard rumours that they would be in the area "Shadade". We also learned that women and children were separated from the men and lived in different places.

In retrospect, we have been told that they lived in terrible conditions. The women had to work in slave-like conditions for ISIS. They washed dishes, cooked and washed for them while the Assyrian children were kept apart from their mothers. They were forced to read the Koran and start the conversion to Islam. Women and girls were forced to wear a veil. They also told me that they had to endure without food and water, sometimes for days. They had access to neither a shower nor to toiletries. There were elderly and sick among them and they had no access to health care and medicines. The men were used as [ISIS] labour force.

During this period of time my everyday life was dominated by thoughts about my

relatives who had been kidnapped. I became addicted to the news on TV and followed everything that was written on social media, in order not to miss any new information about what was happening in my homeland. Every time we would eat a meal, I felt sick, as my thoughts were constantly with my relatives. Every time my children and grandchildren gathered around me we would talk about our relatives in Syria. At every meeting with friends and acquaintances we would talk about my relatives in Syria.

On a daily basis, I was called by the news outlets, social media and TV channels who wanted to know if I had any news from my relatives. 'Unfortunately, nothing', was often my answer, "no, we do not know yet." Grief took over my daily life and the feeling of joy felt far away. My children tried to comfort me by saying that everything would be ok. "You hurt yourself and your health, you have to be strong for the family's sake," they told me.

But no comfort was found there, and it just got worse. Now we experienced the worst nightmare, a recorded video posted on social media. The video showed six men on their knees dressed in orange clothes and with guns pointed at their heads. One of them turned out to be my cousin and I think I stopped breathing. Three of the men were slaughtered to death on the video. Thankfully none of them was my cousin but, however, there

were three Assyrian men who lost their lives in the most horrifying way. Along with the video there were demands for a ransom for the three men who were still alive, that is my cousin. Money was collected and handed over and the men were allowed to stay alive. But they were not released at this time.



Quiet diplomacy was the order of the day with no contact with the outside world for several months. However, we did stay in touch with the Assyrian bishop who had contacts through ISIS supporters in the area where our families were being held. He received information about the condition of the kidnapped and he was also the only link to our relatives. This resulted eventually in some releases as the bishop managed to negotiate that some people could be released for a ransom. The release was complicated and dragged out because the ransom was raised continuously to unreasonable sums that were not realistic to obtain. At that point the bishop began with fundraising and managed finally to pay the ransom in instalments. Eventually all captives were released after more than a year in captivity.

The first three members of my family were freed on 15 August 2015. This was one of my uncles and his wife, as well as the wife of another uncle of mine, who was blind at the time of the release. She was diabetic and had not received her insulin medication during these seven months. She was not feeling well, because of it. From the photos of relatives that reached us I could hardly recognize any of them, because they had changed, lost weight and aged so much in such a short time. My father's brothers' wives were forced to wear a veil. Time passed, and hopes that the rest of the relatives would be released and allowed to return to their families faded away as time went on.



Those who remained were young and in good health and the idea of ever meeting them again became weaker. Christmas was approaching, and the feeling of celebrating a family occasion with joy and love was far away for me. My thoughts were with my relatives who were in the

hands of cruel and ruthless terrorists. Were they alive or were they dead? Had my younger girl cousins been abducted and married off or were they still with their parents? Had they been raped or left alone? The questions were many. But none of us had any answer to give.

The days before Christmas, we got the news that our relatives who remained in captivity had been moved to another city, the ISIS capital "Raqqqa". This city had been conquered and taken over by ISIS and ISIS top leaders are supposed to be there. They had passed new Sharia laws and they were in effect there in the ISIS city. My relatives had now been transferred to this hell and our hope was waning even further due to the rumours about "Raqqqa" being considered the final destination, the place where life ends, because in Raqqqa many thousands have been killed. Girls have been married off and women sold as slaves. Afterwards, my relative told me that they were brought to a place that lay buried beneath the ground, where they were kept in holes in the ground to prevent them from being discovered and released. Despite this move, the negotiations with ISIS continued, after which small groups were released.

In conjunction with the final release, my cousin, a 15-year-old girl, sat on a bus that would take her to freedom. She felt the joy of soon reaching freedom, but

suddenly the bus was stopped. One man pointed to my young cousin and told her to get off the bus as their "boss" wanted to keep her as a wife, the man said. She was forced off the bus and the bus went on without her. Her young brother, at the age of only 17, is enrolled in the Assyrian militia group that defends the remaining Assyrian villages and districts against ISIS.



Eventually the bishop managed to negotiate with the ISIS leaders and fortunately my young cousin was released in April of this year, 2016. But her brother who had struggled for months for the sake of his sister's release fell himself victim to a mine laid out, probably by ISIS, on the road outside the village. He was only 20 years old and had married three months earlier. His wife had just learned that she was expecting their first child when she was left alone after the young man's death.

Among my relatives who were abducted was another young and beautiful cousin of mine. She was married off to an ISIS fighter from North Africa. Her family is in despair and has tried to investigate her whereabouts. According to rumours, she

has been taken out of the country. Her family still lives in uncertainty about what happened to their daughter. They do not dare to ask or tell the world about what happened to their daughter because they have been threatened. They have been told that if they attempt to ask or search for their daughter they risk both their own and their daughter's life.

Today, several of my freed relatives live with my siblings in Lebanon and some others have had to flee to another Assyrian village, Tel Tamer.

My home village Tel Shamiran, that once upon a time was the home of only Assyrians, is nowadays completely emptied of its Assyrian population. My relatives have nothing left, no house or belongings, not even their passport or other important documents. They have had to start from zero. Many of them are traumatized by their experiences that they will carry with them forever. Many of them do not want to talk about their experiences, especially the women. Many of them feel great shame of what they have experienced, even though they have done nothing wrong.



**Februniye Akyol Akay, Midyat  
Syriac Cultural Association,  
Member of Democratic Local  
Government, Mardin, Turkey**

**Nusaybin Curfew:** Nusaybin, a town of Mardin province, had a population of 113.594, of which 87.948 used to live in city center while 25.646 in rural side of the city. People in the city witnessed curfews for 7 times during the October 2015 - March 2016 period while the 8th curfew started on the 14th of March, 2016. The last round-the-clock-curfew declared by the governor's office lasted for 134 days. On 26 July 2016, the curfew was lifted in 9 neighbourhoods between 5am and 11am. On the other hand, the round-the-clock curfew still continues in 6 remained neighbourhoods in city center. 42 thousand people who used to live in 6 neighbourhoods enclosures with fences and about 25 thousand of 46.021 people from 9 remaining neighbourhoods were forced to migrate from Nusaybin city which had a population of 113 thousand before round-the-clock curfews started. The remaining people kept on living in neighbourhoods with less intensive conflicts in the city center, but under round-the-clock blockade.

Civilians lost their lives in curfews. 25 civilians, including 2 children and 7 women, lost their lives during the curfews in Nusaybin declared on different dates starting with the 1st of October 2015.

**Silopi Curfew:** The curfew in Silopi town of Sirnak with inhabitants of 100.000 was partially lifted on January 19 2016, between 05:00 to 18:00 by Sirnak Governorship. It was found that 29 individuals, of whom 6 were women, died during the curfew.

**Cizre Curfew:** The curfew which was declared on 14 December 2015 at 23:00 in Cizre district- population of which is 132.857 people in total- by the Governorate of Şırnak was lifted on 2 March 2016 between the hours of 05:00-19:30.

According to the data stated in the report of the TIHV (Turkey Human Rights Foundation) related to the violation of the right to life, at least 38 children lost their lives between 16 August 2015 and 18

March 2016 in Cizre. The ages of the children who lost their lives were between 35 days old and 18 years old. In addition, it was stated by many people that there might be many other children among the unidentified corpses.

**İdil Curfew:** The curfew that was declared by the governorate of Sirnak in İdil (populated by 26,500 people) on 16 February 2016 at 23:00 was partially lifted on 31 March 2016 between 04:30 am and 21:30 pm.

Our own research and reports prepared by organizations in the field of human rights also reveal that at least 23 civilians

including one woman and 9 children died during the curfew. At the time of writing of this report, there was no official investigation about these civilian deaths.

At the periods of armed conflicts and wars women's and children's level of response is different. With the violation of human rights and ruining of living spaces people deprived of accessing basic rights like healthcare, clean water, food and education. Thus different health problems are affecting the women and children, combining illness with deep-seated emotional trauma from exposure to the reality of seemingly everlasting wars.

In this base, with the psychologists, sociologists and social workgroups working for GABB and member municipalities, a research held at the towns Cizre, İdil, Silopi of the city Şırnak and Nusaybin of the city Mardin to report psychosocial processes of the women and children at the time of curfews and aftermath. Workgroups consist of sociologists, psychologists and the women employees of the participant municipalities.

### **Physical Conditions**

In face to face interviews with women, it was found that they could only able to stay in their houses for 5 or 6 days and had to shelter in basements or barns to keep themselves safe from the gunfire and

bomb attacks hit their houses because of the intense clashes.

Not only insufficient of the physical places but also scarcity of water and electricity or no places for toilet needs affected and exacerbated hygiene conditions in order to interviews.

Before the declared curfew, almost all houses had stocked up food. However, after the 5-6 days they had to leave their houses immediately due to safety reasons, that is, they took shelter in basements. Thus, they could not reach to pile up more food due to safety reasons. According to women who lived under the siege in basements; they couldn't eat as they couldn't reach stocks, with many women's unable to breastfeed their infants.

### **Psycho-Social Situation**

One of the most prevalent concerns among women was fear of hurting or losing of their children. They mentioned that they lost their hope to live and also they did not believe that they would survive during the process they lived in basements.

According to the observations, women who have remained are divided between feelings of domestic responsibility and family members' security's mission had to postpone their emotions and needs with a lack of self-concentration.

Most women said that they had negatively affected by the injured people and dead

bodies lay in the street and they were not able to help those injured people. They would like to go to street and help the injured people but then they themselves would be targeted by JOH and POH snipers belonging to government forces.

All of the women participated in the survey mentioned that they have sleeping difficulty after curfew, especially because the armoured vehicles drive pass front of their house, their home are lightened during the night and they are scare of their house being raided at any moment. For all these reasons, their fear and anxiety during the curfew has been increased after the curfew was lifted.

The women whose houses raided by JOH and POH forces during the curfew stated that they were insulted through their faith and they were asked *if they pray or if they perform an ablution* in order to humilate them.

It was found with the result of face to face interviews done with the women living in prohobited areas and witnessed the battle, commonly they thought that they would not be able to go back to their house, they could not live as they had before and would have to immigrate like Syrian refugees. Therefore they were upset, scare and in pain during the curfew. Moreover, they mentioned that they still can not get in the room where was gunfired or bombed, they do not want to recall these happenings.

According to the statements that, on the one hand, women refused to leave houses; on the other hand they tried to remove young women and generally girls from armed conflict areas. They used this way because of the fact that they have the memory about 1990s in Turkey and recently IS's rape and sexual abuse against the women in Şengal and Kobane.

At the same time, written humiliation slogans on walls and damaged domestic materials (burning of carpets, stabbed of furniture, broken of plates etc.) which were done by JOH and POH forces makes the process more difficult for healing women's fears and anxieties.

Bedwetting, stuttering, lack of confidence to the strangers, sleeping disorder, hallucination, violence tendency, fear, repression, a-socialization, anxiety. These psychological disorders are the most common among the children.

At this period of time, children, who had to live in the basements, had convulsed, nevertheless they could not utilize health service. During this replacement, children suffered from food-shortages and also they always scared and cried. Even after the end of curfew when they hear little voice, then they wake up with screams and ask their mothers: *"Mum! Does war comeback again?"*

It is noted that the sleep of children is interrupted constantly, and that they

could not sleep without their mothers and can't even go out without their mothers.

It is noted that children's sleep is interrupted constantly, often crying in deepest fear because the sound and announcements from armoured moving vehicles and also pointed flash into the houses by security forces.

It was stated that some children who have to go a primary school in other neighbourhoods are reluctant to going to school, particularly alone, therefore, they insisted to go to school with their parents or a relative from family.

## 6 • Closing remarks

### **Attiya Gamri, President of the PvdA Women's Movement in The Netherlands**

Thank you very much. I would love to speak a few words in Assyrian. [...]. I became member of the labour party almost twenty years ago because of their international solidarity view. And today the labour party showed us that they really believe in international solidarity because Kati took the hosting of this conference and I am very thankful. Today we listened to a few women from different countries, for us, for the Assyrians, a very important voice. The stories remind me of the first visit I have had in northern Iraq,

Assyria, and also Baghdad, in 2004. I spoke with a lot of mothers, women, girls and grandmothers those days and it was one year after the disappearing of Saddam Hussein, of his regime. Those stories were all like 'The war has destroyed us', 'The war broke us', 'We lost everything' and 'We really believe that a new democracy will come to Iraq'. But the change of Iraq destroyed a lot, of course, it destroyed a lot of people, not only the Assyrians, but the Assyrians have felt the war very close. In 2004 and 2005, they lost more than half a million people in Baghdad, some of them have been killed, some them went to Jordan or to Syria or to other places. It is like the story that Ms. Santa from Iraq told us.

The Assyrians have been IDPs (Internally Displaced Person) or refugees for many generations in their own homeland. The ladies I spoke to, most of the time they were asking 'Why and for what did they killed my mother, my sister, my father?'. Few years later, I went to the Nineveh plains in Northern Iraq with a Dutch Delegation and we spoke there with 100 women and all of them, all 100, had a picture of their sister, mother, brother, husband, - whatever, a family member. They lost them. One family made big impression on me: There were four children and those four children came back from school to their house in Baghdad and there they found their father, their mother, their sister and their

youngest brother killed. Just on an ordinary Tuesday midday. Those families fled, they left Baghdad and went to the Nineveh plains. Today part of this family is in Germany and some of them are still in Iraq. What I want to say with this example is that the war of ISIS and Al-Nusra is destroying the Assyrian nation in the Middle East, - but it had been destroyed long before ISIS. Nobody is protecting the Assyrians. No one is protecting minorities like the Yezidis either.

Unfortunately, the messages of the Assyrian women from Syria and also from Turkey are now the same. 'Why and for what?' Today, with this conference, we broke the silence together - about the situation of the Assyrians there. Some of

you might think the war destroyed everybody. And this is true but the war destroyed the minorities even more. The Assyrian women do not have any protection from the Shia or from the Sunni. Nor any protection from the Arabs or Kurds. And no protection from the international community either.

So the war has hurt the Assyrians more, because of their different language, different culture, different choice of religion and different way of looking at the world. And we all know that Al-Nusra and ISIS kidnapped a lot of women as we have heard earlier. We all know that Muslim fundamentalists preach in mosques that it is halal to kidnap a Christian woman or a Yezidi woman. And until today we have



Assyrian women and Yezidi women who are kidnapped and every day raped or forced to be Muslim or forced to be married with an ISIS or an Al-Nusra man.

We believe, and what I've understand from the speakers is, that the Assyrian community should be protected, by *themselves* first of all. They can do that, but just when they get support from the international community. If they do not get any support from the international community, they will leave, as we have understood from Februniye. There were 100.000 Assyrians in Turkey and today there are only a few left.

We are not only the church and the monasteries, no, we are more than a religious group, we are a nation like the Kurds, like the Turks, like the Arabs. We have respect for these nations and want to live in democracy and have forces like the Peshmerga to protect us. So, the Assyrians should have as well their own protection. The Assyrians believe that the Nineveh plains is the heartland of their land. They call it Assyria and this heartland should be protected by their own men and women. And we are asking the international community to support them to protect themselves.

Once, a statement of a woman touched me - with just a few words: 'We are not only from the museum in Paris or London, we are not only from monuments or the things we see under the ground now. No,

we are not only from yesterday, but we are from today and we want to be also for tomorrow in the Middle East'. And if we do not get any protection from the international community, we will leave, like we are here right now.

I used to say in Holland to the labour party that I would not belong in the Netherlands, I belong in Assyria, there are my roots. And like Santa from Iraq said, my grandfather's gave a lot to the world and we are asking the world to give us something back, and that is living in peace with our neighbours, with our cousins, with our friends: the Arabs, the Kurds, the Turks.

So let's stop denying that this minority needs their own province in Iraq, their own human rights in Turkey and to have their own province in Syria, without being a part of the Kurds' policy or the Arabs' policy. Without this protection the women and the kids are suffering, are raped and losing their personality, their identity.

I will read now a few words from today's conference declaration. The most important part is that we are asking the international community to look after the rights of the Assyrians - in Iraq and in Syria and also in Turkey, to stop the violence and to take care of the human rights and international humanitarian law.

Furthermore, stop the discrimination, stop the torture of the Assyrians, especially of

women but also of the whole community. We are asking the parliaments of Europe and the relevant United Nations bodies to act. Without acting there won't be any Assyrians in the Middle East anymore, and there won't be any Christianity in the Middle East either.

As we know, Christianity has been founded through the Assyrians and through our own language - and not in Brussels. We have the responsibility to act. Thank you very much.



## 7 • Conference Declaration

Following decades of marginalisation and targeted violence, today the Assyrians - an ethnic and religious minority, whose homeland comprises parts of northern Iraq, Syria, Turkey and Iran - continue to be subjected to extreme violence at the hands of the various actors of the conflict ravaging Iraq and Syria. This conflict has had a particular impact on Assyrian women and children, who continue to be displaced, deprived of education, food and shelter, and who suffer from severe psychological trauma as a result of their current situation.

Against this background, we, participants to this International Assyrian Women's Conference, adopt the following declaration:

*Whereas* the European Parliament has recognised that the so-called 'ISIS/Daesh' is committing genocide against ethnic and religious minorities in the Middle East (2016/2529(RSP));

*Whereas* the ongoing power struggle and armed conflict dominating Syria and Iraq has and continues to displace and kill hundreds of thousands of Assyrians;

*Whereas* the conflict has also led to the destruction of Assyrian historical and cultural heritage in the area, crucial to the maintenance of the collective integrity of the Assyrian population;

*Whereas* Assyrian women no longer wish to be portrayed by the media as irrelevant actors and therefore pushed to the sidelines of these political games, denied their voice and thus the opportunity to stand up for their rights;

*Whereas* we need to recognise the many Assyrian women in Iraq and Syria, who aside from fighting for their own life are given the huge responsibility of ensuring the well-being of their entire family;

*Whereas* Assyrian women, be it in Turkey, Syria, Iran or Iraq, are consistently subjugated to physical, psychological and sexual abuse;

*Whereas* there is an urgent need to tackle the use of sexual violence as a weapon of war, including rape, the abducting of women to turn them into sex slaves, and forced marriage;

*Whereas* the cultural and religious cleansing operations by 'ISIS/Daesh' forcing civilians to convert to Islam has had a severe impact on Christian Assyrians making them a particular target of persecution and impossible for them to freely practice their faith;

We *appeal* to the international community to take all necessary measures to effectively ensure the safety and rights of Assyrians in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere, who despite various resolutions continue to be subjected to gross violations of human rights and international

humanitarian law, with discrimination, displacement and arbitrary executions among the main abuses. This could potentially be achieved through projects and schemes to protect and monitor the situation of Assyrian women in war-torn regions.

We *also ask* for the support of democratic parliaments to pressure relevant United Nations bodies and agencies to take

effective measures to ensure that appropriate action is taken on ground;

We *call* for the international protection of the Assyrian language and cultural heritage in order to not let this brutal conflict wipe out the Assyrians and their rich history;

Finally, we *underline* that there can be no peace without taking concrete action.



## 8 • Demonstration

On 30 September 2016, the day following the conference, a protest was held on Square de Meeûs, near the European Parliament in Brussels. At the demonstration, Assyrian women's representatives from across Europe, together with the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO), gathered to protest against the systemic violence Assyrian women and children are subjugated to in the Middle East. Slogans calling for an end to the brutality of ISIS, end of sexual violence as a weapon of war and incessant bombing of Assyrians and other civilians in the region were to be heard both in English and Assyrian, much to the interest of the many people standing and walking by.



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