

**ISIS and the Assyrians: A Narrative Study of the Psychological Impacts of  
Intergenerational Trauma, Continuous Atrocity, and Collective Victimhood on the  
Assyrians**

Elvin Envieh Golpashin

Department of Psychology, University of Illinois at Chicago

PSCH 399: Independent Research

Dr. Julie Jing Chen

Fall 2021

# Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore a way forward after the historic catastrophe that was the Islamic State's invasion of the Nineveh Plain in 2014 by providing testaments in the form of interviews, as well as a broadened understanding of the events and traumas from a psychological lens. Using Zoom, individuals from both the Nineveh Plain and the Assyrian Diaspora were interviewed--all of whom were either uprooted by ISIS, aided those uprooted by ISIS, or combatted ISIS. At its center, the paper looked at how the effects of continuous atrocity and collective victimhood affected the Assyrians by setting in motion the negative feedback loop of constant retreat in both civic and political life. It was also found that traumas could be epigenetically inherited, further cementing the cycle. Contributors to the degenerating Assyrian psyche were a sense of lost cohesion, self-perception as second class citizens within homeland nations, acculturation in western host nations, destruction of cultural heritage, misunderstanding of psychological conditions, and the steep and accelerating decline of historical and linguistic awareness. Various interconnected methods to ameliorate the collective psychological circumstance and traumas of the Assyrians were explored, such as DeKelaita's historical consciousness, Yakoub's gaining insight, and Kolk's introspection. Understanding the psychological, socioeconomic, and historical plight of the Assyrians could shed light on the nature of generational traumas, their transmission, and the correct interventions. With the current ongoing war in Ukraine and the potential of escalating further conflicts in regions such as Taiwan, such research is of paramount importance.

### **A Brief Note on the Multiplicity of Modern Assyrians**

Today, the Assyrians are geographically split between the homeland and diaspora. Up until the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, the majority of Assyrians lived in their homeland, comprising Northern Iraq, Northwestern Iran, Northeastern Syria, and Southeastern Turkey. Today, more than 90% reside in diaspora. Their history spans a period of almost seven thousand years, beginning with the Old Assyrian Kingdom and the rise of the city of Aššur. In modernity, they adhere to various denominational sects such as the Assyrian Church of the East, Chaldean Catholic Church, Syriac Catholic Church, Ancient Church of the East, and Syriac Orthodox Church. Assyrians also follow other denominations, including various Evangelical churches, and even Russian or Greek Orthodoxy. Others are also of the Jewish and Islamic faiths, though considerably less in number. Regardless, all of these groups share a common ancient lineage and language (with varying dialects and accents) in what was the Assyrian Empire. Today, they go by many names, most commonly Assyrians, but also Chaldeans, Syriacs, Arameans, Middle Eastern Christians, or Iraqi Christians. Much of this terminology is either of a divisive nature, or misrepresenting the entirety of the diverse Assyrian canvas by focusing on one aspect, whilst obfuscating the breadth and fullness of its multiplicity. For example, the term Chaldean denotes an Assyrian of the Chaldean Catholic Church--a church uniate with the Vatican. Syriac, or Neo-Syriac, is a linguistic designation for the modern Assyrian language within academia. The modern Assyrian tongue is primarily consisted of Aramaic with an ancient Akkadian substratum, hence the Aramean component within the Assyrian nation. These terms are often used interchangeably within Assyrian society. For the sake of simplicity, this paper will refer to them by their ethnic identity, the monadic Assyrian name, whilst keeping in mind and respecting the vast richness of the Assyrian multiplicity.

# Literature Review

## The Ottoman Millet System

Much of the tribalist and denominational infighting between the Assyrian people and other nations of the Middle East can be traced back to the Ottoman Millet system. Effectively, a Millet was one's religious designation, officially maintained and recorded by the state. An Assyrian from the Chaldean Church would not be in the same Millet as one in the Orthodox Church. As a result of this domestic policy within the Ottoman Empire, tribalist sentiments were fueled and a sense of oneness was lost as, over time, Assyrians began to express themselves more in terms of which religious group they belonged to (Lazar, 2015). This, of course, was not limited solely to Assyrians, but to all subjects of the Ottoman Empire. In the empire, religious heads would be given documentation stating that they were free to practice their religious laws according to their religious texts, but told that they were not equal to Muslims or the religion of Islam, could not build churches and ring bells, had to pay poll taxes (such as the Jizya tax), and adhere to strict clothing edicts, as well as mark their houses with dark paint (to signify their non-muslim status), and, occasionally, be the victims of cruel and fanatical acts, without the perpetrators being held accountable (Lazar, 2015). In fact, the word "Melat," derived from the Ottoman Millet system, has come to mean "Nation" in Farsi, Arabic, and Assyrian, forever cemented in the Middle Eastern psyche. For the Assyrians, the effects of the Millet system were detrimental, severely dividing them along denominational lines, as unlike other nations--such as the Armenians who adhered to a single Church--they were followers of multiple denominations, each with its own head or Patriarch. Often, Patriarchs acted as the absolute rulers of these millets, and were second only to the Sultan and his administrators.

### **The Meri Koor Massacre of Alqosh**

The very first large-scale atrocity in modern Assyrian history recorded in greater detail was the Meri Koor Massacre of Alqosh in 1832, committed by Kurdish tribesmen. This event coincided with events elsewhere in the homeland when the Kurdish Emir, Mohammed Pasha of Rawanduz, in the regions of Urmia, Tur-Abdin, and Nineveh, slaughtered thousands of Assyrians from 1828 to 1832. The local priest, Yawsep Abbaya, recounted how at Alqosh, “many, both women and men, would rather suffer torture, affront and death than forsake their faith and deny their religion. They were strong and said with one voice: ‘We will not betray our Lord Jesus, savior of the world. We sacrifice our blood for him.’ They were killed while they loudly repeated: ‘We die for you, savior of the world’.” This account serves to outline the extreme extent to which Assyrian churches glorified martyrdom--a concept that would reduce their population severely (Yakoub, 2020). As Afram Yakoub puts in his book, *The Path to Assyria*, “usually they [the Assyrians] received blow after blow without striking back or defending themselves. Instead we see a gradual reinforcement of the philosophy of renunciation and the glorification of martyrdom,” (Yakoub, 2020, p.15). This philosophy of Christian martyrdom would become one that the Assyrians would pay for dearly.

### **The Bedr Khan Beg and Hamidiye Massacres**

In 1843-1845, the first mass-scale Assyrian Genocide, committed by the Kurdish Emirs, Bedr Khan Beg and Noorallah Beg took place (Lazar, 2015). This was followed a few decades later by the Hamidiye Massacres in the mid-1890s, which this time also targeted the Armenian populations of Van and other provinces, killing anywhere between 100,000 to 300,000 in an

attempt to disperse these indigenous populations from Ottoman imperial territory, or to at least convert or marginalize them (Suny, 2018). For the very first time in Assyrian history, the Assyrians had been expelled from their indigenous lands in Hakkari and environs. Though they were able to return, they were permanently expelled from this region again in the 1920s, this time by the newly founded Republic of Turkey (the successor state to the Ottoman Empire).

### **Saypā/Sayfo: The Modern Assyrian Genocide**

The greatest calamity and blow to the indigenous Assyrians in the long series of continuous atrocities would come between 1914 to 1918, when more than two-thirds of their entire populace was exterminated. This time, the perpetrators were the Young Turks (an Islamo-fascistic group that emphasized “Turkey for the Turks,” and that had dragged the Ottoman Empire into the Great War), with willing accomplices such as various Kurdish tribes that neighbored the Assyrians. The prize for the latter group was the removal of the Assyrians from their indigenous lands, and the gifting of those lands to the Kurdish tribes which had participated in the slaughters--the pogroms being completed in the mid-twenties (Donef, 2014). At this point, the Assyrians were emptied out of their former holdings in Anatolia and Persia, namely Hakkari and Urmia. Many of them came to live in the ancient heartland of the Assyrian homeland, Nineveh, and others began settlements in what became Syria, known as the Khabour River Valley. Some managed to return to Urmia after many years, but none were allowed to repatriate Hakkari, which to the modern-day, remains empty of Assyrians. The far reaching effects of these upheavals cannot be overstated. In a study conducted among Assyrians in Sweden, 91% responded that they had an ancestor killed during the 1915 Saypā/Sayfo Genocide, and 7% said they did not, while 2% were unsure (Gaunt et al, 2019).

### **The Simele Massacre**

The Assyrians, having lost two-thirds of their number, and now living in tents far away from their original homes, while having trekked thousands of miles to relative safety, were in no position to have another mass atrocity visited upon their already fragile state and psyche. Several popular proverbs arose at this point: “This was the coming of the Russians.” “If a Muslim gives you an apple, make sure to make a hole in your pocket so that it will fall out.” Both of these examples highlight the deep mistrust of the group that caused the trauma (Yakoub, 2020).

In addition to this collective trauma and mistrust, many national Assyrian leaders, such as Dr. Baba Parhad and Mar Eshai Shimun, gave up the dream of an independent and autonomous Assyria, instead accepting that they were second class citizens of greater powers. Dr. Parhad, for example, began to counsel against further nationalistic movement. Mar Eshai Shimun altered church strategy to focus on the appeasement of powers such as Iraq and Iran, whereas before he had been an ardent supporter of an independent Assyrian state. Mar Barsaum, Patriarch of the Syriac Orthodox Church, who had previously been a staunch supporter of the Assyrian cause and had represented the Assyrians at the Paris Peace Conferences, suddenly took a different stance, instead preaching against the Assyrian cause.

Despite the battered collective psyche of the Assyrians who had already survived severe traumas, about 7,000 unarmed civilians who had previously survived the genocide were massacred by the newfound Iraqi regime. According to the Assyrian Policy Institute, to this day, the bones of the Simele victims lie unburied, while the KRG (Kurdish Regional Government) has dishonored the site by building a radio tower over it. Even former allies of the Assyrians,

such as Lt.-Col. R.S. Stafford of the British Forces, wrote, “When I visited Alqosh myself on August 21st I found the Assyrians, like the Assyrians elsewhere, utterly panic-stricken. Not only were they disturbed, but their spirit was completely broken. It was difficult to recognize in their cowed demeanour the proud mountaineers whom everyone had known so well and admired so much for the past dozen years,” (Stafford, 1935, 155).

### **Forced Arabization, Acculturation, & the Massacres of Saddam Hussein**

The 1940s to 80’s spanned periods of Arabization and “Homogenization campaigns,” when Arab Nationalist sentiments sought to wipe out the various cultures of the region and create a unified Arab identity within Ba’athist countries like Iraq and Syria. In Iraq, in particular, various villages in Nineveh and Dohuk were wiped out, and their Assyrian inhabitants have never returned, or have been replaced by Kurds or Shabaks by the forced demographic changes of Saddam Hussein. For example, in the population census conducted by the Shlama Foundation (2016), dozens of villages in the northern reaches of Zakho, Amadiya, and Simele had been annihilated, marked with labels such as “destroyed by the Iraqi Government,” or “Bulldozered due to the Baghdad government's Anfal Campaign.”

### **The U.S. Invasion**

Come 2003, the decline of the Assyrians in the heartland was accelerated by the U.S. invasion as the Iraqi economy and peacekeeping forces were destroyed, and much of the remaining Assyrians joined their families in the West to avoid the coming bloodshed. According to the Assyrian Policy Institute (2021), 9 out of 10 Assyrians have left their homeland since

2003. It was out of the vacuum created by the U.S. military intervention in Iraq that ISIS rose. Still, a sizable population remained until 2014, when the ISIS Campaign began. The priority of the terrorist group had been to break the identity of the peoples which it opposed--which is the primary objective of any successful pogrom or genocide (Lazar, 2015). Churches, statues, and theological texts, as well as ancient heritage were annihilated. Amongst the destruction of Christian Assyrian heritage was the detonation of the St. Elijah Monastery of the Assyrian Church of the East--the oldest monastery in Iraq--and the sacking of the tomb of the Prophet Jonah. Various other monasteries and churches, such as the ancient Mar Behnam Monastery in Bakhdida, were either entirely detonated or vandalized with bullets and explosives. Of particular loss was the destruction of the city of Nineveh itself, when militants took a drill to the face of the Lamassu (Neo-Assyrian cherubim deity), and blew up Nineveh's Mashki and Nergal gates, as well as destroyed steles of kings and of depictions of life in the ancient city of Kalhu, going as far as plundering even the Mosul Museum. Holy sites of the Yezidi people also saw defacing and ethnic cleansing. To this day, much of the destruction lacks proper documentation. Approximations have the Assyrians worldwide numbering at around 2 million, which translates to as little as .028% of the world population (Lazar, 2015).

## **Study Parameters & Interview with Mr. Afram Yakoub**

### **The Ethos of Mr. Afram Yakoub<sup>1</sup>**

Afram Yakoub is an Assyrian born in Syria, in the town of Qamishli. He immigrated to Sweden at the age of 9. During his early adulthood, he worked tirelessly for the Assyrian cause and the rights of his people, eventually rising to the rank of President of the Assyrian Federation of Sweden. During his interview, he recounted how the work for the federation was very intense, especially during the years when ISIS invaded the Nineveh Plain. Though he is no longer president of the federation, he still works tirelessly within its circles, and states that it was a great honor to have held the position over some of the darkest years of Assyrian history. In a grand culmination of his many years of experience within the Assyrian cause, he has written “The Path to Assyria,” a work of political science and psychology. In the interview, Yakoub stated that one of his goals as President of the Assyrian Federation was to expand the profile of the Assyrians in the media. For example, In 2015, the Federation was mentioned and quoted in more than 300 different media reports in the Swedish and international media. As for the drawbacks, Yakoub stated that this focus on the media took away attention from other things that should have been focused on for the Assyrians in Sweden, including everything from taking care of local Assyrian associations to arranging seminars and different kinds of activities for the Federation’s members. Yakoub emphasized that, “we were really trying to gain attention for our people in Iraqi Assyria, and what had happened to them after ISIS.”

---

<sup>1</sup> All participants were given the option of utilizing a pseudonym for their own safety. Mr. Afram Yakoub chose to include his true name within the study.

### **Collective Victimhood**

In his book, Yakoub argues that there has been one alarming and key factor throughout Modern Assyrian history: that the Assyrians have been retreating from every region, and in every possible arena, be it political or civil (Yakoub, 2020). In other words, this factor of constant retreat is true demographically, militarily, politically, organizationally, and culturally. “Setbacks run like a common thread in the history of the Assyrian movement. Today, we are demographically weaker, more militarily irrelevant, far more politically marginalized and under greater existential threat than a hundred years ago, despite years of struggle,” (Yakoub, 2020, 21). This factor of constant retreat in all facets of life was officially coined by Gabriel Afram (the previous president of the Assyrian Federation of Sweden and predecessor of Afram Yakoub) as the Mysterious Disease.

### **The Mysterious Disease**

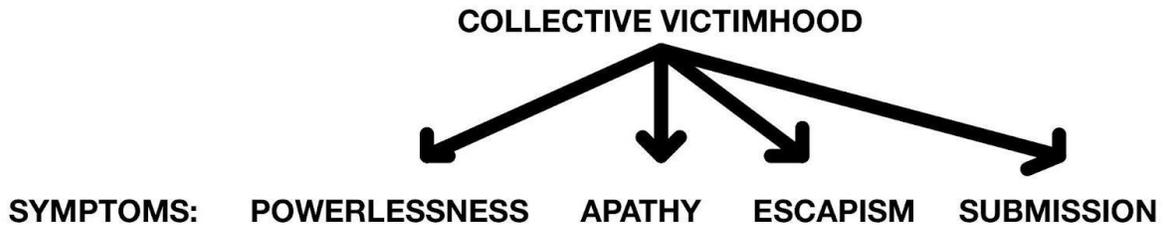
According to Afram Yakoub, it was Gabriel Afram who first noticed that, “we suffer from a mysterious disease. No one has ever been able to identify what it is, but we have to find the solution.” Despite not being able to identify what exactly this psychological disease was, Afram correctly identified that one of its symptoms was the factor of constant retreat in every facet of life for the Assyrians. Holding the same position that Gabriel Afram once held, and with the publishing of his book, Mr. Yakoub believes he has at last identified the correct diagnosis of the mysterious disease: what researchers now call collective victimhood. Yakoub claims that in psychology, it has long been known that the individual can develop a victimhood mentality. Only recently has it also been proven that groups can suffer from the same mental state (Yakoub,

2020). In his book, Yakoub invokes the works of Daniel Bar-Tal, an Israeli researcher in political psychology who outlined the indicators of a group suffering from collective victimhood. Such indicators included feeling less sympathy towards others, feeling justified to avenge the injustices, and always perceiving oneself as the victim, even in times when the group was the perpetrator. In the interview, Yakoub states that the cycle begins when the group is subjected to an atrocity or systematic political repression, though not all members of the group need to be physically affected to develop the victimhood attitude. Stimuli such as these can accumulate within the collective memory of a group, encoding important experiences of events that were especially long term in their suffering (Yakoub, 2020). This collective memory can for generations harbor a sense of affliction. Yakoub continues, “if new generations are unable to counteract a sense of past helplessness, the mental representation of the catastrophe continues to bind members of the group,” (Yakoub, 2020, 25). This only reinforces the sense of helplessness, and the entire collective identity comes to revolve around being a victim.

### **Escapism, Submission, Powerlessness, & Apathy**

There are four unconscious behavioral patterns that indicate the presence of a group suffering from collective victimhood: escapism, submission, powerlessness, and apathy. During the interview, Yakoub recalled how he would have arguments with his father and other older Assyrians when he was younger. He would challenge them by asking, “why can’t we do anything for our nation down there?” The reply was always the same: that it was impossible, and that the Assyrians would need to have a super-power backing them. When Yakoub would again challenge his father, he would display the same sad, glassy look in his eyes as always, “exactly how a loser with bad body language would respond.” This, for Yakoub, was the look of

powerlessness: one of the four subcategories of collective victimhood. Self empowerment requires a sense of being in control of one's own circumstances and the feeling that you yourself can change them--a feeling that powerlessness robs (Yakoub, 2020).



**Figure 1.** Components of Collective Victimhood. The most basic diagram of Collective Victimhood, representing all four ways in which an individual can fall under the mentality.

The sense of powerlessness is further exacerbated by the belief of everyday Assyrians that their situation may only be bettered via external rescue (Yakoub, 2020). As a result of this pervasive powerlessness, coming together to help one's self is considered futile, and only calling for the outside help of higher powers remains. In his political treatise, Peter H. Talia writes how many Assyrians resort to claiming, “We are but a few; we are scattered and sparsely so; so we are abandoned, ignored, and forgotten,” and that, “For these reasons, and many more, we have become uninfluential, and therefore the world is unaware of us,” (Talia, 1980, 35). This also explains why it is so popular, especially amongst older Assyrian circles, to refer to prophetic biblical promises that Assyria shall one day be restored, awaiting the intervention of an angelic or godly hand on behalf of the Assyrian people (Yakoub, 2020).

This awaiting a higher power may be sourced in powerlessness, but it quickly leads to the next symptom of collective victimhood: Escapism. Escapism arises when the sense of total

helplessness in a vulnerable and desperate circumstance becomes overwhelming (Yakoub, 2020). This higher power--religion, for instance--now offers a mental escape from the cruel and seemingly helpless reality. Churches are the center of all life for Assyrian activities, with the clergy holding great sway over their members. And so, rather than joining and supporting civil or political organizations, the majority of Assyrians take their resources and time to the churches in a bid to escape from the cruel reality of their dilemma, both national and personal (Yakoub, 2020). Yet this escapist mechanism leads to another, perhaps more sinister symptom of collective victimhood: submission.

Often when escaping to the church hierarchies, Assyrians tend to elevate priests, bishops, and patriarchs to the status of kings and princes. During the interview, Mr. Yakoub stated, “when you talk to these people you really get the sense that their Patriarch is their President and that their Bishop is at the level of a minister, and you feel like the church is their state.” This inability to question members of the clergy and church hierarchy delineates a clear psychological inability to separate members of the state from members of the church. This may actually be yet another remnant of the psychological damage wrought by the millet system, pervading the majority of the region of the Middle East. Yakoub then stated, “so they invest everything into the church because they believe that this vehicle, the church, is their only chance at survival. I believe that this is a psychological coping mechanism.” This surrendering of all tangible resources and facets of thought to the hierarchy of the clergy is in itself a form of submission.

But Assyrians do not solely practice submission to the clergy, as even the clergy must often submit to a higher power. Thanks to the policy of Mar Eshai Shimun’s Assyrian Church of the East in the 1940s, it was reinforced within the Assyrian psyche that one must obey the ruler, no matter who that is. Within Assyrian homes, portraits of Ataturk in Turkey, al-Assad in Syria,

and Saddam Hussein in Iraq were often displayed (Yakoub, 2020). Ironically, Yakoub notes how newly arrived Assyrians in Sweden put up portraits of the Swedish king, despite having left their homes to be free from authoritative power. Lamentably, many have also dropped their ethnic ties altogether and wholly embraced the labels of Syrian or Iraqi Christians, marginalizing themselves as a mere religious minority in the process. According to Yakoub, “these labels illustrate the deeply ingrained submission mentality that for hundreds of years have become a subconscious behavioral pattern.” Today, this submission has taken an even more extreme form, where Assyrians involved in the political arena have become utterly servile to forces that have and continue to oppress the Assyrians, such as the KDP, or the Kurdish Democratic Party (Yakoub, 2020). This mode of thought can further be noticed in the way Assyrians often introduce themselves as mere minorities, or as “Iraqi, Turkish, or Syrian Christians,” instead of their ethnic background, legitimizing the occupying powers without any meta-cognitive reckoning (Yakoub, 2020). The only exception to this are the Assyrians of Iran who do not utilize the Christian label in politics, but rather their ethnic marker. And finally, for many Assyrians, the stage of the collective victimhood mentality is apathy, as delineated in Yakoub’s interview.

I was actually able to observe the beginnings of apathy in many of the Assyrians that I worked with. I think there is a pattern where an individual that somehow becomes involved in the Assyrian national struggle through community work, or by becoming a member of an Assyrian political party, works a few years, becomes active, and when they see that there is no progress, or worse, that they are losing ground constantly, they come to sense the weight of this powerlessness, and believe that all their work is in vain. That

powerlessness then transitions into apathy. And when you become apathetic towards something, you don't move a finger because you have lost all hope. So, you have tens of thousands of Assyrians, currently living, who have gone from being involved but feeling powerless, into an apathetic state.

Apathy, the final stage of Collective Victimhood, is an utterly demobilizing force. One can also see how demoralizing the constant retreat is when dealing with the psyches of Assyrians involved in communal or national organizations and movements. There is also a clear distinction between the Assyrians stuck in powerlessness and those already in the apathetic state. Yakoub states, "The group of the Assyrians stuck in powerlessness are the ones that are still active in some way, while the apathetic Assyrians have completely given up."

### **The Roots of Collective Victimhood: Continuous Trauma and Atrocity**

It was not only the sheer endless breadth of atrocity, but the barbarity with which each and every act was exercised that eventually broke the Assyrian psyche in the 20th century. The vast majority of the aforementioned atrocities were not waged between two warring nations, but were directed against innocent civilians and defenseless indigenous populations (Yakoub, 2020). Various historical examples may be pointed to:

*"They led away the children, girls and boys, and subjected them to severe torture. With swords and daggers, they severed their thin bodies. They threw themselves on the beautiful, honourable*

*women, dragged them away barbarously, and raped them so that they would be full of shame. They searched the houses and filled the streets with the body parts of children so that the heart could burst,” (Yakoub, 2020, 40)*

*“In Gogtapa, they killed the wife and daughters of an old priest, and his arms and legs were chopped off. They were murdered and severely mutilated. Some men’s eyes were cut out with knives. They were allowed to stumble around for a while before being shot. Women were found with broken backs since they were pressed, folded in two into the stoves. Pregnant women’s bellies were slashed open and their unborn babies ripped out,” (Yakoub, 2020, 41)*

*“Women who breast-fed their children were almost always shot and killed, but the children were left to starve to death. The women’s clothes were ripped off, they were raped and then forced out naked in the cold to die,” (Yakoub, 2020, 41).*

*“Men were forced to stand in a line, and bullets were fired to see how many people they could pass through. Others had to lie down in long rows, kerosene was poured over them and set alight. A boy was found with his body full of needles,” (Yakoub, 2020, 41)*

As discussed in the literature review, for more than 200 years, Assyrians suffered repeated atrocities all across geographic Assyria, regardless of denomination, the barbaric extent to which is expressed above. The key, as Yakoub states, is that “the brutal, often grossly sadistic

violence was waged against a peaceful, defenseless population,” (Yakoub, 2020). Yet this was a perpetual pattern, running for nearly 200 years, all the way from the time of the 1832 Meri Koor Massacre, to the very recent ISIS assault on the Assyrian heartland in 2014. Furthermore, the prerequisites to causing trauma to a collective people are not confined to mass genocide or massacres, but can be sourced in the every day happenings, as well (Yakoub, 2020). Every Assyrian is raised knowing that he or she is a second class citizen within his or her respective country of birth, as Yakoub stated in the interview.

For instance, one man told me that in their village in Iraq, a Kurdish child and an Assyrian child around eight to ten years old started fighting in school. The next day, this Kurdish boy’s family and clan showed up at this Assyrian family’s house fully armed. So you can imagine the trauma and the fear the Assyrian family and other villagers felt when the armed Kurdish clan threatened them over such a small thing. They managed to calm them down, but still the trauma and fear remained after that. It is often isolated events such as these that force Assyrians to leave their homeland.

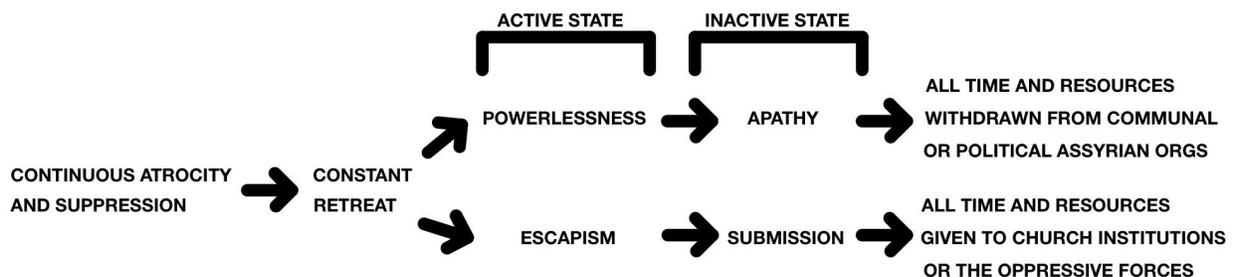
Thus, one can see that the causes of trauma inflicted on the Assyrians at a collective level are not restricted to the massacres and genocides that have haunted them during their exponential 200 year decline. Yet this trauma can also take a very systematic form, even invading the curricula of the education systems of the nations that Assyrians live in. Afram recounted how, “my father told me that when in school, he got hit by an Arabic teacher because he was speaking Assyrian to his friend. Assyrian students were forced to speak Arabic, and so many grew up not

knowing the language.” To make matters worse, such systematic oppression was also pervasive in the justice systems of Syria and Iraq, and often even Turkey.

If you were growing up in Iraq or Syria, in a sense, you were always weaker than the Arab or the Kurd. Let’s say that you were in a car accident with an Arab or a Kurd. You would automatically feel inferior due to your experiences with the society and what the education system indoctrinated you with, and you would not have the means to enforce your right. And even if you overcame this fear, the court system was still biased because unspoken policy often dictated that the word of a Muslim Arab or Kurd was higher than that of an Assyrian Christian’s. So the entire system was against you, and when you experienced that, you limited yourself in different ways.

### The Self Fulfilling Prophecy

While Yakoub’s “The Path to Assyria” does not distinctly outline the following pathways, this study is proposing them as a simpler and more concise means of understanding how an Assyrian arrives at the apathetic or submissive stages.



**Figure 2. Pathways of Collective Victimhood.** More complex than Figure 1, this represents the two potential pathways towards a mentality of identifying as a victim-collective, with active and inactive states, and also taking account of the factor of continuous atrocity and constant retreat.

This proposed diagram presupposes, as Yakoub's "The Path to Assyria" has proven, that the "feeding point" into the collective victimhood complex of the Assyrian Collective is the tragedy of continuous atrocity and suppression--markers of which remain even after an Assyrian has migrated westward. This endless cycle of tragedy, mistrust, hatred, and bigotry results in a constant retreat, as Assyrians are forced to disperse around the world, sucking vital resources from their political and civic institutions. Individual Assyrians who are victims of this trend then follow one of two pathways: one beginning with powerlessness, and the other with escapism. As mentioned previously, the Assyrians active in civic or national movements become daunted by the constant regressive state of things and the seemingly hopeless strive towards national prosperity, falling into the powerlessness mindset. Others take their time and resources to the churches, or even those who, ironically, oppress them. This is an escapist mindset, as the Assyrian individual is attempting to mitigate the emotional pain of their status as a second class citizen (or in the case of the diaspora, often the state of their marginalized group), searching to be availed of the situation by a higher power--be that the regime oppressing them, or God. However, at these two points, the individual is still active in some way within the civic or national organizations.

The constant factor of the perpetual retreat only gains momentum, and as the Assyrian individual takes notice, they either completely submit to the institution they had escaped to, or they become apathetic to the entire cause, even if it's something as simple as speaking the

Assyrian language. Both are now inactive in either civic or national organizations. The difference is the final product, where the Assyrians on the escapist to submission pathway now forfeit their time and resources (often including free speech and even thought processes) to either the state or the church. As for the Assyrians on the powerless to apathetic pathway, they completely withdraw their time and resources from all levels of communal and political Assyrian movements. To make matters worse, the Assyrians who are at the apathetic or submissive stages have a magnetic-like pull on the Assyrians who are not yet.

I can certainly say that the number of apathetic Assyrians is increasing every year because we have been regressing constantly the whole time. When I was growing up 20 years ago, there was still much hope amongst many Assyrians that we would gain something. And back then, there were still more than two million Assyrians in our geographical area. Most of that is gone today, and so most of them have lost hope because of that, and they have become apathetic and moved away from everything Assyrian.

Thus, the cycle continues, and can only be described as “self fulfilling,” as a continuous supply of atrocity and suppression drives the Assyrians from Assyrian areas, further robbing them of the hope of gaining any rights or some form of autonomy within their homeland. In conclusion, all four of these states of powerlessness, escapism, apathy, and submission lead to a victimhood mindset, but as described, some are more advanced and difficult to overcome

depending on whether the individual is still active within civic or political Assyrian organizations.

### **Suffering & Collective Memory**

Recent developments in academia have pointed to the existence of various pathways in which collective victimhood becomes an ingrained, subconscious pattern passed on from generation to generation. In the interview, Yakoub, who himself as a child attempted to overcome this experience commented:

It is taught subconsciously. As I write in the book, what happens is that at some point, there is a grandfather or someone giving up. Of course, he doesn't arrange a family meeting and say that he has given up on his community. But their behavior changes as certain things are not important anymore. And then that naturally passes onto the children. For instance, let's take my mother. She is very religious, and so naturally, she tried to pass on her behavior to us children in different ways.

These ways, or ingrained beliefs, Yakoub explains are the beliefs that church membership, or for other Assyrians, politics in the form of activism, are the only two ways of achieving momentum for the Assyrians--both mentalities being completely reliant on external rescue, and sourced in collective victimhood (Yakoub, 2020).

Yet the “self fulfilling prophecy” might not only be limited to the subconscious reinforcement of behaviors and attitudes. To understand how tragedy shapes the mental health and psyche of both the individual and the collective, multiple examples must be examined. Of note, it was found that women, in particular, displayed higher levels of PTSD symptoms than the men who survived the attacks on the World Trade Center--despite displaying lower cortisol levels--as well experiencing more distress during the recollection of the severe trauma (Dekel et al, 2013). This same cohort of women were noted as having lower cortisol hormone responses--associated with higher risks for PTSD (Dekel et al, 2013). In another study, lower cortisol levels were most apparent in children born to mothers with PTSD in their third trimesters on September 11th (Yehuda et al, 2005). In other words, women were already more susceptible to the symptoms of PTSD due to reduced cortisol hormone responses, whilst at the same time being at risk of passing on the same condition to their children.

The intergenerational transmission of stress explored so far is further documented in how the progeny of trauma survivors, such as Holocaust or Dutch famine survivors, were more likely to develop PTSD, as well as mood and anxiety disorders, than children of parents that didn't undergo such stressors, thus cementing how the children of survivors of traumatic experiences undergo negative mental changes (Daskalakis et al, 2020). Furthermore, whilst parental stress resulted in epigenetic and neuroanatomical changes for offspring, maternal stress in particular proved to be more potent than paternal stress in its adverse effects upon offsprings (Bowers and Yehuda, 2016).

At this point, whether intergenerational stress is a simple transfer of negative consequences from parental stress to offspring, or if it is a way to enhance the adaptive capabilities of progeny, is yet to be determined. For example, children born to mothers who

survived famine have higher obesity rates, which during a famine would have served the child better, but is otherwise detrimental to their health in any other circumstance (Bowers and Yehuda, 2016). Thus, in order to go beyond the current hypotheses, it would be beneficial to conduct future studies on the descendants of Assyrians who survived the various Assyrian genocides and massacres using the suggested parameters. The final answer to Yakoub's "self fulfilling prophecy" and the amply named "continuous retreat" may just be rooted in the dawning of the novel and newly understood academic world of epigenetics, and, more specifically, in the concept of the intergenerational transmission of stress.

## **Interviews with Mr. Athra Kado, Mr. Esho Sora Misho, and Counsel**

### **Robert W. DeKelaita**

#### **The Ethos of Mr. Athra Kado<sup>2</sup>**

Athra Kado is a native of the ancient Assyrian town of Alqosh, also known as the “mother of Assyrian villages.” He is a teacher of Neo-Syriac, or Modern Assyrian, and was a volunteer soldier for the NPU (Nineveh Plain Protection Units), an official Assyrian military under the auspices of the Iraqi state. For a time, he also served as the media director of the NPU. He fought at the Battle for Bakhdida, retaking the town from ISIS militants and allowing the indigenous Assyrians to return to their homes. He is an activist for the Assyrians remaining in the Nineveh Plain, and has garnered the attention of media outlets worldwide. He is currently serving as the leader of the Assyrian Democratic Movement’s Baghdad Branch, whilst simultaneously teaching his mother tongue and attempting to gather attention to the tragedy that befell the Nineveh Plain during its invasion by ISIS.

#### **The Ethos of Mr. Esho Sora Misho<sup>3</sup>**

Mr. Esho Sora Misho was a native of Tel Keppe, the closest Assyrian town to Mosul. Not only was Tel Keppe the first Assyrian town to be invaded by ISIS, but his home was the first to

---

<sup>2</sup> All participants were given the option to utilize pseudonyms within the study for their own safety. However, Mr. Kado requested that his real name be used for the study.

<sup>3</sup> Like Mr. Kado, Mr. Misho requested that his real name be used for a study, in place of a pseudonym.

be entered, robbed, and ransacked. Today, he resides safely within the nation of France. In Iraq, he was an artist who created arches, sculptures, steles, and more, often invoking ancient Assyrian motifs for churches and civic organizations alike. Unfortunately, most of his work was destroyed by ISIS during their ethnic cleansing campaign. During the fall of Mosul, he was one of 11 members of the city council of Tel Keppe and witnessed the corruption and ineptitude of the system firsthand. He also served twice in the Iraqi army, seeing both its failures and successes, first during the Iraq and Iran War, serving from 1985 to 1988 in the Office of Foreign Experts, and then during the 1990-1991 Gulf War. He attended the University of Basrah's Engineering college from 1980 to 1984, earning a Bachelor's degree in engineering.

#### **The Ethos of Counsel Robert W. DeKelaita<sup>4</sup>**

Counsel DeKelaita is a native of the Chicagoland area, and an active member of the Assyrian community within. He was instrumental in helping many Assyrians from Iraq migrate to the safety of the United States, starting from the troubled years in 2003 up until the ousting of ISIS. He also represented Assyrians from Iran, Syria, and Lebanon so that they could remain in the United States after they had arrived, or as they were being deported back to their homeland. Once a person obtained a grant of status, he was able to help them bring other family members into the U.S. (such as wives, husbands, or children). He is also a passionate teacher of Assyrian history, with a love for Assyrian art and culture. He emphasizes the need to keep the memory of the homeland and its history fresh within the minds of the newer generations, despite living in the diaspora. He was born in Kirkuk, Iraq to the prominent DeKelaita family and moved to the United States in 1973, eventually becoming a lawyer and serving both his clients and his people

---

<sup>4</sup> Counsel DeKelaita likewise refused the option for a pseudonym.

back home. He received a bachelor's degree in political science and philosophy from the University of Illinois, a Master's in International Relations (IR) from the University of Chicago, and a Law Degree from Loyola University of Chicago.

## **Part 1: Lead up to the Fall of Mosul**

### **Saddam's Reign of Terror and the Fall of the Sunni Power in Iraq**

To set the stage, Council DeKelaita stated that before the reversal of power that came as a result of the U.S. invasion in 2003, handing power to the Shiite element in Iraq, the country was ruled by the Sunnis of Tikrit, where today, Saddam Hussein's tomb is located.

Iraq was led by a Sunni power, specifically one clan inside of Iraq, which was Tikrit--the old Assyrian town of Tikrit, which became Muslim and Arab later. Iraq was led by that town, by the people from Tikrit and their allies. The Shiites were persecuted, but many were also not persecuted. They were incorporated into the Ba'athist regime structure of Iraq. But the ones who happened to have sided with Iran because of their ties to the clerics of Iran and the city of Qom, and other various Shiite centers of learning inside of Iran were suspected and targeted by the regime in Iraq. Shiite clerics in Iraq were especially targeted by Saddam's regime, in which case, either they would submit to the power of the state, or they would be exiled, or they would be tortured and killed.

Thus, while the ruling Sunni class of Tikrit abused the power it held under Saddam's rule, it also integrated loyal Shiites into the national fabric which placed Ba'athist state sentiments and Arab nationalism above all else. Human rights abuses culminated under the weight of this policy, as shall be described throughout the study.

However, changing to a Shiite rule of the nation after the U.S. invasion, there followed a complete dissolution of this policy, where instead of rewarding loyal Sunnis, the new Shiite regime focused on a policy of enacting revenge at every possible chance. As Counsel DeKelaita noted, "The Shiites, being given power inside of Iraq, took advantage of their power and partly abused their power against the Sunnis. One of the most vulnerable elements the Sunnis could take out their rage against were the Assyrians." Counsel DeKelaita made it clear as to what exactly dispossessed the Sunnis of Iraq.

Imprisonment, alienation from political power, demographic displacement inside of Baghdad, were just some of the methods used against the Sunnis by the new Shiite regime. They were moved out of Sunni neighborhoods in Baghdad, for example. They were attacked, tortured, even killed. Many of their politicians were assassinated and they lost various prominent leaders. It was a total annihilation of the leadership of the Sunni element inside of Iraq, and it was done to consolidate Iran-backed Shiite leadership within the country.

It is during this chaos that Al Qaeda militants moved closer to the hearts of the dispossessed and the oppressed Sunni peoples.

### **Reasons for the Anger and Dispossession of the Sunni Element Within Iraq**

During their respective interviews, both Mr. Kado and Mr. Misho made it clear that they, as well as other Assyrians living inside of Iraq, knew that the brief calm brought by force during the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq would not last. Kado states that even before 2014, “we kept hearing that they [Islamic militants] were controlling the area. We were told that we couldn’t talk, we couldn’t move. That if you go to Mosul, you would see Al Qaeda, which was, let’s say, the mother of ISIS.” One can see that the movements, rights, and free speech of the Assyrians were already restricted before the rise of ISIS, due to groups like Al Qaeda. The question then remains of how Al Qaeda, “the mother of ISIS,” was allowed to come into the region. This region, the Nineveh Governorate, is a unique region within Iraq because of its ethnic and religious makeup. The center, Mosul itself, is majority Sunni. West of the city are more Sunni towns and villages, but with a large Yezidi population in Sinjar (who like the Assyrians, suffered immensely at the hands of ISIS). East of Mosul, however, are the Assyrian towns that this study will focus on. This Eastern portion of the Governorate is known as the Nineveh Plain, and is the central heartland of the Assyrian homeland. The Assyrian environs of Mosul can be broken up in this way: those on the eastward road from Mosul to Erbil, and those on the northward road from Mosul to Dohuk. According to Misho:

The very first Assyrian town closest to Mosul is Tel Keppe, about 6 km from the city. This is where my family lived for generations. There is also Bakhdida, east of Mosul. It was a large city, and before ISIS, at least 60,000 Assyrians lived there, though that is much less than before 2003. Today it’s likely half of that, if not less. East of Mosul the way leads in order through Bartella, Bakhdida, Karamlesh, and Bashiqa. This is the road

we would take when going to Erbil. And when you go from Mosul to the North, then you pass Tel Keppe, Batnaya, Tel Isqof, Baqopa, and Alqosh in that order. These are the major Assyrian towns east of Mosul.

Thus followed a situation where the Nineveh Plain was split in two, with the western half being taken over by Sunni militants, and the eastern part, the Nineveh Plain, being controlled by the KRG's Peshmerga (Kurdistan Regional Government's Army) and Asayish (Kurdish Policing Force). But when did this polarization of the Nineveh Plain occur? How were the militants allowed an opportunity to infiltrate Mosul and gain power in what was once one of the most diverse cities in Iraq? Misho paints a picture of an ailing Saddam who had just lost his bid to take Kuwait.

At that point, Saddam had relinquished the image of Iraq as the leader of Arab nationalism in the Arab world because when he attacked Kuwait, he broke the illusion of Arab brotherhood and nationalism as Kuwait was an Arab power. Even Arab armies from Egypt to Syria and the Arab nations of the Persian Gulf rose up against him. So then, in order to retain his power and throne, he began to rely on religious ideology and Sunni fundamentalism, giving power to Sunni fundamentalists. In particular, he invited foreigners that were a part of Al Qaeda to enter Iraq. Our lives as Assyrians became much harder. If you were a Christian woman, you couldn't go out of your home alone, anymore.

The foreigners, who were members of Al Qaeda and invited into Iraq by Saddam did not leave, but instead preached their message to and recruited from the local Sunni populace. Doubtless, it took many steps to turn the once booming and diverse city of Mosul into a hub for Islamic militants. Thus, with such elements filling the vacuum left behind by the Ba'athist regime, much akin to how the Nazis portrayed themselves as the saviors of Germany, the KRG stepped up to fill precisely such a role, taking credit as the first defense against terroristic elements. Kado says "The message was that you couldn't stand against them [the Peshmerga] and whatever they did was because they were protecting you." But what was the Assyrian populace being protected from? To answer this, when asked if he was surprised by the sudden fall of Mosul, Counsel DeKelaita answered, "I was not surprised. I thought that there was something like this coming because the Sunnis in Iraq had been dispossessed through the intervention of the United States in Iraq." Misho, in turn, cited that among the various human rights violations that led to the dispossession of the Sunnis nationwide, unfair imprisonments backed by bogus laws only exacerbated the situation and solidified the power of the new Shia leadership.

When they [Shiites] took control of the government, they enacted a law that easily allowed them to arrest whoever they wanted and to label the detainee a Wahhabist terrorist. So, they went and imprisoned people, imprisoning the sons of Sunni families, angering entire tribes, and poisoning their hearts.

In Mosul itself, which is the region this study focuses on, Misho claims that the majority of ISIS supporters from within the original populace resided on the right side of the city (as the city is split into right and left by the Tigris river).

### **The 2003 Assyro-Chaldean Conference**

When discussing the hopes of the Assyrians after the toppling of Saddam's Tikriti regime, Counsel DeKelaita highlights his own experiences during 2003:

When I was there in 2003, there were high hopes that we could have done something, but the political leadership among our people was either unwilling or unable to do something. It may have been a bit of both. Just like the leadership of the churches, they felt that they couldn't form anything, and allowed the Assyrians to be dispersed all over.

When asked as to the cause of these designs, he replied:

To me it was an unreasonable fear, but it was exactly what the enemy wanted, which was the more dispersed we got, the less likely it was that we'd act as a collective group, and in our own collective interests. But here's the kicker: our own people were the ones leading the charge out of the Nineveh Plain! I had a lot of arguments with our leadership about this. 'Why do you want to encourage people to leave the Nineveh Plain? Why do you think that this is not the best place that they could be in?' And these arguments were long

before ISIS. I'm talking about 2005 to 2010. We got into a lot of arguments about this, and it's very sad to say that our political leaders did not share the vision that we had for our people existing on the ground in all of these towns and villages and working together as a unit.

One can perhaps hypothesize that one of the things holding back the Assyrian drive for a homeland in 2003 was Yakoub's idea of external rescue, where many Assyrians would not have attempted to garner any further degree of autonomy and rights due to the belief in rescue by a greater power, such as that of the U.S., Russia, or even God. This is mirrored in future sections, as the Assyrians seemingly waited about for the post-2003 U.S. foreign diplomatic arm to grant them their rights, or even a semi-autonomous region within Iraq. Today, the situation has only worsened, according to Counsel DeKelaita.

If you do a survey among our people, I would say that a good 95% would say that they want to leave. My uncle was a doctor in Kirkuk for more than 50 years, and he would always say that he would be the last Assyrian to leave Iraq. 'I will not leave, until everybody else leaves.' And guess what? He had 2 daughters, and he had a son. His daughters are very pretty, and he started to worry that his daughters may eventually be forced into a marriage. And so he packed up and he left. It was about a year and a half ago and they just claimed asylum in Canada. And he was kidnapped, and he was beaten by this Islamic group in Iraq. And even with what happened to him, despite being

kidnapped, he didn't want to go. But eventually, when push came to shove, he said 'it's not just me, it's my daughters, and I don't want to see my daughters disappear.'

It is with personal stories such as these that one can see that the mass Assyrian exodus is not due solely to geo-political pressure, but also to very real, psychologically damaging, and intimately personal and individual reasons. Kado further supported this notion when stating:

One of the plans, as I've heard from trusted resources, is that some church leaders are trying to take the Catholics [Assyrians of the Chaldean Catholic Church] out of Iraq. To open the borders for them to leave. And based on the current situation, especially in the Northern Nineveh Plain, the majority would leave. So, that's one of the actions taken by clergymen, which is just like beheading us. That's worse than ISIS actually.

However, Kado also retained hope, arguing that:

On the other hand, they can really change the situation, and make our future great because they have power, money, and connections in the world. One priest here can change many things. Not because he has an army behind him, but because Iraq is a religiously controlled country. So if a clergyman says that the KDP is not good, or even the Shiite militias, and he really pushes to change the situation, and brings his own people to control these areas, they can do it.

Already, when examining how the native Assyrians view the clergy and their power in politics, one can detect traces of the escapist and belief in external rescue mindset. When waiting for the clergy to take action on their behalf, the Assyrians are inadvertently taking part in this mindset, perhaps due to the disbelief in their own will to alter their circumstances. But the clergy also made multiple attempts at church unification, and by extension, the attempted creation, or at least discussion of, a semi-autonomous region for the Assyrians in the Nineveh Plain. Misho, on the other hand, stated:

In 2003, the Assyro-Chaldean Conference came together to talk of the nation, and the taking of the Nineveh Province for the Assyrians. All of the church heads were present from all of the denominations. They went to the UN to argue that this region was for the Assyrians, but the UN struck it down, stating that the region was for a mixture of Assyrians, Yezidis, Shabaks, and Sunni Arabs. At that time, the Plain was still majority Assyrian, and there was some hope for Assyrian autonomy.

Once again, the element of belief in external rescue played a role in the final push of the Assyrians for a semi-autonomous homeland. One can see that it was not through armed struggle or protests that the Assyrians attempted to garner a semi-autonomous region in the homeland, but by the higher political power of the UN. But since 2003, multiple changes in hierarchies of all of the churches have taken place, resulting in various ruinous actions by certain members of the clergy. For example, Kado explains how during the founding of the NPU (Nineveh Plain Protection Units), the Chaldean Patriarch ought to have supported the initiative, “but instead,

Patriarch Sako announced that he was not blessing any *Christian* militia, even the official ones. He said that if you want to serve your own people, join the Peshmerga and the Iraqi army.” As this study will explore, neither the Peshmerga or the Iraqi army have been a positive force for the Assyrian people, but detrimental to their survival in the region. This study has also already examined the propensity of religious Assyrians to consider the word of a patriarch or bishop the highest and most important decree in any matter--falling under the submission mindset.

### **The Iraqi Civil War of 2006**

In regards to the bloody civil war which rocked Iraq, Misho outlines how:

In 2006, Al Qaeda entered Nineveh, and this was when the lives of us Assyrians became increasingly more difficult. In that same year, a religious war erupted between the Shiites put in power by the United States and backed by Iran, and the Sunni Muslims from the old power structure. This internal war bred racism and mistrust comparable to the wars between the protestants in England and the Catholics of Ireland. People went around killing and imprisoning people based on their religion.

While the Sunnis and Shiites entered open civil war, the Assyrians were caught in the middle, and as Kado explains:

In 2006, the persecution increased more. In 2008, a great number of our people were forced to flee from Mosul. These radical Islamic groups in Mosul didn't reach Alqosh, where we were living, but we were affected because many of the Assyrians from Mosul fled to Alqosh. We are the same people and we felt their pain. Maybe nobody came to us and put a gun to our head, but we were feeling what our people were feeling. Some of us were strong enough to stand against it, but the majority were afraid to say something.

One can see that for the majority of Assyrians living during this time, caught between the civil war, the very climate was heavy with ill-foreboding for the future of their people throughout Iraq. An Assyrian in Alqosh, as Kado describes, would not be able to sit easily if his brother in Mosul, a mere 50 kilometers away, was being publicly persecuted. This form of distant yet simultaneously near-to-heart persecution is a unique form of fear-inducing trauma. This was why Assyrians became afraid to go to the city of Mosul, the center of their governorate.

### **ISIS and its Psychological War on the Assyrians**

In the interview, Counsel DeKelaita was adamant about how ISIS was not a trained military force to be reckoned with, as the media made it out to be. "The question should have been: 'Who is ISIS?' There were 800 fighters when ISIS took Mosul. I mean, what are these guys? Supermen?" Here, there already appears to be the psychological fear of the unknown, as the shady group's background made them out to be a far bigger foe than they really were.

It was strange in the way the Iraqi government and the United States all of a sudden ‘began operations’ against ISIS, whereas before they had remained silent, as if ISIS was this incredibly sophisticated army. What people don’t realize or choose to hide is that these militants were the most ill-trained people in the world. They were not an incredible military force. There was no reason that nations like Iraq and Syria would have allowed these people to exist on their territories and pretend like they created a state. So, it was very strange when the gates were opened for the Iraqi army and off they went to defeat ISIS, as if this was an incredible military achievement. To me it wasn’t, it was a big joke. And if you carefully watch footage of what’s happening, it was as if a street gang had taken over a place. Is a street gang the match of a military trained by the United States, or trained by Russia, in the case of Syria? These are not people that should present a major military challenge. These are people who are completely inept at what they do. They’re just horrible people, and just because someone could behead people, doesn’t mean they’re good at military activities.

In fact, much of the tactics of ISIS were based in psychological warfare more so than physical warfare. The mass rape of women, the mass murder of men, the sex-slave trade, and the ethnic cleansing of ancient heritage sights, all served the purpose of making the Iraqi too afraid to fight back, especially when broadcasted and disseminated in the typical manner of the militants. In a way, the militants were more boogeymen than actual soldiers, as many did not even have proper military training. Counsel DeKelaita went on to state:

But there is something more to ISIS than meets the eye. I'm very suspicious of the involvement of various Sunni powers in the Middle-East that worked with the United States in opening the door for these people to come in and wreak havoc in Mosul and its environs. One day, I hope that we will know the truth about ISIS, and believe me, the truth is not what we have heard so far. Again, these were not trained military armies fighting on behalf of ISIS. We see the pictures of people dressed in black sitting on trucks, and one of those trucks just happens to come from Texas. Jeez, I don't know how that happened!

In recent years, many have called attention to the fact that the exchange of arms with nations like Saudi Arabia, itself a Sunni power, ends up arming Al Qaeda and ISIS militants. The latter, armed with the weapons intended for the former, does the bidding of Sunni powers in an otherwise Shia-majority nation. In other words, ISIS using American technology was a game of proxy warfare that vulnerable minorities paid for dearly. Counsel DeKelaita went on to explain the reasons he was not surprised about the fact that the ISIS invasion happened, but rather how he was surprised about how it was handled.

It wasn't surprising to me, to be honest, because I had constantly been involved in Assyrian affairs. I was involved with our people in Detroit, and we were involved as Assyrians with the State Department, and the State Department seemed to have known. We had a conversation with a prominent member of the State Department. He had said

that there was going to be an Islamic fundamentalist wave coming, and we expected it because there was this sentiment, in particular, among Sunnies who were dispossessed.

But it goes beyond knowing, and into the territory of purposeful neglect, as DeKelaita explained.

So, having heard from this prominent member of the State Department, how did he know? And when did he know? And how is it that no action was taken when you saw these people marching through the desert from the city of Raqqa in Syria, for hundreds of miles, towards Mosul. I mean, they had satellites, they had intelligence, they were in control of Iraq because they helped form its democracy. They had military power there. How is it that they did not know that a gang of 800 people was coming to take over a major city inside of Iraq. That is just bewildering to me. And I'm sad to say that I haven't seen much scientific or academic work written on this, because it may be misconstrued as conspiracy theory. So I was not surprised when it first happened, and I thought that worse things would happen.

What is perhaps most interesting when examining Counsel DeKelaita's account is how he made it clear that the people of Iraq were well aware that a disaster was impending.

I was in Iraq in 2003, and I was asking people what they thought now that the Ba'ath regime had fallen, and their response was that they anticipated Iraq would either get much better, or much worse, as they did not believe it would stay constant--it was still the calm before the storm. And it did get much worse.

Counsel DeKelaita further emphasized that the "wild-card" Iraq was dealt was quite literally the worst one possible.

These people were and are the worst element that you can find in the Middle East. The worst of the worst. And on top of the worst of the worst from the Middle East came the worst of the worst from the West, including the United States, Russia, Britain, France, and other places. The worst Islamic fundamentalist elements all congregated in this one zone. And I believe that they were manipulated by Western powers for a purpose. Not because Western powers dislike Assyrians--that has nothing to do with it. But because Western powers thought that these people were a convenient ploy to wage a silent war against Iranian interests and create the chaos that they did. In the process, they created a lot of what is called 'collateral damage,' which came in the form of genocide against the Assyrian and Yezidi minorities, and even pretended that ISIS could not be defeated. This was just shocking to me. The entire country of Iraq was defeated within a month by the United States forces, yet ISIS lingered in these territories, destroying peoples' houses, killing them, abducting them, raping them, pillaging their sights, destroying artifacts, destroying churches, displacing whole populations--and nobody could do anything about

it! It was the most amazing thing in the world. And then the gates opened, and then all of a sudden, people could do something about it.

But as to the mysterious origins of ISIS members, Council DeKelaita remarked how:

A lot of the tapes are being questioned, because when asked where the ISIS members were from, they would answer from all over, even from places like Chechnya. In reality, some are from Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Europe. Maybe it was an experiment to attract all of the weird fundamentalist groups to one place, kind of like a fly trap of some sort. But I think the last place we needed these people was in a country which was already ravaged by war, famine, and the worst living conditions such as those resulting in high cancer rates because of the weapons used against the people by the United States. It was just extremely cruel to do what was done to Iraq by either intention or negligence, on the part of the great powers. Primarily I lay the blame at the door of the United States.

### **Stuck Between Greater Powers & the Dissolution of Identity**

Kado notes how the decade following the U.S. invasion and the transfer of power to the Shiite element, eventually leading to a rise in Sunni fundamentalism, escalated into a political, psychological, and geographic chokehold on the Assyrians living throughout Iraq. “Al Qaeda became strong between 2008 and 2010, and then there were constant bombings all over Iraq,

forcing the Assyrians to leave Baghdad.” According to the API (Assyrian Policy Institute), on October 31st, 2010, 6 Jihadists who were members of the Islamic State of Iraq (a precursor to the better known ISIS) seized control of Our Lady of Salvation Syriac Catholic Church in Baghdad, and held 120 Assyrians captive within. Shutting off the lights, they opened fire on the congregation and detonated their suicide vests, in total killing 44 worshippers. Expectedly, the events were severely traumatizing to Assyrians throughout the nation, and some churches were even closed down. In total, since the U.S. invasion, 70 Assyrian churches were attacked or bombed during the ensuing chaos. Thanks to this form of political and psychological pressure, half of all Assyrians within the nation had already fled by 2010 (today, it is more than 90%). During the interview, Kado extrapolated on the compromising position that the Assyrians were in.

In Baghdad, it was Shi’ite groups backed by Iran, and in Mosul it was in Sunni areas with Al Qaeda. And, on the other side, we had the political pressure of, if I may call them, the racist Kurdish political parties. Why am I mentioning these specifically? Because they were controlling our areas. You couldn’t say whatever you wanted. You didn’t have freedom of speech, and if you talked about something done wrong by these specific people, you would be forcibly stopped, arrested, or even disappear. So that was the daily life for us Assyrians, here.

When asked if the situation has changed, Kado replied with a *yes, but* noting how:

It's worse now actually. The daily actions are less, just because we raised awareness, and the world is hearing about these actions. There is also the fact that these political parties are not the same as Al Qaeda. They are supported internationally so they are afraid of international organizations, international delegations, and various groups that are here, because they're getting support from them. So when we talk to these groups, about how these political parties--specifically the KDP--are doing these things, they [Kurdish political parties] are afraid of it. So they are suppressing our rights in other ways. The pressure is a little bit softer, but it's the same ideology going forward. That was what we were facing every day.

Kado then went on to explain how the KDP pressures the Assyrians in the Nineveh Plain.

There is no other strong Kurdish political party here. So, the KDP, specifically, through their security forces, Asayish and Peshmerga, pressured the Assyrians. Many people joined them because they were afraid. Many people fled from here because they couldn't stop talking about the injustices committed by the KDP and its forces. When they talked they were arrested, so they just fled--they couldn't live in that situation. And others are just trying to live their daily life, but increasingly, it is becoming more difficult to look the other way.

One can see that ISIS may have brought fears of physical persecution and torture, but the KDP brought fears of psychological and political reckoning, forcing many Assyrians to choose

sides in order to preserve their wellbeing within the region. Furthermore, historically, since the fall of their empire, the Assyrians have perpetually been stuck in the cycle of appeasing two major powers, paying dearly for the actions of both parties. Counsel DeKelaita thus makes it clear that this is a survival strategy for many individual Assyrians who have to make the choice of who to support depending on where they live.

The way that Assyrians can destroy themselves is to say that ‘you are sympathetic to the Kurds, Iranians, Syrians, etc.’ Well, that’s the nature of the Assyrian, isn’t it, these days? He has to be sympathetic to people around him, because otherwise he will not survive. So, don’t destroy yourselves because of the very nature of your being. Don’t hurt yourself because you’re in a situation where you have no other choice. The Assyrian who lives in the KRG has to sympathize a little bit with the Kurds--though that doesn’t mean that he doesn’t criticize them. But he has to recognize who the powerful groups are. The Assyrian living with Shiites in Iran must understand that these are the people in charge. For example, the former representative of the Assyrians in Iran, Yonathan Betkolia, was being criticized in a very hostile way by other Assyrians, and I felt that this poor guy loves his people and loves to work for them, but his people do not realize what a sensitive position he’s in. What do you want him to do? To rise against the Iranian government all by himself? Give the guy some leeway and understand his position. Anna Eshoo, for example, who works in the American Congress--give her some leeway--she has limits.

During the Iraq-Iran war, for example, Assyrians had no choice but to kill Assyrians on the other side of the trenches. It is due to the compromising position that Assyrians are often politically placed in, the struggle ensuing between two or more powers, that much of the internal fracturing and even psychological dissolution takes place. This political pressure to choose between greater powers also runs down to the members of the Assyrian clergy, who, thanks to the aforescribed psychological impacts of the Ottoman millet system, have no choice but to be politically active in the Middle-Eastern fabric, leading to an inability to separate “church and state” in the Assyrian psyche. When commenting on the shift in the rhetoric of the Assyrian clergy, Counsel DeKelaita noted the various factors that led to the polarization between Assyrian churches, such as the desire to garner what little political power the Assyrians within Iraq were granted.

Part of it for Mar Sarhad [the Chaldean bishop of Detroit and California] and Mar Ibrahim [a bishop in Detroit] was that it was a budget issue, because in Iraq, the people at the helm of the Christian community happen to be called Assyrian. They were the ADM [Assyrian Democratic Movement], and they were getting a budget from the Central government in Baghdad and from the KRG, and so the ADM was able to say that it represented the Christian minority in Iraq. Well, Sarhad came with Mar Ibrahim and said that he represented 80% of Christians in Iraq, while the ADM only represented 15%, and that the latter could not represent the former. He claimed that he represented the people who call themselves Chaldean who are the majority in Iraq. Therefore, dealings proceeded through the Chaldean clergy, rather than political leaders of the ADM, which represented all Assyrian Christians, regardless of denomination.

Here, one can note the grandchild of the millet system--the current theocratic method of running the Near-Eastern nation states, to this day cemented within the Middle-Eastern psyche.

This was a power grab, and interestingly, what Sarhad started was inherited by the rest of them. All of the Chaldean clergy went ahead with the same line, including the then Bishop Sako, who used to say that he was an Assyrian and that there were no differences between Chaldeans and Assyrians. He's even from Zakho, which only became Chaldean about a hundred years ago. He knew that history, and he's not stupid, he's a well-educated person. But he felt that in order to get a budget, which would require him officially representing his flock, he cut off from the ADM and created his own Chaldean political groups. I have friends in Detroit who say that it wasn't anything against the Assyrians, but an interest in power, and an interest in political influence. But what is the cost to that? When you create so much social and political pollution by what you're doing, maybe it's time to think that it's not really worth it.

But beyond the gains of playing into the politics of those who hold power, Counsel DeKelaita noted how:

There is also always the factor of individual arrogance. Bishop Sarhad Jammo is a very charismatic and strong character. He had the reunification of the Church of the East as his goal, and he felt that his ego was on the path to success, and from my understanding, he wanted to eventually be the Patriarch of this new reunified church, which was going to be

the Assyrian Church of the East and the Chaldean Church brought back together. This church was going to have greater respect by Rome. But when his plans were thwarted, he became obsessively hostile to those that he felt had thwarted his plans, which were Mar Dinkha, the late Patriarch of the Assyrian Church, and all of the Assyrian nationalists. He felt that the Assyrian nationalists were hostile to his aims and claims, and so he became obsessively anti-Assyrian. He had this big speech in Detroit where he proclaimed, ‘You are Chaldean, you are Chaldean, you are Chaldean, and nothing else.’ He made an exception for Assyrians from Iran because they had always called themselves Assyrians, but if you were from Iraq and Chaldean, you had to be only Chaldean.

And with polarizing policies such as these, Assyrians were often distanced from their ethnic background, and made solely to embrace their church identities. In the end, the fracturing of the ethnic identity of the Assyrians within Iraq (and even Syria), results in nothing more than the political and psychological polarization of religious Assyrians, and the enabling of the clergy to line their own pockets. “A lot of the Chaldean Bishops in Iraq make a lot of money advertising the fact that they help the Christians there. They’ve made good amounts of money.” Yet there is also a healthy variety amongst the Assyrian people, and Counsel DeKelaita paints a vibrant picture of this legacy, stating:

There is variety, such as the different clans, tribes, towns, villages, dialects, and churches. That variety is okay, as it is a garden of many different colored flowers. But there is also the very destructive division fostered either by the political parties or by the churches and

church leaders. For example, Mar Sarhad Jammo, who was a very good friend of mine when he was a priest, became a very poisonous character as a Bishop of the Chaldean Church in Detroit and California. Even Mar Ibrahim insisted to the Iraqi government and to the Kurdish government that Assyrians and Chaldeans are a separate people and should not be considered the same nationality. Whereas before, he used to say that Assyrians and Chaldeans are one people, and that Chaldean is just an expression for the church, and that we are all Assyrian. Or even Emmanuel III Delly, the late Patriarch of the Chaldean Church, who said, 'He who calls himself an Assyrian and is a Chaldean is a traitor, and he who calls himself a Chaldean but is an Assyrian is a traitor.' Ironically, he said it in Arabic to an Arab crowd. And, you know, the average Arab crowd knows that we are in a nation of 40 million people and number less than a hundred thousand, so they ask what we are fighting about.

However, it is not solely internal factors that have worked to erode the Assyrian ethnic identity within Iraq, reducing it to what is perceived as a religious identity within the public eye. Drawing from the experience from his work with Assyrian organizations, Counsel DeKelaita outlined his worries clearly.

I do worry about foreign governments, such as the KRG, interfering among our people. In my case, the U.S. government was involved in telling Chaldeans they are separate from Assyrians, which became an issue in my court. But primarily, lesser players are going to be more interested in dividing Assyrians than greater nations. The United States

and Russia won't feel that the Assyrians are a threat. Syria may feel that the Assyrians may be used by somebody else against them. Same way that the Kurds may feel that the Assyrians may be used against them and thus that they must control them and divide them. Iraq, too. Not so much Iran, Iran doesn't really worry about them. They worry about them as a Christian entity more so than an ethnic one. So all of these people feel that the Assyrians should be divided and perhaps controlled. The wise counter to that, however, is for Assyrians to realize that and take stock of it and not allow it to destroy themselves and the way they view themselves.

But the ethnic erosion and fracturing of the Assyrian psyche by the clergy also affects members of the clergy, itself. For example, Kado notes how:

Even inside each Church, each priest and each bishop is building his own empire. They are constantly trying to put up borders between groups, villages, clans, etc. There are some priests that are trying to gather together as many people as possible. But unfortunately, the majority of them are just seeking political control and power. They scramble for the scraps of the political game in Iraq. In addition to this, there are the political parties created or supported by the KDP, such as the Chaldean Political Party, Chaldean National Council, and many others. These people are using their power and money to create proxy parties. Many people are in need to feed their families, so they will do whatever it takes: they will call themselves by other names and make certain statements. This is all aimed at undermining the national unity of the Assyrian people.

Thus, it can even be reasoned that the denominational polarization of the Assyrians serves to bolster the agendas of non-Assyrians, by building militias under Assyrian denominational nomenclatures, but run, organized, and filled by non-Assyrians, such as Rayan Al-Kaldani's primarily Shia, "Chaldean militia"--an Iran-backed paramilitary, that despite its name, is manned primarily by non-Chaldeans, serving to only bolster the portfolios of the militia groups aligned with Iran. Lastly, Kado makes a historical case for the denominational division between the Assyrians that led to the fracturing of their ethnic identity and collective psyche.

Today, the churches blame the political parties and say that they should unite. The oldest of these parties in Iraq was ADM [Assyrian Democratic Party], created in 1979. But, since 400 years ago we've had divisions when there were no political parties, because the churches were dividing us. The divisions created by the Churches will continue forever unless there is some awareness amongst our people. Unless they will understand that the church leaders and the proxy political leaders are just there for their own positions. Most of the church leaders aren't even near to anything Christian. And the political parties that are claiming love for their nation, they, just as the clergy, are the first to sell out our people. We are seeing it daily here. Here, and with many cases in Diaspora. They do whatever to keep themselves alive.

This will for institutional self-preservation at the cost of the many, which arises from a need to appease two greater powers--whether that be Sunni and Shiite, Iraq and Iran, or American and Iraqi--leads to the fracturing of the ethnic cohesion of the Assyrians, and

ultimately polarizes and negatively conditions the collective Assyrian psyche. According to the Assyrian Policy Institute, every time the term “Christians” is used to refer to Assyrians in place of their ethnic identity, they are dispossessed of their cultural identity, history, and territorial claims, as well as undermined within the societies where they reside, allowing for their daily problems to be ignored. All of this leads to their history being ethnically cleansed and denied, further perpetrating the cultural genocide against them. The term “Christian” falls under the victimhood umbrella precisely because it fractures and divides the ethnic Assyrians into even smaller denominational groups, further cementing their inferiority complex that came as a result of the 200 years of ethnic cleansing waged upon them in all of the regions of their homeland. Ironically, the same derogatory terminology assigned to ethnic Assyrians from various denominations by the Ottoman administration is still in use in contemporary politics, often being peddled in political circles by the same people claiming to represent Assyrians, Chaldeans, Syriacs, Arameans, etc.

### **Security of the Nineveh Plain Before 2014**

Security plays a great role in the peace of mind of a people, and is one of the foremost needs in Maslow’s triangle. It also plays a great role in the psychology of the modern Assyrians, and is one of the main reasons Assyrians have departed their homeland in droves. Misho highlights how:

At the time, the Kurds controlled the plain up to Tel Keppe. So, the border between the Sunni Arab and Kurdish powers was Tel Keppe, where we lived. The Kurds had

encroached all the way up to those borders and claimed it as a part of Kurdistan. But how could it be a part of Kurdistan, when I, an Assyrian, and my neighbors as Assyrians, lived in the town, and in the neighboring towns? The issue was that the Europeans and Americans were okay with this arrangement and with the territorial claims of the Kurds. And the Shiites who were in charge of the Central Government didn't bother to aid our case, as it didn't matter much to them what Assyrian towns the KDP lay claim to. And so we were left to be occupied by Kurdish forces.

Following this occupation by Kurdish forces such as Peshmerga and Asayish, multiple proxy forces were created by the KDP to help implement Kurdish interests in the majority-Assyrian region. However, even these proxy forces would not function to protect the Assyrians. As Kado states:

There was a group previously protecting the Nineveh Plain. They were called 'The Guards of Nineveh Plain.' They were created during that era when Al Qaeda first came to Mosul. There were more than three thousand men that were all Assyrians, but supported by the KDP. So, after ISIS came to Mosul in June 2014, in a few weeks, they [the KDP] disarmed this force. For each post with 5-10 men, they left one Kalashnikov with a single magazine, the equivalent of thirty bullets. While they were doing this, they were promising the Assyrians in their towns that they would bring more forces of Peshmerga and Asayish to protect them. But as we saw, this was a lie--they all just fled.

## **Part 2: The Account of Mr. Esho Sora Misho**

### **The Fall of Mosul From the Viewpoint of the Assyrians of Tel Keppe**

Mr. Misho's personal account begins by him laying out the variety of the Assyrians in Mosul itself. "We were in the Nineveh Governorate, and Mosul was its center. There were Assyrians in Mosul that belonged to the Syriac Orthodox Rite, Eastern Rite, and Chaldean Rite." Here, we see an example of how the Assyrians of the region divided themselves along denominational lines.

There used to be many of them there. Just of the Assyrian Church there used to be 500 families. There were also Assyrians of the Ancient Church of the East. Of the Suryoyo [Western Assyrians], there were many successful and well off people, and the Orthodox had large churches. There were also some Armenians. All of these were in the center of Mosul, but we weren't there. Those people were expelled from the city on the 10th of June. That's when ISIS entered Mosul, but ISIS was already there for a long time in the form of the radical Islamists of Al Qaeda.

Misho then continued, explaining the bizarre and unfathomable fall of the city to ISIS militants.

From then on, a political game was played that to this day bewilders us all. There was a very large Iraqi army stationed in Mosul. It's no secret that they fled, leaving those they were sworn to defend defenseless. It was all over the news. For us, when people had finally figured out what had happened, we were all dazed and in disbelief. Everyone asked, 'Who told the army to abandon their posts and the people they protected in Mosul? Why was ISIS let into the city without a fight?' All of the soldiers and the officers fled from the city. Not a single one stayed.

One can imagine the Assyrians waking up one day, and realizing the center of their governorate was suddenly held by a terrorist power. The shock and psychological trauma of this first event cannot be overstated. Misho continued:

See, when retreating, an army takes all of its equipment, tanks, and munitions with it. Soldiers do not get out of their trucks and escape on foot. They do not leave behind all of their guns and ammunition. I can tell you this because I served in two wars. As a soldier, if an enemy army is approaching, you wouldn't leave behind those you protect, and leave behind your vehicle to escape on foot. Frankly, it is a stupid decision to make. You have to retreat with your tanks, your guns, your munitions. But they left everything behind for ISIS! All of the guns given by the Americans to the Iraqi army were then in the hands of ISIS. They left behind even the simple handguns. Each soldier ran to his home, and a great game of politics was played that day. Why is this significant? Because the second largest province in Iraq is Nineveh, and its surrender in that manner should not be taken

lightly. The same thing is happening in Afghanistan now with the Afghan army fleeing before the Taliban and leaving all of their equipment behind. Yemen, too. For some, the mentality is that when they are leaving behind their weapons, they are doing so for a 'son of their nation,' not a stranger--despite this sentiment also referring to a formal enemy--albeit an internal one. So, in Nineveh, when the army up and fled and left all its equipment behind, the difference was that it was before a stranger encroaching on their home. Many ISIS members were not Iraqi, coming from countries like Syria, Palestine, Turkey, Tunisia, Russia, Britain, France, and even the United States. The enemy in this instance was not Iraqi, so it is not the same as what is happening in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan they do not fight back and they surrender their arms because the mentality is that he who is encroaching is also an Afghan, and so a brother. In Iraq, it was foreigners who wrought havoc.

It can then be noted that the ISIS invasion wasn't seen as an ethnic liberation movement for all Iraqis from the regime, but rather, an Islamo-fascist "liberation movement" for the Sunnis that were dispossessed by the Shiites, as previously described. The emphasis was on the domination of one group over all others. This political scandal and the fall of the city of Mosul was especially traumatic for Mr. Misho and his family, as Tel Keppe is a mere 7 kilometers from Mosul, and the city could be seen from his rooftop.

On the 10th of June I received news that Mosul had fallen. I was in shock. The city council of the province of Nineveh fell, and all public buildings, such as the police

headquarters, were occupied by ISIS. ISIS offered the Assyrians within the city three choices: either that they'd convert to Islam, pay the Jizya tax, or they'd leave the city but forfeit all their possessions, especially all their gold and jewelry. Here's the catch: they didn't kill them because they were still in the early days, and the Sunnis were celebrating their 'liberation' from the Shiite regime for about a week. Just like in Afghanistan today, the entrance into the city was met with jubilation. There were no killings and no excessive violence. So, they let the Assyrians flee Mosul, but at the cost of losing their entire livelihoods, lest they convert to Islam. But before they were allowed to leave, all their money, gold, and jewelry was stripped from them. Of course, they were also losing their homes and businesses, if they hadn't already been looted. They were losing everything. Most had no choice but to come to the Assyrian towns and villages surrounding Mosul, tired and walking on foot. Many came to us in Tel Keppe and sought shelter.

It is important to note that the Assyrians of Mosul, compared to the Assyrians of Mosul's environs (its many eastward towns) were a small minority of the total Assyrian population, as the majority of them had already been expelled by militants before the coming of ISIS. Once the Assyrians of Mosul arrived at the Assyrian towns, east of the city, Misho described the desperate and pitiable state they were in.

These refugees from Mosul came to us tired, having walked the distance from the city, and many were crying. The parishioners of the Assyrian Church of the East had a hall in

which we held events, and that is where they slept, while others stayed in the schools of Tel Keppe. They had no mattresses, and food became more scarce. Then came the NGOs, who first helped with distributing food. There were many of these NGOs, and I was part of the city council, so I would often distribute by hand to these people. We would document their names, how large their families were, and where they were from. Then we would tell them when and where to go in order to receive aid. This is because the NGOs stored the aid in the city hall of Tel Keppe and entrusted us to hand it out.

This was the only system in place to help the traumatized, and as shall be explained in coming sections of the study, the NGOs also functioned as essential psychiatric help to the traumatized. Misho laid out the system in place at the time:

When the Americans came, they created a city council of 11 people, of which I was one. The Majority were Assyrians, some Arabs, and some Yezidis. The district of Tel Keppe was large and diverse and reached up to Dohuk. Sadly, much of the Assyrians native to the district immigrated to Detroit and Chicago after the 2003 invasion. Despite this demographic shift, before ISIS, the majority of the district was still Assyrian with many surrounding Arab and Yezidi villages. Today, Tel Keppe is majority Sunni Arab, as most of the Assyrians did not return after the ousting of ISIS. And how would they? Their neighbors had turned against them and stolen their homes. The system had failed them. But for a few years, when the Americans came to the region, we entertained their officers

in Tel Keppe and they used to attend our meetings to see what we were discussing and planning. We were part of their big project for democracy in Iraq.

It can clearly be seen that it was American military and political intervention that designed both the relief and governance systems, and thus, much of the failures ought to be placed on them, as Counsel DeKelaita formerly stated. Furthermore, according to the API, only an estimated 7% of the former Assyrian population has returned to Tel Keppe due to the presence of Iran-backed militias, or the PMF Brigade 50. Thus, it is important to keep in mind that ISIS was not the only faction keeping the Assyrians from returning to their areas. Misho continues, explaining how:

The Americans were not there in our region. They had already left in 2011 and the country had fallen into the hands of Iran because of the vacuum they [The Americans] had created. All that stood between us and ISIS was the Peshmerga. Our own people had been forcibly disarmed by them [Asayish and Peshmerga]. We were left with no choice but to rely on their promises, and they always reassured us, saying, ‘do not run and flee, we will sacrifice our own blood on that ground because it is Kurdistan.’ The ironic thing is that our region has never been Kurdistan. It is the heartland of the Assyrian homeland, but thanks to the KDP’s charm with Western media, it is not seen as so. It is not even legally so. The KRG does not include the Nineveh Plain, but Kurdish sources always present it as such, despite it being majority Assyrian.

One can already see that even before the brunt of the ISIS offensive, the Assyrians felt uneasy about being disarmed and forced to accept the protection of those they deemed outsiders.

When you climbed onto the rooftops of Tel Keppe you could see Mosul because it was so close. And you could no longer enter the city because they had American guns, and if they saw you from afar, they would not hesitate to shoot at you. It was a strange thought that so much evil was happening less than 10 kilometers from your home.

When asked how Misho had news of what was transpiring inside of ISIS-controlled Mosul, he replied:

There were Arabs who used to come to Tel Keppe, bringing news with them. Before ISIS came to Mosul, as you know, the radicals already existed there. So, rumors of the terror in Mosul didn't begin with its fall. For example, there were people employed by the government that would come to Mosul. The terrorists would be notified and they would kidnap them and kill them. It was dangerous to be a government employee. So, remember that before Mosul fell, terrorism was already spreading in Mosul, and the Americans that frequented this region would be under constant fear as they didn't know when the terrorists would attack them on the road. Until 2006, that's how the Americans were until they left. Whatever projects they had with our people were abandoned.

Hence, it can be concluded that ISIS' initial targets were employees of the Shiite regime, and personnel belonging to the American occupation of Iraq, perhaps both intended to weaken the post-2003 invasion government. The remaining Iraqis, such as the Assyrians or Shiite civilians, were secondary targets.

### **The Preemptive Kurdish Retreat From the Viewpoint of the Assyrians of Tel Keppe**

By this point, many references have already been made to the betrayal of the Assyrians and Yezidis by the Peshmerga. Misho asserted that:

This part has to be entered into history: they did not tell the Assyrians of the region that they were retreating! They did not tell us to find a way to defend ourselves. They didn't tell us a thing. The Assyrians woke up one morning and realized that the Kurdish army was not there. What happened? To this day we have no idea. The same way the Central Government army retreated without firing a shot before ISIS came, the Peshmerga retreated. It was as if they were sending a message, 'Hey, enter into the Assyrian lands, we've pulled back our defenses!' And ISIS eventually entered, but the Assyrians fled because we had been disarmed beforehand. What they told the priests, political leaders, and people of our towns was, 'do not run and flee, we will sacrifice our own blood on that ground because it is Kurdistan.' All of the priests and political leaders of Bakhdida, Bartella, Bashiqa, and Tel Keppe were given these reassurances. So the people had no choice but to trust in and depend on this statement. Why? Because when the national army fled, only the Kurdish one remained. So we didn't flee and we stayed in our towns

asking ourselves why we would flee. We didn't question the value of those promises at that time, because doing so would mean taking into account the unthinkable. But that's exactly what happened. The Peshmerga allowed the unthinkable to happen to those they promised to protect.

Just as the Arab army inside of Mosul surrendered the city without a fight, not too long after, the Kurdish army surrendered the Nineveh Plain. Misho described the rapid abandonment and exodus from the region.

On the 10th of June was when Mosul fell. On the 6th of August ISIS entered Tel Keppe. How did they enter Tel Keppe? Well, because the Kurdish armies had fled. And not just Tel Keppe. Tel Keppe, Bakhdida, and Bartella, all fell on the same day. Do you know why the Nineveh Plain fell so fast? Because the sons of Mosul, the young Sunni population, all stayed and helped ISIS, because they thought that ISIS had come to liberate the Sunnis and to further the Sunni cause. They envisioned a brotherhood with the foreign invaders who were of the same sect. They were one religion, and so they worked together to end the Shiite reign. But how would they end the Shiite control? Well, they played yet another part to this political game where they intended to divide the nation of Iraq into three. A place for the Shiites, for the Sunnis, and for the Kurds, each. This, we think, is why the Kurdish armies and the Central Government forces pulled back without a fight. But this only emboldened ISIS, who then began its campaign against

those it had underhandedly worked with. Who intended and executed this? We do not know, but we suspect this. It was a game, and we paid dearly for it.

Throughout this study, references have been made and will still be made alluding to “the political game.” In the parameters section of the study, Yakoub touched upon this severe distrust of the groups inflicting the trauma, but in this case, the distrust is perhaps not unfounded. Regardless, the effects were the same, contributing to the Assyrians’ victimhood mentality. After all, they were indeed victims--but to identify as such can be psychologically damaging and fragmenting. Misho continued:

So, the Sunnis of Mosul stayed with ISIS. These people were celebrating and dancing. And when they knew that the Assyrians had left their villages, many of them came together and planned to rob their homes of their money, gold, and furniture because many of the Assyrians of Mosul were well off and would buy very handsome things for their homes. They also owned factories and other successful institutions within Mosul. For example, the Assyrians of Bakhdida ran the many chicken factories that supplied the entire nation.

Here, one can see how ISIS directed much of its efforts at destroying infrastructure already in place, so as to render life for the Assyrians untenable.

The manner in which the Assyrians suffered must especially be recorded in history. You see, when ISIS took Mosul, they cut the water pipelines that came from the Tigris, north of Mosul. It had been a huge government project that created a large water pipeline of about a meter in diameter to supply the environs of Mosul. It used to go from the Tigris to towns like Tel Keppe, Batnaya, and Tesqopa, all the way up to Alqosh. When they closed it to torment us Assyrians, they also cut the power. This was all intended to put pressure on us to begin fleeing. On the 10th of June they cut the water. So, from the time when Mosul fell, to when we fled, we were stuck without water.

Still, even at the point of losing both their water and electricity access, the Assyrians did not flee their ancient homeland. Instead:

We bought it [water] in tankers. Some people who owned tankers would go to waterwells and use a diesel powered motor to siphon water from the earth and bring it back with them in trucks. They would fill up their tankers and come back and sell us their water, which was actually more costly. So the Church of the East in Tel Keppe began purchasing tankers and dividing water between the people, including Arabs who didn't adhere to the religion or sect. When the church began to distribute water between the houses, it wasn't given solely to the Assyrians.

Here, it can be seen that one of the major ways the collective survival of the Assyrians was achieved was through the direct intervention of the church, rather than a civic or institutional

organization. Furthermore, Misho pointed out that it wasn't just Assyrians being forced to leave the city and take refuge in Assyrian towns.

And there were two muslim families who had fled from Mosul who lived among us because they were Shiites who had worked with the regime. Whoever had worked with the government would be captured and killed by ISIS, even if they were Muslim. But keep in mind that they didn't break the water pump or anything--only cut off our access to it. It was intended to be one of the factors to force us to eventually flee. Amongst it were other factors such as the cutting of electricity and the scarcity of fuel. Everybody was buying these things for a very steep price and with great difficulty.

### **The First Flight From Tel Keppe**

Misho continued to explain the tense climate as the days dragged on, and how the Assyrians expected an attack at any moment.

When we were still there, we were waiting to see when ISIS would enter our towns and villages. Will they enter today, tomorrow, a week from now? One day, when there was no electricity, suddenly, word spread that ISIS had entered our lands. A crowd gathered and people just began to flee. 'What happened, what happened? The families are fleeing!' Son did not know father, and dog did not know owner. When they started fleeing, my son wasn't with me, so I, with my wife and my daughter, decided to stay. This was because I didn't have a car and the drivers that I used to have contact with and relied on were no

longer there, each one grabbing his own family and fleeing. Whoever owned a vehicle grabbed his family and fled. What could I do? The drivers that I used to call to come drive me around were no longer there. So we stayed there.

It must be noted that Misho being forced to stay in Tel Keppe was an incredibly dangerous prospect, as he was one of the 11 members of the council of Tel Keppe, and thus affiliated with the government. Furthermore, his young daughter would have been a target of the Islamic militants, as so many Yezidi and Assyrian girls and women were.

So not all the Assyrians fled, and with the ones that did flee, some Arabs who worked with the Central Government also fled. And when they got out and drove up the way to Nohadra [Dohuk], they were stopped by the Kurds. See, the Kurds had pulled their troops from the border where they'd protected the people of Tel Keppe, and moved them further North, abandoning those Assyrian towns without a single bullet being fired. But here's where events got even more sinister. They [the refugees] were asked where they were going and told that they could not pass. They were stopped north of Tel Keppe, at the Tesqopa checkpoint manned by the Asayish. These Asayish police didn't allow the Assyrians to flee, forcing them to stop their vehicles there. Some suspected that they wanted to offer us Assyrians as a sort of sacrifice to ISIS and to create conflict between us and the Arabs so that later we would have no choice but to rely on them for support against the Arabs. After all, this is exactly what they did to the Yezidis when they pulled back their lines, and the Yezidis paid dearly for it. They offered them up as a sacrifice so that they themselves could benefit politically. Ironically, they were seen as the saviors of

the Yezidis, when in reality, they were the cause of their misery. If they had not withdrawn from their posts preemptively, not disarmed the people, and at least notified the locals, then we and the Yezidis would have defended ourselves. But they didn't want that. We had to be the sacrifice so they could come back later, cameras rolling, and 'save us' from ISIS. In reality, in a twisted political game, they and ISIS worked hand-in-hand. When the Kurds pulled back without firing a bullet, ISIS advanced. And when they stopped at Alqosh, it was as if there was an understanding that these were the new borders.

Here, again, can be seen the severe distrust of the group inflicting the trauma. This event shall be further discussed in the interview with Mr. Athra Kado, as his viewpoint from the town of Alqosh is invaluable when assessing the Kurdish betrayal of the Assyrians and Yezidis. In fact, Alqosh was the point the Kurds returned to, post preemptive withdrawal, and fortified as a new front against ISIS, though at that point, the Assyrians had already been emptied out of their towns. To this day, Alqosh is illegally controlled by the KRG, despite officially being under the Central Government's jurisdiction. Misho continued to highlight some of the miseries of the Yezidi people, as well.

But the Assyrians responded more readily, unlike the poor Yezidis. Many of the Yezidis did not flee, and so their wives and daughters were enslaved, and many of their boys and men killed. As for us, it was the mercy of God that on the day we couldn't flee, ISIS did not yet invade. The day wore on, and some of the Assyrians that were not allowed to pass by the Asayish returned to Tel Keppe in their vehicles. The Kurds didn't let them escape,

intending to offer them up to ISIS, as they had done with the Yezidis. But Christ was with us, and on that day, they [ISIS] did not enter. Our whole family had climbed to the rooftop taking pictures of the events transpiring. But the reason I mention this day specifically is because I wanted to make a point about how the Kurds didn't let the Assyrians escape to safety.

### **The Second Flight From Tel Keppe**

Misho explains that after the Kurdish withdrawal, "ISIS reached many of the Assyrian villages, stealing and robbing. These five: Tel Keppe, Batnaya, Beqopa, Tesqopa, and Sharafiya were victims of this." Note that these are only the towns on the northward road--the road Misho's family took to safety. The towns Eastward towards Erbil, such as Bakhdida, are mentioned elsewhere in the study. Misho continued:

Why? Because when the Kurds purposely pulled back their forces up to Alqosh, there was an understanding between them that that was the dividing line between the militants and Peshmerga. So ISIS did not enter Alqosh, yet the people of Alqosh had fled because they saw the refugees fleeing from the other Assyrian villages. When ISIS reached Sharafiya, all that was left was 2 to 3 km to Alqosh. Although the Alqoshians got up and fled, going to Nohadra, they didn't push any further because that was the line the Peshmerga had drawn. To this day, it is in the hands of the Asayish and Peshmerga. After the political game that the Kurds played, there was nothing left to do. So, the 10th of June was when Mosul fell, and on the 6th of August was the entrance of ISIS into Tel Keppe. We had nothing left to do, and this time, we were able to flee, but we weren't even able to

take our things. All our things were left back there. After the Kurdish army fled, both the Arab and the Kurdish armies were gone, and the Nineveh Plain was emptied of all defenses. We did not have guns. And even if we did, what would we have done with the small Russian guns, while they sported the latest American weaponry, firing from afar? Either way, before the Kurds fled, they went to the homes of the Assyrians and confiscated the remaining guns.

Here, one sees evidence that the Assyrians were unable to fulfill basic human needs, such as a sense of security. Lack of security can be a major contributor to stress and trauma, and the Assyrians were forced to merely sit and wait for the assured invasion of their homes after the Peshmerga had effectively redrawn the borders. Misho explains what transpired when ISIS entered the town.

In Tel Keppe, in particular, many Assyrians were wealthy and owned very large homes and mansions. They entered these homes and robbed them of everything. And the Sunnis were very happy that they were robbing Assyrian homes. The first that they robbed in Tel Keppe was my home, because they went to the homes of government people first. I got a telephone call telling me that they had entered my home and were stealing and breaking things. You will never know the feeling of knowing someone else is in your home, and that you cannot do anything about it. Just the fact that they entered your house--your bedrooms where you sleep--it is a great weight upon the family. Can you imagine if this happened to an American or European? It is a huge weight mentally when a stranger

enters your home without permission. And to enter someone's house and break his things--this is even more wounding.

At this stage, ISIS is already inflicting severe trauma without even necessarily causing bodily harm to its victims. Misho goes on to explain both his sources (as he was no longer present in Tel Keppe due to the forced exodus of the Assyrians) and the systematic robberies that took place.

At this point, they had not yet entered the homes of the other Assyrians. Then, as we were waiting, one by one, each one of us began to hear that their homes had been broken into. The Arabs that worked with us in the city council also fled, and the Arabs who didn't flee were the ones telling us. The son of my friend, who couldn't go anywhere else, stayed there and was tipping us off. These were the older Arab families of Tel Keppe, and some of them even knew Assyrian, and sometimes, you wouldn't even know if he was an Arab or Assyrian when he spoke Assyrian with you. We were close with them. These were the kinds of people tipping us off, such as my friend's son. But when the new ones came from places like Mosul, they were not the same.

In fact, Misho tells of an instance where:

Once, some of these newer Arab women were sitting and talking outside of their homes, and they were by then our neighbors. One of the Arab women turned and said to my wife, 'Do you know what we were talking about?' My wife answered that she did not. The

Arab woman replied, ‘We were talking about how we would each take one of the Assyrian homes for ourselves when ISIS comes.’ That means that when the Assyrians would run, each woman would try to claim a house. Already, they were arguing amongst themselves who’d get what. So, even then, they were just waiting for the Assyrians to flee. This was before we left. Why am I telling you this story? Because if you want to know how ISIS spreads, know that it is from the heart. If this was the thinking of the mother, how would her sons turn out? If the mother is envious of her neighbor’s home, wanting to take it for herself, and even proclaiming her envy with pride, what can you expect?

It is difficult to assess whether such attitudes arose from the dispossession of the Sunnis, the age-old psychological damage of the Ottoman Millet system, or the status of Assyrians as second class citizens in Iraq. It may very well be a combination of the three or more factors. It may even be due to the brainwashing and conditioning by religious clerics, as Misho alleged.

After the ousting of Saddam, the clerics of Mosul told the Sunnis not to buy goods from Assyrian vendors. They also told them not to go to our homes, because we were ‘unclean.’ They claimed that as the unclean, we would be destined to leave the region, and that their followers would inherit our homes and belongings. The Assyrians of Nineveh know of this talk as it affected us all. All they needed to do was wait for ISIS to come do its dirty work.

Again, one can see hints that the Assyrians were well aware of the worsening situation in Iraq, and how eventually, all of the Sunni rage would be directed towards them.

### **The Destruction of Symbols: ISIS' Ethnic Cleansing Campaign**

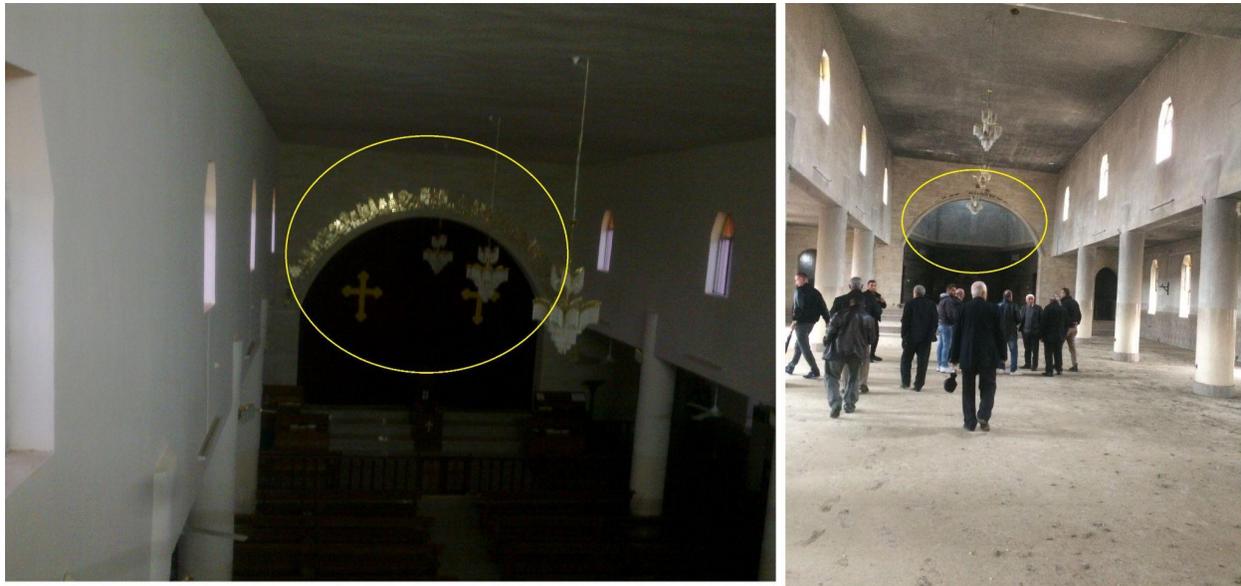
After Misho received news of the robberies and vandalism going on in Tel Keppe, he got the most heartbreaking news yet.

I had many things like plasters, stones, fabrics, and other expensive artist's equipment. I lost them all. They destroyed many of the things I had made for the church such as intricate religious engravings and wonderful stoneworks. Both in Mosul and in Tel Keppe I had many such works, all of which are destroyed now. It was my passion making these things, and ISIS destroyed them all. I was a sculptor of Assyrian art. I had a statue of Assyrian lions at home which I miss a lot. They smashed them all.

Here, one sees examples of how ISIS personally targeted individual members of the community. In the case of Mr. Misho, the destruction of his art was how he was directly targeted and affected emotionally. In particular, he was especially fond of one of his creations destroyed by ISIS.

In our Church, I had made a beautiful Assyrian panorama. I had many of the old Assyrian motifs displayed in it above the altar, 11 meters high. They dismantled it all. I loved that panorama a lot. When people saw it they couldn't believe I had made it. I had made it with bronze, and they thought it was made of gold, so they took it and melted it down.

Misho has kindly provided images of some of his creations destroyed by ISIS, and at his request, they have been included in this section.



*Assyrian Panorama- new Assyrian calligraphy in metal bronze by eng: esho sora 2013*

*Assyrian church of the east - Telkèpé - Nineveh*

**Figure 3. Artistic Panorama at Tel Keppe’s Church of the East.** To the left is Misho’s most beloved creation, the Assyrian panorama above the holy altar, created in 2013, and destroyed by ISIS in 2014, as shown to the right. The intricate design used ancient Assyrian motifs, and the bronze was made to look like gold. Misho considered this particular piece his magnum opus--the loss and destruction of which was the cause of much emotional distress for the family, which had already lost its home and all its belongings. This image was kindly provided by Mr. Misho for use in the study.



*Church of saint Joseph in Telkèpé - Nineveh*

**Figure 4. Destroyed Assyrian Cross Design.** On the right, Mr. Misho can be seen with one of his cultural creations he was commissioned to create for the Assyrian Church of the East in Tel Keppe. In 2014, as seen on the left, the design was purposely blotted out. Assyrian-Christian and Ancient Assyrian symbols were particularly targeted in ISIS' ethnic cleansing campaign. Crosses, in particular, were targeted and destroyed. This image was kindly provided by Mr. Misho for use in the study.



*church of the east - Tèlkèpé- Nineveh*

meta

**Figure 5. Destroyed Plaque at Tel Keppe's Assyrian Church.** Stonework and calligraphic designs by Mr. Misho appear to be destroyed by ISIS. Religious symbols and writings were smashed or sprayed with bullets. The two plaques, one at the entrance wall and the other at the tower, used Assyrian calligraphic designs to commemorate the name, founding, and history of the Church. As for the entrance door itself, the cross was dismantled and removed, and the central design was stripped off and sprayed with bullets. These images were kindly provided and captioned by Mr. Misho for use in the study.

When we fled, ISIS and some of their higher command stayed in my home and inside the homes of other government officials. They didn't tell me who was living in my home then, because they didn't want to make me more worried. They just told me that a stranger had entered my home. And they entered my home just hours after we left.

It may be theorized that the takeover of the homes of government officials may have been a planned, and symbolic replacement of the older governing body by the ISIS militants. After all, ISIS' destruction of cultural heritage was an attempt at a symbolic removal of the identities of the original indigenous inhabitants of the land, as symbols of art serve as a means of marking the unique characteristics of a culture in a specific region. Yet the destruction of older symbols and their replacement with the ones approved of by ISIS did not end at the destruction of art.

They destroyed all of the graves of the Assyrians in Tel Keppe. In history, a grave is evidence that a family member or a people lived in that land. You can say, 'Here is his grave. You can read his name, when he was born, who he was, maybe even what he did.' Countless generations are recorded like this. But when ISIS destroyed every single grave in the Tel Keppe graveyard, it was an attempt at destroying this evidence of continuity.

Unfortunately, when the Assyrians fled, one of the things left behind were the graves of their ancestors. What do you have against the dead? What purpose could it serve other than disheartening the living to destroy a grave? The biggest Assyrian graveyard that was in Tel Keppe still hasn't been repaired. The bones of our ancestors, and whatever they were buried with litter the ground, because ISIS even went as far as digging up the dead and dishonoring them.

Indeed, Misho makes the claim that the destruction of cultural art and even the graves of a people serves to sever the clear continuity of the Assyrians in the region. By removing the symbols and culture of the former indigenous people, ISIS, and by extension, the KDP, intended to replace such symbols with their own.



***Tombstone for a church priest***

**Figure 6. Destroyed Grave in Tel Keppe.** Here, in another photograph (courtesy of Mr. Misho), one can see the tombstone of an Assyrian priest desecrated by ISIS. It was common practice to also unearth the remains of the dead and spread them around the broken pieces of their graves.

ISIS would film these actions and post them on social media to dishearten their victims from afar. This image was kindly provided by Mr. Misho for use in the study.



**Figure 7. Kurdish Vandalism of Assyrian Artifacts.** At the site of Zawa Mountain, overlooking Nohadra/Duhok (image from Ishtar TV), the Kurdish flag is spray painted on an ancient Assyrian relief, damaging and vandalizing the site. Kurdish vandals also sprayed the site with bullets, as can be seen by the many bullet holes. It is also common practice within the KRG to not provide proper protective measures for sites such as these, leaving them exposed to the elements, and eroding the evidence of a continuous Assyrian heritage within the region.

But the destruction of cultural heritage by ISIS, and its vandalism by Kurdish factions does not solely hurt the Assyrians, as Counsel DeKelaita explains.

It's a desecration of their heritage, as well. You're living in these places which have this history. If they [Kurds] dislike ISIS, which they claim to do, how could they themselves act like ISIS? This is the worst form of desecrating one's artifacts and a complete

disregard for your own humanity. These artifacts are the shared heritage of the World. Wouldn't you be upset if you saw Roman ruins being obliterated and blown up? I was upset when I saw the Buddha statue destroyed by the Taliban. Would you like people to go to a museum in Paris and just start burning and destroying because it doesn't fit the religious view of that person? Or go into the art institute in Chicago and start tearing up paintings where there are nudes? That is insane. No one should stand for it. There are a lot of decent people in the world who are trying to bring back the heritage that was destroyed. I myself would love to interview the person who took the sledgehammer to those reliefs. That would be a fascinating interview for me.

However, there is also hope when it comes to the reclamation of the cultural heritage of the Assyrians, as Kado states:

Genocide is not just killing people, it's also the erasure of their presence and roots. However, we had seen many Arabs who raised awareness against what ISIS did, and they did some artistic works to show that the roots of Iraq are Assyrian and that they love our culture.

In fact, during the protests against the government in 2019, Assyrian motifs could be seen spray painted all over the walls of Baghdad. Kado continued:

But we didn't see anything like that from the Kurds as a people. This is because for thirty years now, they have been controlled by a fascist and racist political party that's teaching

them hatred and how everything is Kurdish. Whatever is not Kurdish is not accepted and is seen as the enemy. There were times when we'd go to Kurdish stores to buy things and we'd speak Arabic because, obviously, we wouldn't speak Assyrian with them, but they weren't accepting us, telling us that we'd either speak Kurdish, or they wouldn't sell anything to us. So this is the mentality that at least two Kurdish generations have been raised with.

One can see how the superiority complex of the KRG directly contributes to the inferiority attitude, and by extension, the victimhood mentality, of the Assyrians who live as second class citizens within Iraq. If an Assyrian is unable to purchase essential goods for their family due to their heritage as an Assyrian, then being an Assyrian quickly becomes second-class citizenry. Kado also explains how the KRG twists news coverage of the findings of Assyrian artifacts, such as the finding of a recent, and unique ancient Assyrian wine-making facility.

For the artifacts that were discovered by international groups, when they were in English, they couldn't alter it, because there was an Italian archeological group with them near the village of Shiyus, 20 km north of Dohuk, and they could not twist the truth. So, they wrote an article about it, and when the Italian group was with them, they couldn't lie and say something wrong in English. But when they translated it to Kurdish, they wrote that it was an Assyrian artifact, but at its end, they inserted 'And this is proof that Kurdistan was here for thousands of years.' Saying that at the end of an article talking about Assyrian artifacts--can you imagine? They can't change the stones, but they are trying to play with it as much as possible. We've seen worse than what Saddam was doing against our

artifacts at their hands. It is much worse. The KDP's attempt to erase the connection between the Assyrians of today and the ancient Assyrians is worse than what Saddam was doing with his destruction of churches and forced demographic shifts in the Anfal campaign.

This Kurdification and appropriation of Assyrian heritage in the KRG likely serves the purpose of, once again, eliminating evidence of a continuous Assyrian identity within the region, and a symbolic hijacking and renaming of the heritage of the land.

### **Safety in Sarsing and the North**

Misho explains what the family was able to carry, and what they were forced to leave behind, as well as how they were able to stay alive despite nearly losing everything.

My creations in Mosul I don't have pictures of because they were made in the 90s, and they are now lost to time. We also didn't have time to take any of our family pictures when we were fleeing. The only things we were able to take with us were some clothes and important papers. We didn't even have money for airplane tickets. When we had stayed in Sarsing for about a year, the government would give us money coming from Baghdad. It would go to the bank and they would distribute it among us refugees. The government of Baghdad would pay all of the workers that were on its payroll, and the money used to go to Mosul, and to our towns, too. When the money would come to Tel Keppe, everyone would get it. Salaries would come until the time ISIS came.

This implies that the Central Government provided some form of relief to the refugees in the form of monetary compensation, albeit, a very small amount. The problem was that the Assyrians had to travel many long miles from their places of refuge to the banks where they would retrieve this money. As previously described, there were two possible directions for the Assyrians to flee, those being either east, to Erbil, or North to Nohadra/Dohuk. The latter was the path Misho's family took.

We Assyrians went to the homes of the Assyrians of Nohadra, because we had many relatives there. Our family stayed at Sarsing because we have family there. Assyrians of the Syriac Orthodox Church from Bashiqa also stayed there inside of the hall of the Church of the East. It was the hall for funerals and other events. Other Assyrians of Tel Keppe went to Nohadra and stayed in the Sennacherib Sports Club, while others stayed in the basements of churches. The Sports Club was a large place where you could do gymnastics, play table tennis, and other sports--but it certainly wasn't equipped to serve as the living quarters for so many people. None of these places were. This is where some of the Assyrians of Tel Keppe ended up staying.

This is also a common motif in modern Assyrian history, where the people are continuously dispersed in regions away from home, and/or divided along denominational lines while in exodus. Misho went on to highlight some of the hardships they faced.

The families slept on the floor, huddled together, without any privacy. Some of the NGOs who came did eventually give them mattresses to sleep on. These organizations would go

to the local priest and notify him of their intention to give aid and would ask him to divide up the aid amongst the refugees.

Here, again, one can see the vital roles that the NGOs and religious institutions played in the survival of the Assyrians. Misho explains that the reason the NGOs partnered with the priests was because the priests knew their flock and could provide a list of names to which aid could be partitioned. Once arriving at Sarsing, Misho delineates how:

Sarsing has an upper portion of the village in the mountains. The part of the village in the mountains is completely Assyrian. During the time of Mahmoud Barzani, most of the lower portion of the village was forcibly Kurdified. Ascending to the upper reaches of the village is not easy--it is quite difficult and the path is very narrow. When you get up into the mountains, it is primarily houses and farmsteads. We went there by car to live with our relatives so we can live more comfortably. Compared to many, we were lucky. There was no gas, and finding it became very difficult. Imagine, no gas in an oil rich country like Iraq!

And as previously explored, the facet of privacy is of importance to any human being, including refugees.

We stayed there until October 2015. We were there for more than a year, but we didn't stay with our relatives the whole time. We eventually rented a small house there with our own money. So we stayed a few months with our relatives and the rest in our own rented

home, because it isn't good to keep living with relatives in a small space with no privacy. There were some NGOs who would go to the church there and distribute food and other aid. People must remember this kindness. There was a very kind priest there who also helped, very pure and placable. As soon as we left Sarsing, he passed away in an accident.

It is at this point that Misho's family stayed there for an entire year, realizing that there was no hope of returning to their former home after the destruction wrought by ISIS, and the mistrust bred anew between them and their former neighbors--many of whom had supported ISIS.

### **Exodus Into the West**

As already explored, an estimated 9 out of 10 Assyrians now live outside of their homeland. Misho explains the mentality that drove this mass exodus. "After a while, the Assyrians said that they are constantly refugees within their own homeland." This came as a direct result of the constant stream of massacres and genocides against the Assyrians over the past 200 years.

And when ISIS entered the towns and villages of the Assyrians, they thought that they would never leave them, and would continue to live there. All of their wealth was left to the Sunnis who had turned on them. It was all over.

Misho then extrapolated on the paths the Assyrians could take to reach Western countries.

So, whoever had family in the diaspora went to Lebanon and Jordan, waiting to join their family where they resided. They had family in countries like America, though a good many in Australia. And when the people heard that Australia had opened its doors, they left in droves, first to Jordan. They left from Erbil airport to Jordan and waited to be accepted into their host nations.

Unfortunately, the path back to a life resembling some degree of normalcy was not easy, as Misho explained.

So we left Sarsing and went to the airport in Erbil, although, some unfortunate Assyrians to this day are waiting for their host countries to accept them, under poor living conditions in Jordan. They have been stuck there for many years and it is wholly uncertain when they would be accepted. They need help.

Jordan is a stepping stone from Iraq and even Syria to Western nations. Essentially, the Assyrians wait in these countries until they are accepted by their host nations--a process which can take many long years.

But we didn't go to Jordan. While we were staying in Sarsing, we heard that France was accepting some Assyrians and that they would go directly to France. There was no need to go to Jordan. On the other hand, Australia would not accept you unless you go spend a few years in Jordan first as a refugee. So, we weighed our options and determined that we

were already refugees within the homeland, so France accepted us as such. We were classified as political refugees.

Note that the label of political refugee is often paired with religious refugee, thus blurring the lines between the two. Misho explains that,

This was due to a period of time when France opened its borders for a small number of people who could be classified as refugees. We also didn't have anybody in France. If we did, they would come and visit us once a year. Some of the people of Sarsing also came with us to France, scattered about. What could they have done? The Kurds were increasing there every year, and with their education, they were taught to hate us. Also, when your sons and daughters finish school, and go to University, and then look for a job, they simply won't find it. They want to work, get married, start a family, but they can't. There is no way of life there. However, if they were members of Kurdish parties, such as the KDP, they would be given jobs. This was the same form of discrimination that the Ba'ath party would use. If you were not subservient to Saddam, you would not have a livelihood.

Here, one can see clear parallels between the old system in Iraq, and the new, where the one implemented by Western powers ended up having the same exact shortcomings and failures, further marginalizing already marginalized groups. Of note is also how many Assyrians in the West are estranged and with little social contact in their host nations. This isolation can have

detrimental effects on the psychological wellbeing of many Assyrian refugees. Luckily, Misho explains how once arriving in France, some things did see improvements.

France is a very good country. For 6 months the government didn't bother us when we came to France because the person who brought you here would answer for you. And after 6 months, they granted us residency for 10 years. It's not like America. Here, when they grant you residency, they give you a medical card and help you with food and drink.

However, when asked what will happen after these 10 years, Misho replied:

We do not know. If they give us citizenship, very well. If they do not, so be it. We simply do not know. It depends on the government. They have taken all our papers, so we don't even have evidence that we are Iraqi. The government of France took all documents from us including birth certificates, ID cards, national cards--everything. This is the law of France for political refugees seeking residency.

It can be deduced that even for refugees safely within Western nations, the uncertainty of their futures may be a source of stress and further contribute to or reinforce past traumas. Misho explained what it meant to be a political refugee.

He is the one who does not have the right to return to his home country. My daughter is there and I cannot even see her. For 6 years now I have not seen my daughter. Legally, I am not allowed to see her. And she cannot come to us because it is extremely difficult.

Even for simple tourism, where she would visit us and see us, the government of France would not accept her because of where she is applying from. For countries like Iraq, it is very difficult. They suspect that you're coming here to stay and to not return. Even a tourist from Iraq cannot come here. We have family in America, but we wouldn't be allowed to go see them because we are political refugees. We must stay solely in France. We, as political refugees, do not even have the right to go back to Iraq because we are in exile. I cannot work here because I do not know French. It's also not like America or Canada where there is a job for everyone. There aren't that many factories here.

Thus, scarcity of jobs, isolation, and suspicion by the host country are also all contributing factors to the reinforcement of trauma on the Assyrian refugees.

### **Assessing the Future: Hopes and Fears**

Mr. Misho gave quite an unexpected answer when asked if he expected the return of ISIS in the region.

ISIS is nothing new. It is not something that we discovered in our lifetime. ISIS is deep within the heart of every fundamentalist--a planted seed. All it needs is a little water and the right soil, and that man becomes an ISIS member. ISIS has been at all times, albeit under different names. Those who committed genocide in Hakkari were ISIS. Those who committed the Simele Massacre were ISIS. And even Bedr Khan Beg was ISIS. Soriya, where the priest down to every child was murdered--that was ISIS. ISIS was always around in the hearts of people.

But Misho did also fail to dispel fears of a prospective return of ISIS:

It's only a matter of time before another project of this sort occurs in the East and the remaining Assyrians are expelled. They want to do many things in the East, for example, just as in Afghanistan. And this game they want to expand to Iran. Only time can reveal these designs, and as always, we will pay dearly.

Thus, in a way, expecting the next great catastrophe has become routine for the remaining Assyrians. When asked if he would ever consider returning to the Assyrian homeland, Misho, with wide eyes and excitement replied:

Yes, but I can no longer live under the rule of the incompetent and racist Kurdish regime. We must go there, and be given our rights. We must go with our heads held high. We will not accept what they've been doing to us so far. Organizations like the UN must guarantee the region for us. Where else can be called Assyrian if not Nineveh, the heartland? There were many young men there without jobs who could easily have joined an Assyrian army under the Iraqi one, and who themselves wanted to. This is because in Iraq, a thousand dollars were given to soldiers and policemen. A thousand dollars for someone who is jobless is plenty, so they would have stayed. This was until we had to flee from Nineveh. But instead, each rite had created its own policing force in towns like Tel Keppe, so that terrorists wouldn't be able to infiltrate and bomb the churches. Some young men with guns would be employed as security in towns like Bakhdida, Bartella, and others. Dweth Nawsha was started by the parties, and NPU [Nineveh Plain Protection

Units] by ADM [Assyrian Democratic Movement]. The NPU soldiers came from all of the towns. So if our own are protecting us, like the NPU, then yes.

In other words, the factor that would most guarantee the return of the Assyrians to their ancestral lands would be Assyrian forces protecting Assyrian towns. The mistrust of Arab and Kurdish armies can clearly be traced to the aforementioned events of 2014 when the Assyrians were abandoned by the armies protecting them. Heartbreakingly, Misho exclaims how:

My family and I were the only ones who had passports, and when I went to interview at the French consulate, I did not want to go. Believe me when I tell you that there hasn't been a single night, since 2015 until now, where I've been able to sleep peacefully, because I am always thinking of my Nineveh and how my people were scattered and my nation broken. Thinking of my friends, my family. I had a very good job which I was passionate about. All of it is gone. Everything is gone. I cannot sleep. I do not have joy anymore. There has not been happiness in my life for a long time. My body is here, but my soul is there.

This tragic state of restless limbo in the west and PTSD-like symptoms is shared amongst many Assyrian refugees.

We cannot live far from it, and each Assyrian who went into the diaspora dreams of home. They sing of Nineveh. Eat like they did in Nineveh. When they paint, they paint Nineveh. All Assyrians are tied to the city of Nineveh and the Plain.

### **Part 3: The Account of Mr. Athra Kado**

#### **The Theft of Alqosh's Mayorship by the KDP**

The viewpoint of the account of Mr. Athra Kado differs from that of Mr. Misho's in that Alqosh and Tel Keppe are geographic opposites within the Nineveh Plain. Tel Keppe was the first Assyrian town to be taken over by ISIS, whereas Alqosh was untouched due to the return of the Assyrian youth who intended to defend their town. Tel Keppe is open to invaders from all sides, but Alqosh is nestled in the mountains. Mr. Athra Kado is a native of Alqosh, a town inhabited by Assyrians since time immemorial. Mr. Kado explains how:

It's actually the last town in the Plain. Half of Alqosh is on the mountain and the other half is on the plain. The famed monastery is in the mountains. After this mountain, a few kilometers, the KRG [Kurdish Regional Government] starts, but Alqosh is under the Central Government. So, geographically, Alqosh is at the top of Nineveh Plain.

Moving from north to south, Kado outlines how:

Then Sharafiya comes, a small village. Then Tel Isqof, which is similar to Alqosh--about four thousand to five thousand people. Then Baqopa. Then Batnaya. And then Tel Keppe. Now, however, because of the city's expansion, Mosul is almost connected to Tel Keppe.

Alqosh, due to its ancient stature and renown amongst Assyrians, has been nicknamed “the mother of Assyrian villages.” Thus, being the “mother,” the town is very important as a psychological symbol for the Assyrians. However, the term “village” is merely an expression, as Alqosh is one of the largest Assyrian towns to which Assyrians from all four corners of the homeland can retrace their heritage to. Hence, the occupation of the city by the Peshmerga and Asayish over the last few years has been of considerable stress and concern to many Assyrians.

In fact, the town was high on the radar of many human rights groups as, according to the Assyrian Policy Institute [API], in July 2017, the longtime democratically elected mayor of Alqosh, Faeiz Jahwareh, was illegally deposed by the KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party). The residents of the town held 3 protests against this action between July 20th and August 18th, 2017. The KDP, ignoring the wishes of the people, then installed Lara Yousif Zara, a KDP aligned politician, as mayor, effectively tightening their hold over the northern Nineveh Plain. As the API writes, “The validation of Zara as a legitimate representative by Western officials is demoralizing to the local communities and sends a harmful message that there is no recourse.” It is further demoralizing to the Assyrian minority which, with actions such as these, comes to believe less and less in the workings of democracy and the right to self determination. As Kado was present during these events, he recounts how “this actually started on the 12th of June, 2014, after two days of ISIS entering Mosul.” Here one sees proof that the KDP waited for chaos to ensue before implementing their agenda on the ground.

In two days, the council of the Alqosh subdistrict--which the majority of are KDP members--issued a paper that the mayor of Alqosh will be dismissed, and that the KRG

flags would be raised on the government buildings in Alqosh, despite it being an Assyrian town, not Kurdish.

It is important to note that this action was sudden and unexpected, and that many of the Assyrians were too fearful to challenge the new move. “So, they summoned him [the former mayor] who resided in the mayoral building in Alqosh to go to the council building, but we didn’t let this happen. We demonstrated and protested the change and didn’t let him go to the council building.” Here, on August 24th, 2017, according to the API, Alqosh police (officially part of the Iraqi Central Government police force, but effectively an extension of the Kurdish policing force, the Asayish, as Lara, being an Iraqi sub-district mayor, had it under her supervision) delivered notices to 11 residents of Alqosh who had organized the protests. These notices were stamped by the illegally imposed mayor, Lara Zara, and they warned against future “illegal” protests, threatening various consequences. Many who received such notices also reported receiving death threats from KDP members. The protests in Alqosh ended shortly after these notices and death threats and no other protests followed. Kado added that the Assyrians of Alqosh felt that:

Everything was burning and ISIS was in Mosul, why was this the time to change the mayor? That is, unless there was some hidden political agenda. So, we didn’t accept it and with the help of political pressure from the church and the ADM and other groups, it didn’t happen. In 2016 they tried to repeat it and remove him once again. In 2017, we tried to stop it, but we couldn’t. We protested twice, during which they changed him

anyway, and we had one more protest after Lara Zara was put in the office by the KDP. She was ‘elected’ by the council, the majority of whose members are KDP members. The people had no say, even when they protested.

Here, one sees how the KDP uses its power on the ground to disenfranchise and rob the Assyrians of their right to democratically elect their representatives. According to the API, during all of this, the Governor of Nineveh (aligned with the Central Government and not the KRG) issued multiple orders for the former mayor to be reinstated. Zara refused to comply, maintaining her position by force of the Peshmerga. Finally, on July 15th of 2018, the Governor made one last order for Jahwareh’s reinstatement. When the mayor attempted to return to his office, he was detained by the KDP Asayish policing forces, taken to an unknown site, and severely beaten. This, of course, sowed terror within the inhabitants of Alqosh, and was one of the factors as to why no more demonstrations were held since. In fact, today, brutality against Assyrians is part and parcel of life in areas controlled by the KRG. For example, as of November 17th, 2021, the API reports that in response to a peaceful Assyrian protest held against the “longstanding and systemic inequalities in the allocation of public resources and infrastructure,” authorities of the KRG deployed riot police, who used physical force as a first resort tactic. Human rights violations such as these seek to deter further protests by Assyrians for their rights, and aim to terrorize those who dare speak out against the status quo.

But what was the point of removing a democratically elected mayor in an Assyrian town outside of the bounds of the KRG? According to the API, under Zara’s new leadership, in September of 2017, the KDP was able to hold the referendum in Alqosh, despite Alqosh being in Iraqi federal territory and not the KRG (the referendum was a vote on whether the Kurdish

region was a part of Iraq). In fact, due to the KDP wresting control of the Mayor's office in Alqosh, Alqosh became the only town in the Nineveh Plain to hold the referendum. Many Assyrians boycotted the vote, and in an attempt to further appropriate and Kurdify the town, signs reading "Yes to Referendum!" were put up to sway the vote. Kado claimed that:

They [the KDP] put pressure to finish the process of the Mayoral switch quickly because they had the referendum coming up. They wanted to do the referendum in Alqosh as a part of the KRG, despite it being under the authority of the Central Government in Baghdad. We Assyrians in Alqosh do not want to live within the KRG. We want to stay within the Central Government.

To make matters worse, Kado reports various fraudulent actions on the part of the KDP.

The funny thing is that all of the people who are allowed to vote in Alqosh are two thousand, but there were four thousand yes votes for the referendum in Alqosh. Just the members of the KDP who were first to go and vote were a maximum of three hundred people. All of the people of Alqosh are about five thousand, and about two thousand are allowed to vote. Who can imagine where all those extra votes came from?

This attempt at forcibly integrating Alqosh (on the border between KRG and Central Government territory) was, what Kado believes, to be part of the KDP's agenda to forcibly

appropriate and Kurdify the Assyrian towns East of Mosul. In fact, as the API claims, it has been for more than a decade that the KDP has been trying to annex Alqosh, and by extension, the larger Nineveh Plain, to the KRG.

### **The Disarming of the Nineveh Guards**

Kado laid out the tightening grip of the KDP on the Assyrian towns of the Nineveh Plain.

There were Iraqi police aligned with the Central Government, but they didn't have that much strength on the ground. So, it was mostly the Asayish and Peshmerga, controlled by the KDP. In the beginning, from 2003 until 2006, they weren't that strong. They came to this area after 2003. They needed a couple of years to get stronger and to push their agenda on the ground. And when Al Qaeda came to Mosul, they were increasing their propaganda about what was happening under the Central Government, and how the people had to be under their control because they were better and offered protection. In reality, they did whatever they wanted with impunity because of the loosening grip of the Central Government. Even in their media, over and over again, they drilled the idea that 'if it wasn't for the Peshmerga, your women would be taken by ISIS. So, you have to support us, no matter what we do. Even if we are stealing your house, you have to shut up and not say anything because we protected you.' But in fact, they just fled, they didn't fight--they didn't do anything.

According to this account, contrary to the image of the Peshmerga and Asayish forces in Western media, the Assyrians have seen the ambivalent, if not malevolent face of the KDP. In fact, right before ISIS' invasion, the Peshmerga disarmed Assyrian groups and went from home to home confiscating weapons and munitions, according to Kado. Interestingly, the new Assyrian force protecting the Assyrian towns in the Nineveh Plain, called the NPU (Nineveh Plain Protection Units) is not backed by the KDP, unlike the former protection force, but by the Central Government in Baghdad. One can see how the Assyrians no longer wished to align with Kurdish factions after the blatant betrayal and attempt at "feeding the sheep to the wolves." When asked if the Assyrians were fearful of another ISIS offensive, Kado stated:

If we weren't afraid of another ISIS attack, we wouldn't create a force of our own. When ISIS came, every single Assyrian was thinking of leaving unless the NPU was created. We started creating it in June, and it became official in February 2015. But until that time, every Assyrian wanted to leave. They were hopeless and had nothing to stay for. When they saw their own men taking up arms and training, seeing them as a real force, many people stayed and waited for this force to take control.

Again, it is clear that security by the Assyrians for the Assyrians appears to be the primary factor in Assyrians either leaving or staying and protecting themselves. It may be posited that this is actually a step away from the victimhood mentality, as unlike before 2014, after 2014, the Assyrians began to take their security into their own hands, no longer depending on external rescue.

Thus, it can be deduced that it is of immense psychological importance to the Assyrians to have a force protecting their own people, run by their own. As Misho made clear in the previous section, Assyrians will not live with peace of mind in areas controlled by the factions that have historically betrayed them to malignant forces. Likewise, they will not return to such areas lest they be protected by their own. In fact, according to the API, the towns with the highest rates of return, post-ISIS, have been those protected by the NPU, and not Kurdish Peshmerga or Shiite militias. Unfortunately, the Nineveh Plain is split today between these factions. Alqosh, as has been discussed, has been politically hijacked and run by the KDP. More southern towns, like Bakhdida, which are run by the NPU, have seen higher rates of return, and have the largest Assyrian populations. Other less fortunate towns, such as Tel Keppe, controlled by the Iran-backed Shiite militias and Shabaks, have seen the least number of returns, as many Assyrians have been actively blocked from returning by threats and human rights abuses. As Kado explains:

The militias are the worst, especially the Shiite militias, like the Babylonian Brigade, which claims to be Chaldean Christian. There are maybe twenty Iraqi-Christians and the rest are all Shiite. This force is supported by Iran. They take orders from Iran, not the Iraqi government. In addition to this are the Shabak Militias, like the 50 Brigade and 30 Brigade, both connected to Iran. After that comes the Peshmerga, in the areas controlled by them, from whom we are facing political pressure every day. So it's either the NPU, Peshmerga, or the Shiite militias. In terms of statistics, the majority return to towns and areas controlled by the NPU. With them, you don't have to be loyal to any outside group because the people of the town are controlling the town itself. You don't have to be loyal

to any outside political group, ethnicity, or religion--it's just controlling yourself by yourself.

When discussing how Assyrians felt about the current security in Iraq, in his own interview, Misho stated:

Of course the remaining Assyrians feel safest under the NPU. For the Arabs, there is no true national government anymore. The government of Iraq is militia based now. It is not centralized in a way that it would be able to work for the good of the whole nation. Each one works for his own party and militia. For us Assyrians in the Nineveh Plain, the majority of us wanted to stay with the Central Government, not with the Kurds. Why? Because the Kurds have a lot of fights with neighboring nations, such as the Turks, Iranians, Arabs, and so on.

Here, again, can be seen the pressure on the Assyrians to choose between two forces, in this case, Shiite Arab, or Sunni Kurdish.

### **Peshmerga & Terror Against Assyrian Refugees**

Parallel to Misho's account of the Assyrian refugees from Tel Keppe being stopped at the Tesqopa checkpoint by the Asayish and being forced to turn back, Kado describes how the people of Tel Isqof--the town between Baqopa and Alqosh (and south of Sharafiya)--were

likewise stopped at a checkpoint. With this, it becomes clear that multiple checkpoints were set up between the major Assyrian towns of the Nineveh Plain and used for the purpose of stopping refugees from reaching safety, forcing them to return back to the dangers of an undefended front against ISIS.

When the people of Tel Isqof started fleeing, all of the ways to get out of Tel Isqof were closed except one, which was a main road set up as an Asayish checkpoint to control the entrance and exit of the town. But the Asayish closed that checkpoint and prevented people from leaving Tel Isqof. 'We are protecting you, do not leave.' You would think that if they were protecting them, their defenses would be set up in front of the town, between them and ISIS, not behind it. The point of this was to choke the roads and not allow any of the Assyrians to escape.

In fact, at this point, the Peshmerga and Asayish had already abandoned the main front against ISIS without firing a single bullet. They only maintained the checkpoints set up north of the Assyrian towns, not south, as would have been the defensive position. Kado continues to paint the horror scene that unfolded, resulting in a clear violation of human rights on part of the Peshmerga.

The Assyrians argued that they were free to leave or stay, and that they had the right to, but still, they didn't let them pass. So one of the guys from Tel Isqof said, 'I have family and I want to go. You can't stop me.' He started arguing with an Asayish soldier. During

that time, a general of the Peshmerga named Ismael, though his last name is not known to me, was passing by and going to the town, southwards. He saw that there was an argument and that people were gathering at the checkpoint and arguing with the soldiers. He came to the commotion, got out of his vehicle, saw that a young man was arguing with the Asayish, took the gun from another Asayish soldier, and then shot the Assyrian from Tel Isqof in the leg.

At this point, Kado paused to reiterate, “This was a general. That general, after a few months, was killed by a bomb.” What this shows is a clear disregard for the wellbeing of those the Peshmerga professed to protect. More importantly, it is a clear indicator that the Peshmerga was using the same tactics of ISIS, using force, bodily injury, and psychological terror to either disperse people or control them. In fact, Kado continues to explain precisely how the Assyrians responded to this violation of human rights.

That man fell on the ground, and out of all of the people, nobody touched him because they were afraid that if they were afraid that if they went and took him off the ground, the Asayish would shoot them. So he stayed on the ground for more than 15 minutes, bleeding, and then, finally, the Asayish eventually said ‘go and take him.’

With just a bullet, and a single man bleeding on the ground, the Asayish and Peshmerga were able to immobilize and terrorize a town of thousands. In that precious time that they were waiting, ISIS was advancing. Luckily, “because of the renewed pressure from the people, they

were forced to open the checkpoint.” This was likely due to the advance of ISIS from the south, as it became clear that the Assyrians would either have to brave the Asayish and Peshmerga holding them captive, or fall victim to ISIS in the same horrific way the Yezidis of Sinjar had. Effectively, what the Peshmerga and Asayish had created at each one of these checkpoints was a bottleneck of refugees scrambling for safety, but rendered immobile due to the threat of being harassed and shot at. Meanwhile, Kado explains what happened in one of the southern towns of the plain. “In Bakhdida, until 9 PM, the Bishop was calling the Peshmerga leaders and asking what was happening, because he had heard of the fleeing.” Of note is how it is the role of religious leaders to map and keep track of political and military moves within the society.

The Peshmerga leaders replied, ‘No, we will not leave. ISIS will not pass our borders unless over our bodies.’ They insisted that they wouldn’t leave their posts, and that the rumors in Sinjar were false, and that they would fight to the last drop of their blood. These were their real words, and we were hearing it in their propaganda. After 11 PM, they began withdrawing from the frontlines. There were Assyrians from Bakhdida that were on the frontlines with them, and in that case, they knew that the Peshmerga were withdrawing. Otherwise, nobody would have known. We had more than 40,000 civilians just in Bakhdida. They would have been a perfect meal for ISIS. But they acted quickly after they heard that, and they started fleeing at midnight. At 3 AM, ISIS came to Bakhdida. More than 40,000 just from Bakhdida, and hundreds of thousands of other Assyrians from that area, fled to Erbil in two or three hours.

Note that these towns were of the eastern route described, not paired with Tel Keppe and Alqosh, as those were of the northern route headed for Nohadra/Dohuk.

Some Assyrians stayed in the towns. About 50 of them were freed after a few weeks, and the rest are still in the hands of ISIS. More than 30-40 Assyrians from Bakhdida--they are not announcing the number, which I don't understand why--Assyrian women, old men, are to this day in the hands of ISIS. Until now nobody knows what happened to them.

Kado recounted how he was personally involved in the release of one of these hostages that ISIS held.

One of them I had contact with directly. We went to buy her from ISIS. She was taken to Syria, Raqqa, ISIS' capital. There were some groups that supported taking her out of there, so she is safe now. They were taking them to Mosul, then through Syria, and then finally to Raqqa--the area most under their control.

### **The Final Kurdish Retreat From the Perspective of the Residents of Alqosh**

The Assyrians of Alqosh, unlike those of other towns, were perhaps more proactive in their own self defense, despite Kurdish pressures to curb such efforts. "In Alqosh, when the 3rd of August happened in Sinjar, the people of Alqosh put pressure on the Asayish demanding that they'd help them with controlling the checkpoints, and that they'd have to personally be there."

Here, unsurprisingly, the people of Alqosh are displaying a clear distrust of the group inflicting the trauma.

To be at the checkpoint is better than to just wake up and see ISIS on our heads. The Asayish refused, insisting that they were controlling the situation. So, political parties like ADM and the Communist Party gathered and put pressure on them. There was a compromise that for each period of time during each day there would be duties for each type of group.

When asked if the Assyrians had any warning as to what was about to happen on the day of the ISIS invasion, Kado responded:

Actually, we had the opposite. As I told you, there were crimes committed during that time by the Peshmerga. On the 3rd of August, 2014, Sinjar, the Yezidi area, was attacked by ISIS with the same scenario. The Peshmerga fled and ISIS came. You know, they kidnapped thousands of women and children, and killed many people. Then we were warned by that incident that happened in Sinjar. The warning was the very unfortunate fate of the Yezidis in Sinjar.

Kado, having already described the disarmament of the Assyrians by Kurdish forces, tells of the withdrawal and betrayal process from the perspective of the guards of Alqosh.

On the 6th of August, when ISIS came, my two brothers were guarding the checkpoint as soldiers of the ADM [Assyrian Democratic Movement], at the main entrance of Alqosh. Part of the deal made was that nobody would be allowed into the city after 6 or 7 PM. Even an Alqoshian would not be allowed to enter, no matter what. This was the curfew set in place to keep any militants from breaching the city. So, a group of Peshmerga came to Alqosh, numbering two or three cars. My brother told them that they could not pass, and that there was another way to get to Dohuk. There is a road that passes through Alqosh and goes to Dohuk, and then there is another road outside of the town. The Peshmerga replied that they wanted to go to Dohuk because they were on vacation and were changing posts with another group of Peshmerga. Again, my brother said that they could not pass, but they kept insisting that they couldn't go via the other road, so my brother eventually let them pass. After that, in a few minutes, another, this time larger, convoy of Peshmerga came to the checkpoint. When my brothers saw that, they closed the checkpoint, and when this group approached, again, they claimed they were on vacation. They insisted that there was no trouble and that everything was fine and that they were simply going on vacation. One of these Peshmerga in the other car was Assyrian. We have Assyrians who have joined the Peshmerga because being aligned with the KDP means easier access to jobs. He leaned out from the window of the vehicle and he shouted in Assyrian, 'No brothers! We are not on vacation. Take your families and flee because ISIS is behind us! We left our posts at Tel Keppe and ISIS is coming behind us. Just take your families and leave!' And when the other cars heard that and realized that the men from Alqosh knew, they floored it off the side of the road and, with their weapons, machine guns, doshkas, military cars, everything, they fled. By about 9:30 PM,

the people of Alqosh realized that there was no one protecting the borders, no one on the front lines, and that ISIS could enter Alqosh at any time. They managed to flee as quickly as possible. While they were going to Dohuk, the Peshmerga military vehicles were racing with them. The people that had sworn to protect us were literally racing us to safety.

This account matches that of Misho's, where the Peshmerga pulled their forces from the front lines in Tel Keppe without alerting the residents of the plain. It took a mass tragedy to avoid further mass tragedies. "ISIS had been in Mosul since June 2014. On the 3rd of August, when ISIS attacked Sinjar, they [the Assyrians] started fleeing." As the study already showed during Misho's account, this first flight was the inexplicable and sudden flight of the Assyrians from their homes, as a false rumor spread that ISIS was approaching. When the Assyrians tried to flee, they were forced to return again by the Asayish and then were finally allowed to flee on the 6th, mere hours before ISIS entered Tel Keppe, as the Peshmerga and Asayish were no longer at their posts manning the checkpoints. "ISIS managed to enter an emptied Tel Keppe on the 6th of June. Then, one by one, people from Batnaya, and people from Tel Isqof all fled northward." According to Misho, it was the towns Tel Keppe, Bakhdida, and Bartella that fell on the same day, so the latter mentioned by Kado may have been emptied on the same day (the 6th of June), but perhaps were entered at a later date, as ISIS moved from town to town looting. Kado explains the mentality pervading this sudden mass movement out of the Plain. "They [the Assyrians] were like, 'We have to flee. This happened in Sinjar, so it will happen to us too.' It was as if dominoes were falling, and nothing could stop them." These dominoes falling may allude to the "political game" many Assyrians suspect. Furthermore, as the main power of ISIS

lay in its psychological intimidation and sowing of fear, one can see that its sheer brutality against the Yezidis of Sinjar was enough to persuade the Assyrians of Nineveh to abandon their homes, as they had likewise been disarmed by the Peshmerga before the ISIS invasion, thus robbing them of a means of self defense and a sense of psychological security. The reason for this sudden exodus, Kado explains, is:

When you are a Kurd, or when you are an Arab in an Assyrian area, and your officer is fleeing and has left you alone, there is a very tiny possibility that you would stand and fight. But when you are Assyrian, for example an Alqoshian at the checkpoint down the road from Alqosh, and you get an order to flee because ISIS is coming, well, you would never leave your position because you have your family behind you. But a Kurd from Erbil or Dohuk, for example, wouldn't care because they would still safely return to their own families. This is the tribal mindset Iraq is stuck in today.

### **The Vandalism and Theft by Peshmerga Forces**

Kado went on to describe his family's specific circumstances.

There were some youth who stayed to protect Alqosh. My two brothers had two cars, all full of my family, so they both had to go to Dohuk. The way from Alqosh to Dohuk is a maximum of forty minutes, but on that day, it took more than three hours. They arrived at about 2 AM in Dohuk, and at 4 AM they went back to Alqosh. They went back to try

whatever they could do. If ISIS would come to Alqosh, you'd assess the situation and see if you're able to fight them. If not, then that is your ability. On the other hand, there was the possibility that thieves would come to Alqosh. Because of the shock that the families of Alqosh received from the news, the majority of them left their houses open. The people just took whatever they could. Why? Because when you're sitting in your house and you hear that ISIS is coming, you will just take whatever you see as important, like important paperwork and ID's. In Iraq, we have a lot of papers, unlike Western countries. Each one of us has 3-4 official government IDs. So, take as many important things as you can, and then just sit in the car and leave. Many people were leaving their homes open because of this. Eventually, some of the youth of Alqosh banded together and returned. Some didn't even leave Alqosh in the first place. Those who stayed and those who returned were staying so they could try to prevent ISIS from coming to Alqosh, and if they didn't, then to prevent any damage to the town.

At this point, the Assyrians who realized they were abandoned to the onslaught of ISIS either completely fled, or opened pockets of resistance in whatever way they could, having been disarmed. Kado further highlighted reasons for returning to the dangers of the front, which had by now moved to Alqosh, as all of the other towns were overrun.

In Tel Isqof, where ISIS stayed less than 3 weeks, they opened and robbed about twenty to thirty houses only, because they didn't have time to rob more. But when the Peshmerga went there, every single house was robbed. ISIS robbed a maximum of thirty homes,

taking the weapons and gold. Yet when the Peshmerga ‘liberated’ Tel Isqof, they stayed there, made it into a military area that civilians could not enter, and started stealing things from the houses. Everything, even the blocks of electricity, were stolen from the houses. In other houses, they destroyed the wires of electricity, destroyed everything, probably so people would not be able to return.

The Peshmerga’s attempt to make the return of Assyrians to the region either unstable or impossible was clearly evident. As Kado explains, this served the purpose of psychologically weakening the resolve of the refugees, making their return unlikely.

They aimed at destroying the hope of the people from ever returning to their homes. There is no other logical goal behind taking the wires from the houses and destroying everything else and making the houses unlivable. Whoever was recording them, they were either beating them or arresting them. One time, an inhabitant of Tel Isqof who had stayed behind recorded them and went to the officer of Peshmerga. He said, ‘Sir, this is what’s happening. Please look at the video. You have to stop this.’ The officer took the phone and deleted the videos, saying, ‘What videos?’ That is why it’s important that the men of Alqosh stayed in Alqosh. If they hadn’t done so during those days, the Peshmerga would have done the same in Alqosh and maybe raised propaganda that ISIS was still in Alqosh so that the people of Alqosh wouldn’t have the opportunity to return back.

Once again, one can see the need for self protection by the people of the towns themselves. Finally, Kado argues that:

Less than a month later, at the end of August, the families began returning to Alqosh, settling again. Had everyone left, even including the men from Alqosh, I don't think that the Peshmerga would have allowed these families to return, as we saw with Tel Isqof. They would have forced us to remain in Dohuk for two and a half years, as they did with the people of Tel Isqof.

While the Assyrians of Alqosh were forced on their exodus to Dohuk, where they stayed and what kind of aid they received depended wholly on their connections. As Kado explains:

The Assyrians have many towns in Dohuk, what we call Nohadra. We also have areas like Nahla and Zakho where we also have hundreds of villages, even though they are small. But we also have towns, and people who own buildings inside the cities, and even buildings belonging to the churches. So these were the places where they went. I knew a family of colleagues from Khoyada, the Chaldo-Assyrian Student and Youth Union, so my family stayed with them in a village named Dehe, about one and half hours from Alqosh, to the North. So, many people have relatives and friends, people they know, and the rest were like, 'I know this family, I will call them, and I will bring my neighbor with me.'

Here, one can see how the close-knit societal structure of the Assyrians in the homeland actually served as a safety net in times of turmoil, providing both living quarters and temporary resources.

It was managed in some way. Of course in the first week it was difficult, especially for the people of Bakhdida, because they were more than 50,000 people, so it was hard to contain them all at once. But then the churches started managing it and the people started helping out, and international organizations created camps for them.

The main safety net in terms of providing living conditions and psychological relief appears to be the NGOs, the Assyrian churches, and the connections that a refugee family already had.

### **Potential Reasons for the Kurdish Retreat**

Counsel DeKelaita made the case that, “The Peshmerga did not want the Assyrians to die, rather, they wanted to take their lands. They wanted them out of that territory.” Thus, the Peshmerga left the Assyrians defenseless so as to synthesize a pseudo-exodus out of the Nineveh Plain region, strengthening KDP territorial claims once the Peshmerga returned to reclaim former military lines. In theory, this would also have enabled them to more easily control and confiscate Assyrians lands. According to the API, illegal theft of Assyrian lands in the Dohuk region of the KRG and in the Ankawa district of Erbil has been a common threat against Assyrians. This

design was likely extended to the Nineveh Plain, which, while not a part of the KRG, was controlled by the KDP politically, and militarily by the Peshmerga and Asayish. However, there were also economic reasons for keeping the Assyrians away from their homes and in the limbo of refugee camps. Kado explains:

Many of these refugees were employees and workers, and economically, they were temporarily living in the KRG, so they purchased goods from Kurdish vendors in Erbil or Dohuk.. The economy of the KRG was better off because of the refugees, but after the majority of the people returned back to their areas, the economy dramatically declined in Dohuk and Erbil. These were the benefits that the KRG reaped. In return, we got nothing--nothing but more political pressure, more corruption, more cultural appropriation and Kurdification. Even the Kurdish employees in the KRG haven't been getting their salaries since April 2020. So, the negative things increased, and the heads of the KRG just kept talking and taking. Our misery led to their becoming wealthy, and they wanted to keep it that way for as long as possible. That is why they didn't let us defend ourselves, and why they didn't let us return to our homes.

Thus, the benefits of the Assyrian exodus to the KDP were twofold: the annexation of Assyrian lands to the KRG, as well as the boosting of the KRG economy. Furthermore, when discussing the victimhood mentality of many Assyrians, the case is often made that the Assyrians did not make an attempt to defend themselves, and thus are not truly victims. However, as has been continuously noted in this paper, the Assyrians were disarmed and disallowed an

opportunity to defend themselves and their towns by the Peshmerga and Asayish that they had been cooperating with. Kado states:

In 2005, there were plans in motion with the Americans, and the first steps went forward to have a kind of force, more than just a militia, to be trained for the Nineveh Plain. But it was stopped mostly by the KDP again. The Kurdistan Democratic Party, the Barzani-led party, and other parties in the KRG, did not want this to move ahead.

### **The KDP: Democracy or Clan Mentality?**

One of the main takeaways from Yakoub's work was that the Assyrians have been in a perpetual state of decline economically, militarily, and politically (and as this paper seeks to explore, psychologically). One of the main reasons for this was the impact of the millet system on the region as a whole. However, while the millet system affected Middle Eastern peoples on a larger scale (as the Ottoman Empire enveloped vast swathes of land that today constitute multiple autonomous nation states), today, on a micro-scale, the whole of Iraq, unlike other republics, such as those of Turkey and Iran, is ruled by what is known as the Clan system. This, just like the millet system, results in the fragmentation of the identity of peoples, the inefficient running of government, and a general degeneration into bigotry and mismanagement of resources based on the political might of a clan. In other words, "might becomes right." Athra gives a historic breakdown of this political system.

In 1933, in Simele, there was an Iraqi army that slaughtered our people. In 1969, in Soriya, because of problems between the Ba'athist army and the Kurds, we fell in the middle and many Assyrian people were killed. This time, we saw with our own eyes that the Iraqi army and the Peshmerga fled. Not because they didn't have weapons--which was a huge lie. Not because they were not trained, or anything else of the sort. But because there are political parties controlling these governments, and these political parties are run by the Kurdish clans. As I mentioned, the Peshmerga is controlled by the KDP or specific tribes. In turn, the KDP is run by the Barzani clan, which has controlled the KRG for many years now. The majority of the officers of the Iraqi army in Mosul's 2nd battalion were KDP members and Kurds, and the rest of the army in Mosul consisted of various Arab parties. So it was a political deal between the Arab clans aligned with ISIS and the Kurdish clans to flee. They withdrew their positions without shooting anything because it had been agreed beforehand. And, as you know, after Mosul, the same happened in the Nineveh Plain. When something happens multiple times, it is no longer just a 'conspiracy theory,' as you say in the West. We Assyrians have been feeling the results of these actions here daily.

Kado, here, paints a picture where the armed forces are controlled by the parties, such as the KDP, and these parties are in turn controlled by clans within Iraq, such as the Barzani clan. The fault of this system is that blood and alignment with clan or party becomes the main mechanism by which to attain jobs and resources necessary for survival, and thus a tool for political control, suppression, and coercion of not just minorities, but of every single individual in society.

Even a Kurd of the Barzani tribe who disagrees with how the heads are running things cannot speak out. It is democracy only in name. Meanwhile, in their schools, their children are taught to hate minorities and to see everything as Kurdish. Do you see why the clan system is so strong?

Hence, even institutions such as the education system are used to reinforce the clan system and implement control by the oligarchical few of the KRG. Kado then explained how the clans even went as far as embezzling funds meant for the refugees that had lost their homes because of their actions.

There is a Barzani organization which many international organizations go through, owned by the Barzani family. It is easier to go through them because they control everything in the KRG politically. There were many cases of corruption that they were accused of. Sometimes, they steal money from the organizations, sometimes they use it politically, other times they come and distribute aid meant for the refugees in the KDP headquarters instead. Even though the food could be coming from the UNHCR, they can direct it somewhere other than its intended destination. These are some ways they use international aid for their own benefits and to blackmail us.

Thus, not only did the clan system contribute to the refugee crisis in the first place, but it also siphoned money from humanitarian aid programs.

They still received military support internationally. Billions of dollars came to them. For every single international organization that comes here, whatever they are distributing to the refugees is controlled by the KDP. The KDP is using that humanitarian support to put pressure on the refugees. They also take a percentage of the aid money coming in.

Here one can see how even international aid is used to place economic and psychological stressors on refugees who are used as political pawns. But how exactly does all aid go through the institutions run by the Barzani clan, and by extension, the KDP party? To give an example, Kado relays how in Alqosh,

In late 2020, the minister of immigration brought food baskets to the people in Alqosh, and they [the Alqoshians] wanted to distribute them in cooperation with the Church. You see, the current priest in the Church doesn't get along with Lara Zara--the illegally imposed mayor of Alqosh--because he does not not accept many of the actions of the KDP against the Assyrians. So, when the trucks came and the Church wanted to start distributing, she stopped them and the priest, using force and the Asayish police. They forced the trucks to leave Alqosh, and then she brought them back again in the morning of the next day. Now, she wanted to distribute the food baskets. But the minister of immigration, Evan Jabro retaliated by saying that Zara does not have the right to distribute them, and so the trucks left once again. In the end, the people of Alqosh needed them, so they came back again. So Zara brought the Asayish, arrested the drivers, telling them that they wouldn't leave Alqosh until the food was distributed under the control of Zara. Zara would distribute it because it had to be through a member of the KDP.

Here, one sees an example of how aid, no matter the source, is distributed through KDP members or associates by force. This serves to boost the image of the KDP as, on the surface, it appears that the members of the party are responsible for the aid. It also provides ample chance for the KDP to embezzle aid as they act as the middleman. Kado also provides an example of how the KDP and Barzani clan blackmail individuals and collective peoples alike into aligning with party interests.

There were members of the former Nineveh Plain Guards from Bakhdida who, after being disarmed by the Peshmerga, fled to Erbil and stayed in the camps in Ankawa. When the NPU and Iraqi army took back and controlled Bakhdida, the situation began stabilizing and people started wanting to get back to their homes. However, the families of these Nineveh Plain Guards were prevented from getting back to Bakhdida. They were told that if they went back to Bakhdida, their salaries would be stopped, and they would be dismissed. The KDP could do this because the Guards had been aligned with and funded by the KRG, but why would they want this? Because they were using these refugees to put pressure on the international community and showing how the situation in the KRG was not good, despite it being safe for the people to return.

Here is more evidence that the KRG used refugees as a direct means for acquiring and pocketing more international aid.

They were also arguing for the Peshmerga to be allowed to get into Bakhdida and to control it, so the people would feel more 'safe.' It didn't work because many people

didn't care about their salaries anymore. They couldn't continue to live in camps forever and went back to their homes.

In addition to using the refugees as a means to embezzle funds, the KDP also intended to use them as propaganda to further their territorial claims. This gross neglect of the true problems of the refugees, such as their extended time as refugees, most certainly negatively impacted them. "Many people returned, took different jobs, and returned to their lives. When the KRG saw that it was out of control and that all the people were going back, they stopped trying to keep them from returning." Kado also provides a general structure of the clan system--specifically that of the KDP.

The KDP controls the government, the mayor, the army, the ministers, down to the last soldier--everything--the whole system. During Saddam's time, they were using their positions in the government to do what the Ba'ath party needed, not according to the Iraqi laws and needs of Iraq. Saddam's party hijacked government positions for the good of itself and its own members. Today, the KDP is doing the same exact thing. For example, you cannot be a manager of a refugee camp if you are not a KDP member. It is very difficult to get employed if you're not a KDP member. You also cannot take a position in the KRG government if you are not KDP. And other Kurdish parties in their parliament hold no real power, and are just puppets and proxies of the KDP. This was exactly the same situation with Saddam's Ba'ath party.

It is also integral to take note of the fact that groups such as the Peshmerga and the Asayish are not united or centralized by any means.

The system in the KRG is tribal. There are a few families controlling the government, and even the rest of the Kurds are affected negatively by these families, such as the Barzanis. One tribe controls the Asayish in one area, and another tribe controls it in another. From the officer down to the last soldier, all are from this one tribe.

This is further an example of how every position within the KRG is either paid for or predetermined by clan affiliation--an arrangement seriously harming any Assyrian not aligned with the KDP or other proxy Kurdish parties. Kado even outlines how infighting between the tribes affects the Assyrians, who themselves often have no stakes in the fights.

There are often problems between tribes, which has affected the Assyrians also. For example, some tribes are taking our lands, and the court, via legal documents, rules in cases that the land actually belongs to the Assyrians. But the government cannot do anything because the tribe is strong, and they cannot control it. The government controlled by Barzani can't do anything because the opposing tribe is also big. You even hear talk like, 'They are Assyrians, why are we making problems between two Kurdish tribes?'

Hence, in order to maintain the status quo of the tribal system within the KRG, the inalienable rights of the Assyrians are often thrown out even in the courts, and their territorial

possessions confiscated without compensation. For example, according to the API, on April 27th, 2021, 1000 dunams of agricultural lands belonging to local Assyrian farmers in Ankawa were expropriated without any notice given to the owners. The farmers were not offered compensation and the land is planned to be used to build villas, luxury apartments, a hotel, and a mall. The API states that, “There are numerous cases across the IKR [or KRG] where Kurdish officials, individuals, or developers have seized Assyrian lands on which they build new properties for either personal or commercial use.”

### **Fear in Today’s Alqosh and the Town’s Potential Future**

In the interview, Kado made the case that the main reason behind the political annexation of Alqosh by the KRG was so that the referendum could be held in the town, despite Alqosh not holding any Kurdish population. According to him, the purpose of the 2017 referendum was:

Just a step by Masoud Barzani to make a historic record that he made the referendum--that’s it. That’s what it showed. The real result was that the Central Government stopped the support coming to them and took back Kirkuk and parts of the Nineveh Plain. International support for the KRG also decreased. Of course, we Alqoshians suffered greatly because of this move, as well. There is no democracy, freedom of expression, or free speech here, anymore.

In the West, however, the referendum was sold as a good thing, despite its effects on the marginalization of minority ethnic groups such as the Assyrians and the Yezidis. “They [the KDP] are perfect in propaganda. They show the best side of things, which is unrealistic. They

just lie and repeat the lie until they themselves believe it.” This unrealistic image is further reinforced by the education system in the KRG indoctrinating the Kurdish youth with bigoted dogma. Kado also explains how Alqosh cannot truly be integrated into the KRG, resulting in underhanded tactics in institutionally incorporating it into the fabric of the KDP.

They can't take it, and it's not easy because of Article 140 in the Iraqi Constitution. There is the UN and other international organizations that have to be a part of this decision as well. They can't just come and take it. However, in their propaganda they portray it as a part of the KRG, and until now, they are trying to install branches of KRG institutions in the Nineveh Plain, specifically in the areas that they control, like Alqosh. It is aimed at garnering employees and supporters, and spreading their presence, so that later they can say that it is a part of the KRG.

Thus, while Alqosh is politically annexed by the KRG, which is eroding the rights of the native Assyrians who do not wish to be incorporated into the fabric of the KDP, the town is in actuality still within the official, though less practical, control of the Central Government in Baghdad. Kado outlines how this situation was not the one the Assyrians envisioned post 2003.

We were waiting for more open ears and eyes from the international community, especially from the U.S.A., which was the main reason that Saddam fell. He deserved to fall, and we were waiting for better, but unfortunately, it did not come. As we see it, they are one of the supporters of these actions by the KDP.

This sentiment echoes the “You break it, you buy it” reasoning of Counsel DeKelaita, which asserts that the U.S. is directly responsible for the political failures of the system installed following the 2003 invasion. The Alqoshians also live within their town with a certain degree of fear. As Kado explains:

The last time we protested in 2017, many of us were threatened by her ‘officially’ by letters. She would send a letter to the police station to inform us that if we go out and protest without her permission, we would be arrested. It’s like asking somebody for permission to protest against them. That doesn’t work, and it is a form of control. But we don’t want to put our own people in danger. So, if I go to protest and I am alone--okay, fine--but there are maybe ten or twenty people like me who don’t care about being arrested. They don’t have anything to lose because the situation we are in is already like less than losing everything. We don’t own anything in our life. Maybe there are ten or twenty people like me, but we don’t want to hurt the rest, even if they are hurt in an indirect way.

One can clearly see the deep fear that the Alqoshians have to live through every day because of the reign of Lara Zara within Alqosh. And to make matters worse, the political power of the KDP within Alqosh is only growing.

As you know, Zara is one of the examples of how the KDP puts pressure on our people. The last Consul in Erbil visited Lara in Alqosh at least once monthly, which is far more than he visited any other mayor in a similar position. That, or she was going there to meet

him. She is a sub-district mayor--not the governor of a province, or a minister, or something. The KDP is also managing the situation so that any international people or NGOs who come here are under her control. These actions are making people more afraid of her because it means that she is getting stronger.

It is also clear how the public image of the KDP is maintained in a positive light as any individuals who come to Alqosh from foreign origins must do so with the permission of and under the 'protection' of Lara Zara. Dissidents of the KDP also cannot speak to foreign press as, "The fear increased after Lara came, because she is the tool on the ground. You can't say many things, in case Lara hears it." Yet Kado also makes the case that the persecution within Alqosh is worse precisely because Lara Zara herself is an Assyrian, though a member of the KDP. Kado makes the following analogy regarding the situation.

When a regular sword pierces a person, it hurts. Lara's actions as an Assyrian against her own people I can compare to a barbed sword with many smaller knives coming out of it. We are taking this sword because of her actions. This sword is coming anyway, but through her, it is coming stronger. So when the sword is from amongst our own people, it is ten-fold worse to bear.

The psychological dilemma of the Assyrians in Alqosh is unique because they are forced to face the hard truth that much of their own misery is caused by a kindred. "She would do anything for them. We've seen this and we are seeing this. Every day the intimidation is becoming worse, by arresting people, by putting political pressure on people. Many people have

already left because of it.” Importantly, Kado also delineates some of the animosity between the KDP and the indigenous Assyrians it disenfranchises.

We would respect it if a Kurdish person was defending his rights, but not when forcing us to be a servant for him. As an Assyrian, there is no connection between me and the KDP. This political party is an ethnic political party, so I don't have any stake in it. When foreigners come, they talk about democracy, but everybody who joined the KDP knows that there is no democracy in the KRG. It's the same few families controlling every aspect of life. So, for Assyrians, there is no other reason to join besides power and money, and that is exactly what Lara Zara has achieved at the price of our wellbeing.

## **Part 4: The Account of Counsel Robert W. DeKelaita**

### **Post 2003: A Change in U.S. Judicial Policy Towards the Assyrians of Iraq**

As already discussed in the ethos section of Robert DeKelaita, the Counsel was involved in multiple court cases involving the plight of the Assyrians and their immigration to the U.S.

I was an attorney from 1997, and I represented many Assyrians seeking asylum. Of course, I represented all kinds of other people, such as families seeking unification with each other, people on labor certifications, people as religious workers for churches and other religious bodies, people seeking asylum from Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Turkey. I represented Kurds from Turkey, and even Yezidis. But by and large, the people I had issues with, which later turned into a court case against me, were Christians from Iraq. I was involved with these cases from 1997, so before the fall of the regime.

Counsel DeKelaita's record is quite extensive as not only did he deal with Assyrians seeking refuge post the 2003 Iraq invasion, but also six years prior. In other words, he was present during the worst of what befell the Assyrians in Iraq, and bore the weight of the incoming stream of immigrants and refugees. In one instance, he explains how:

When the regime fell 6 years later in 2003, the cases began to develop in a different way. I had an encounter with a judge who said, 'now that Saddam is gone, I guess Assyrian Christians are not going to be seeking asylum because there is democracy in Iraq now.' And I replied in a court full of lawyers, 'Who said there is democracy in Iraq?' He then said, 'The president of the United States.' And I said, 'The president of the United States does not know what he is talking about. There is no democracy in Iraq, there is chaos. When that chaos settles, we will find out who's really in charge in Iraq.' He replied, 'So you disagree with the President of the United States?' And I said, 'I disagree with him, with the Secretary of State, with the Secretary of Defense. Yes, I do. I don't think Iraq is a safe place to be right now and I don't think it will be in the future.' I went on to write an article in 2004, and the point of the article was that the honeymoon period was over for the Assyrians in Iraq. And that unless something was done about the status of the Assyrians, they would be attacked by people who were very resentful towards the West. I further argued that they did not have the military power to protect themselves, so unless something was done to protect them, they were going to suffer. That was written in April of 2004, and 4 months later, on August 1st of 2004, regrettably, the first five churches were blown up inside of Iraq. And from that day, until today, Christians have been targeted inside of Iraq.

Needless to say, Counsel DeKelaita's forebodings and warnings only came true. Interestingly, he points out the need for Assyrians to have an armed force protecting themselves, consisting of themselves. This was already explored in previous parts of the study, and its best modern-day manifestation is the NPU [Nineveh Plain Protection Units]. Many of the Assyrians

Counsel DeKelaita fought for were in danger of being sent back to an unstable country where they were already targeted.

I fought their cases in court, arguing with government attorneys that it was unfair to send these Assyrians back. They continued to say that Iraq was fine and that these people would not be targeted. They tried deporting various peoples, especially Assyrians in Detroit. Less so in Chicago. I fought it, and I even took it to members of Congress and the State Department and protested it to them. And one of the reasons I think I was targeted by the government was because I didn't only choose to fight these cases in court, but I chose to argue these cases to government officials, because I felt it was very unfair that a person who suffered the killing of his brother and sister in a bombing in Iraq as a result of the United State's invasion of Iraq is now in the United States having to spend thousands of dollars to defend himself from being deported back to Iraq. I didn't think that was fair at all. As a result of that, I had issues with the government targeting me.

From this account, it is possible to glean the fact that the judicial and justice systems within the U.S. were targeting and harassing already vulnerable individuals. To make matters worse, these individuals are vulnerable due directly to U.S. military intervention and foreign policy. It is needless to state that the psychological effect of withstanding such an ordeal for the victims of these policies is harrowing. Counsel DeKelaita outlines some of the ways he was targeted.

One of the things they did is that they sent imposter clients to try to trick me into doing things that were unlawful, which I refused to do, but which have not become public because the way our courts work is that certain evidence is excludable from the court and jury. Another is that they enticed certain former clients from 20 years ago to say things against me in return for something. So they found 8 people who had admitted to lying about other things, and convinced them to say things like, 'Robert was the one who told us to say things were really bad in Iraq and that they weren't that bad, and we had already settled in another country and were fine there.' So, it's a very ugly situation because I have been involved in more than 4000 cases, and these isolated cases found in the government don't fit within the pattern of cases that I was involved in for over 20 years.

For the government to punish those aiming to help Assyrian refugees, it would certainly diminish the image of solidarity with and support for refugees all over the world, deepening an image of mistrust, bigotry, and racial prejudice towards those fleeing from their respective home nations. It is ironic that the Assyrians fled Iraq due to American foreign policy in the first place.

### **U.S. Policy Shift Towards the Assyrians**

In an ironic twist, the same rhetoric that Counsel DeKelaita was using and the same things he was fighting for in court became more commonplace as the public eye, in a political flurry, shifted its attention to the issue of the deportation of Assyrians in Detroit.

It wasn't news to a lot of people that the situation in Iraq was horrible. And I found it very funny that soon after my case, in Detroit they arrested a multitude of people and tried to send them back to Iraq, and all of a sudden you found politicians and lawyers jumping up and down saying Iraq is horrible. All of a sudden government officials fighting against Trump changed their minds and said, 'Iraq is a terrible place, how could you think of returning these people.' That's exactly what I was doing. That's exactly what I was arguing when the government accused me of lying. And actually, what I said back in 2003, regrettably--I say it with all sincerity--regrettably, came true. I predicted the destruction of the Assyrian community in Iraq in 2003 when everybody thought things would be just fine. And things were not fine with each progressing year, until 2014, when they targeted me.

Thus, in a way, the justice for Assyrian refugees is tied to the public eye and the political game at hand within the arena of Washington. For those stuck in the middle, such as the Assyrian refugees, being made into pawns of the system was severely traumatizing and disheartening.

### **The Psychological Effects on Assyrian Refugees**

When asked if he thought his clients were ever directly affected psychologically by the court cases, Counsel DeKelaita replied:

Yes, a lot of them were really harassed in court, especially in Detroit, but also in Chicago. I'll tell you what one Assyrian said to me, but first I want to tell you about the argument I had with Judge Craig M. Zerbe, here in Chicago. He said, 'I know, Mr. Dekelaita, that you've argued for a lot of Assyrian Christians, and that Assyrian Christians are being targeted, but to say that Assyrians are targeted in Iraq is to cherry pick the facts.' He argued that Assyrians are not targeted, are not persecuted, and he denied the case. Of course we appealed it and eventually won, but it took several years, and it took its toll on the person. And let me tell you this person that he was talking about: his father, because he had been working with the Americans in Iraq, was murdered. And the judge justified it by saying that his murder wasn't really because he was an Assyrian Christian, but because he was working with the Americans. Inside of Iraq, the Americans had helped his sisters and his mother escape to Jordan because they were going to be targeted next. And he was willing to send back the son of this murdered person, back inside of Iraq, even though the Americans had evacuated his sisters and his mother out of Iraq. So this is how absurd our court system gets sometimes. And also, in Detroit, they would submit this report called the 'Joint British-Danish Report' on life inside of Iraq after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, and after the bombings of the churches. The report basically said that Assyrians were not persecuted in Iraq and had nothing to worry about. It claimed that the bombings were simply isolated incidents, despite their planned nature, and nothing more.

What this account shows is that despite obvious evidence of the clear impending danger of both bodily and psychological harm to the Assyrians both within Iraq and as refugees in the West with the potential of being sent back, the court systems failed to dispense justice and often

increased the likelihood of such injustices. Counsel DeKelaita also gave another sobering account of yet another Assyrian refugee stuck within the limbo of the American court systems.

One of my clients had been in the United States on an H-1B Visa, which is a work Visa given for 3 years. When you come through the airport, you are given what is called an I-94, which is a white card stamped by the airport official stating the authorized amount of time and date you are able to reside within the United States. So they were supposed to give him 3 years. Well, they made a mistake and instead of 3 years they gave him 3 months, and he did not know at the time that he was visiting that he only had 3 months. He was living in Detroit but had landed in O'Hare Airport, so he came to me, and we went to speak to the officer at the O'Hare Airport to explain what had happened and presented the proof that he had a Visa for 3 years. We requested a restamping to reflect the reality of him getting a Visa for 3 years instead of 3 months. So they took a look at it and went back and forth as officials and then said that they couldn't do anything and directed us to immigration in Nebraska. And so we sent a letter to Nebraska, waited, and the letter came back saying there's nothing they could do and that we'd have to go back to the airport. So we went back to the airport and the airport again said no. So I thought that we would go to the main immigration building in Chicago and speak to somebody who was reasonable. We went to speak to someone and an official came out and I showed her the passport and explained everything, and again, she said that she could not do anything about it. So we were walking out and the gentleman said to me, 'What a funny world we live in. Here I am in the United States, and I came in with no weapons, with a visa for 3 years, with a passport, and they're not able to extend my visa to 3 years, the

time they had originally agreed to. Yet inside of my country, Iraq, is an army of a hundred thousand Americans who are armed, have no visas, no passports, and yet they are legally there. And nobody can tell them otherwise. But here I am asking for the law to support me, and nobody is listening to me. Nobody is listening to you.' And I told him, 'You know what? Just a minute. I love what you just said, and I'm going to go tell this lady what you just told me.' He tried to say that it was okay, but I insisted that I was going to go tell her. So we went back up inside immigration and I said, 'I know you can't do anything, but I just want to tell you something, something for you to think about. All we needed was a stamp on his visa and we weren't able to get it. He's an Iraqi Assyrian, and he's telling me that he's doing everything by the law, and that yet, somehow, he's illegally present in the U.S. But there are a hundred thousand U.S. troops inside of Iraq without passports, without Visas, and with weapons and tanks, and nobody is going to do anything about it and they're legally present in that country. Yet he, having entered the United States with permission, with a visa and a passport, can't extend that passport up to the legal time. Can you believe that?' She stood there for a few minutes. Then, she said 'hold on a second.' She took the passport, took it to the back, stamped it, and gave it back to us. So, the point of this story is this: although the system is oftentimes unfair to Assyrians, and to the many people who are vulnerable, there are still decent people in the system. And this one person was definitely a decent person. I was completely in awe and moved by what he said. His suffering produced this insight and reflection. And by the way, after he got his visa extended, he did not want to stay here. He left for Canada. Politically he did not agree with what the U.S. had done inside of Iraq and I didn't blame him. He was a very intelligent man, and in the end, he decided to leave. Unfortunately,

I'm not in touch with him, but I will never forget what he said, and how we extended his visa.

In comparison to the judicial system in France and how France dealt with its Assyrian refugees, as already discussed in the section detailing Mr. Esho Sora Misho's account, the American judicial system is shortcoming, even going as far as causing psychological harm to the refugees that pass through its courts. However, as Counsel DeKelaita stated, there exist certain safety nets for the Assyrians who are lucky enough to possess them.

Most of the people had a network of family--you know, uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters--people who came before or people who were affiliated with the Church or an organization. So the network of the community provided them with support. Their living conditions were not bad. Even when those connections weren't as good, in my experience of the people I represented, they worked very hard, and wanted to make it by the sweat of their brow, not by taking handouts. The overwhelming majority of the people liked to work hard to make a living.

Once again, one can see that the main safety net during times of tragedy for the Assyrians is one's family and sometimes the connections to church institutions, as previously delineated in the accounts of Mr. Misho and Mr. Kado. As discussed, since the U.S.'s 2003 invasion of Iraq, Assyrians have suffered immensely. A level of amelioration for peoples such as these is not unprecedented in U.S. history, but still, no relief was offered to the Assyrians.

The United States made amends for the Jews who suffered in the Soviet Union. I think it should have done the same thing for Assyrians from Iraq and Syria because they really suffered tremendously. And I don't know why they didn't--and because they didn't, they debilitated these people from making an ordinary living, getting married, having children. They set their lives back for many years.

The inability to find a job, settle down, and have children has been a constant and tremendous psychological strain on the Assyrians in their war torn homeland.

And it was all for nothing that was legitimate. And this is what angered me constantly. I felt these people were being bullied by the system for no legitimate reason. One of the reasons I fought my case and didn't cave in was exactly because of that: why should you pick on vulnerable people? Why do you think it's virtuous to pick on people? And of course this became an issue during the Trump administration when people were being separated from their children or put in cages--I saw all of that stuff. I saw how Assyrians were treated. The difference was that the Assyrians didn't have many advocates. I was one of the leading advocates who was assertive and who wasn't afraid to stand up to the system and its judges. I challenged prosecutors, I challenged judges, and hopefully one day I'll be back again to do the same thing I did before.

**“You Broke It, You Own It”**

Much has already been discussed in regards to how the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the Judicial court system within Iraq caused great psychological distress to the Assyrians seeking asylum in the West. In fact, one of the major criticisms of the U.S.-implemented system within Iraq was its failure to protect valuable and irreplaceable cultural heritage sites. ISIS razed various ancient Assyrian cultural artifacts, such as the ancient city of Kalhu (biblical Calah, or contemporary Nimrud), and the Mashki and Nergal gates of Nineveh, to name a few. When asked who was responsible for this immense loss of cultural heritage, Counsel DeKelaita answered:

I think the primary responsibility is with the United States because it conquered Iraq, and there's that old saying of 'you broke it, you own it.' Up until this time, Saddam Hussein, as evil as he was according to American politics, protected these places. He did not allow them to be looted or destroyed or ravaged in any way. In fact, he prosecuted people who did so to the fullest extent of the law.

This was one such stark contrast between the system before US intervention, and after. Counsel DeKelaita continued:

Second, it's very important that Iraqis, the government and people of Iraq themselves, take the blame. The people of Iraq need to be educated to protect their ruins. This is the

heritage of that country, and it's also the heritage of the World, and these things should be protected. Can you imagine having something as valuable as that and not knowing its value? It's really beyond belief that the Iraqis would think that this is not something worth protecting. I include the Kurdish government with the Iraqis, although they've done a better job of limiting access to certain sites, even though we see damage and vandalism done to certain Assyrian artifacts in the KRG. And lastly, and I think most importantly, the blame sits on the people who came into Iraq and did damage.

## **Symbolism & the Current Iraqi Mental Health System**

### **Part 1: Symbolism & Cultural Heritage**

#### **“Historical Consciousness” or “Gaining Insight”**

One of the focuses of this study has been the psychological importance of certain sites in the homeland for the Assyrians. Many of these were razed by ISIS as part of its ethnic cleansing campaign. Counsel DeKelaita explains the importance of these sites:

There are two levels to this: the individual and the collective. And although individuals may not feel that there is a great loss to them when they see the ruins of Kalhu and Nineveh, and the walls being torn down, I believe that this does something to the collective heritage of the Assyrians and to their collective psychological makeup. The destruction of books and churches leaves a lot of people thinking that God must really hate us and has cursed us as a people. You hear a lot of Assyrians say ‘Alaha lee6an eileh’ [God has cursed us]. And you can see why, because it’s not just ISIS, as this has happened many times before. In 1914 and 1915, especially. Think of everything that was destroyed and burned in Urmia and Hakkari, and when the Assyrians left not just their houses but all of the cultural material, like all of the printed books in Urmia that were destroyed. Think of all of the manuscripts that were created in the Hakkari mountains, many of them kept in caves so that the people may come back and retrieve them--those are all gone. Missionaries used to be shopping in some Middle Eastern city, and they

would see a shopkeeper using a piece of paper to put groceries in, and they would pick it up and see that it was an ancient Assyrian manuscript that was being used as paper bags. Think of the thousands of pieces of stones picked from Nineveh and Kalhu and Ashur and used for the building of houses over centuries. These things have happened to us over and over, and this is why I say to you that teaching the history of our people is the best counter to this. And I'm a very positive person. Based on the miseries and what I've seen in my own life--this case that I've been fighting for 7 years myself--and the hundred year battle of the Assyrians for their existence, we still have to keep our hope alive, and keep fighting. Not fighting as in struggling violently against people, but within ourselves. Muslims have this great idea of a Jihad being waged in the mind--or a spiritual Jihad. The Assyrians have to do the same thing. The Assyrians have to wage a spiritual war amongst themselves to protect their heritage inside of themselves. So, you can destroy all of these things, but their memory is going to stay with me and with you, and we're going to recreate them again in physical form. We will recreate them as the Jews recreated the tabernacle, for example. We're going to recreate them as the Jews recreated Jerusalem, again. We should always think of that which we memorize as a people together, which is much more powerful when it is collective. This will be the counterweight to what ISIS has done to our people. Is it damaging? Is it hurtful? Absolutely. I cried when I saw those things destroyed, the Assyrian ruins destroyed like that. I was very hurt, to be honest. As an ordinary human being, not even an Assyrian--to look at something so intricately made, so well preserved over time, having fought to survive centuries of conquest and the elements, and here it is in front of you. What a horrible human being you have to be to feel that something that has come down to you from thousands of years ago is something

that ought to be destroyed by you because your god feels that art is unacceptable. There were Muslims around these sites for centuries, so why didn't they act in the way ISIS acted? The Persepolis ruins had always been there, and nobody had destroyed them because they felt they were Muslim. Even in Judaism there is this mentality of destroying 'idols' and any kinds of images, so it has historical roots in Judaism, because the belief in god requires that all others be wiped out. But it shouldn't be tolerated because it crosses the line of what civilization ought to be.

In Biblical texts, there exists the idea that after the destruction of the Covenant of the Ark, the throne of God, the religion of the Jews changed so that they worshiped an invisible God. Today, the Assyrians are in a similar situation with large swathes of their cultural heritage annihilated over the past hundred years. In a way, the mental awareness of one's history is meant to replace the literal act of carrying out one's cultural rituals, such as those lost to acculturation, and the visiting of holy places, such as those destroyed by ISIS and other factions throughout modern Assyrian history. Counsel DeKelaita explains:

I think that the Assyrians have lost so much that their collective understanding of history keeps them tied together because the rituals that we used to engage in, for example in Church, we're no longer really involved in them say as much as we were a century ago. And because we don't live in the same land anymore, and because we don't speak our language as much as we should, and don't practice our culture enough, then the only thing really left for us is to have this collective memory of a shared past. And that past

should be something attractive and something that we strive to keep in our minds. That's the thing that you and I can share along with an Assyrian from Iran, Sweden, Australia--anywhere. It's more than just knowledge. But I do think that exaggerated American history does result in American exceptionalism, which I like to criticize and think about. But Assyrian history is very important because unlike Americans, or say, Italians or Greeks, we don't have a homeland. And when we don't have a homeland, the thing that keeps us together is going to have to be in our hearts and in our minds. And that thing that is going to be in our hearts and minds, even more importantly than language, is this shared collective consciousness of a shared past. And so I think it's important that that be taught, and re-taught, and re-learned, and looked at from different perspectives, and argued about--something shared as food is shared among us. In a way, it is our intellectual 'qurbana' [communion].

Thus, with most of the Assyrians living in diaspora now, and with large swathes of their heritage destroyed, their language forgotten, and history fading, the one thing left that could preserve a sense of cultural unity would be this "intellectual communion," or the concept of a historical consciousness. This collective memory aimed at preserving a sense of cohesion in the face of the entropy of time and fascistic political forces serves multiple functions, both positive and negative.

Memory is something that we carry with us, but of course we act on memory, too. Memory makes us do certain things and think in certain ways, and even makes us want to affiliate with some and not affiliate with others.

But within the interview, the question arose as to when this collective memory and historical consciousness would evolve into myth. In response to this, Counsel DeKelaita answered:

History is partly myth, because the way we look at history is of course based on what we know, and sometimes there are certain things we don't want to know. Washington chopping the cherry tree and not lying, or Lincoln being the perfect guy--there are things that we would know and things that we as Americans don't want to know. The things that we don't want to know become the myth. Subtracting from the full comprehensive facts makes the story bordering along the mythic line. But that's okay too, because we know stories of the Old Testament. Job, for example, even though it's mythical, it teaches us something--and if you and I both know the story of Job, and we have an equal fascination with it, then that brings us closer together. I'm not one of the most religious guys in the world, but I can tell you that belief and tenacity are a very important part of the story of Job: confidence in your ideas, if not necessarily your belief in God--but your belief in God, your understanding of God, and your refusal to give up on it no matter what happens. The story of Job is also the story of the Assyrian people, one can say. How often

have people indirectly said to us, ‘Give it all up, how long are you going to suffer like this?’ And we said no, insisting that we would maintain ourselves.

Thus, it is inevitable that this collective, historical consciousness would eventually evolve and represent a different aspect of the Assyrians altogether. Based on what’s already been discussed with the works of Afram Yakoub, the current story of the Assyrian people is of constantly being a victim, and one can see the effects of this mentality in the victimhood method of thought. Yet, according to DeKelaita, this story also has the capacity to evolve and represent the Assyrians as survivors--not just victims. It could be that DeKelaita’s collective historical consciousness would play a role in this change within the collective psyche of the Assyrians. This new and altered historical myth of the Assyrian story may one day echo the following sentiment:

I don’t know if it was the experience I went through on a personal level that kind of solidified this inside of me, but I think about it all the time. And I think it’s heroic of any individual or group of people to fall, and then rise from that fall again, better than before, and learn from the experience. The Assyrians should be hopeful because they’ve survived so many onslaughts, of which ISIS was just one, and if they overcome this, they’ll be much stronger.

What should, in the eyes of Counsel DeKelaita, be a source of hope, is for many Assyrians a dark chapter of history, a horror associated with their unbeknownst sense of

victimhood--something collective, historical consciousness may be able to alter. Counsel DeKelaita is not the only one who carries this sentiment, as in Afram Yakoub's interview, when discussing the potential psychological solutions the Assyrians could implement as a whole, he stated:

The solution is becoming educated first, generally, and then educated on the history of one's own people, in this case, Assyrian history and culture. But beyond that, I make the argument that the Assyrians must gain insight. Gaining insight is a little bit different than gaining knowledge. Insight is deeper than knowledge. It's something psychological. It's not a physiological activity where you read a book and you automatically gain insight. Rather, it's the combination. Reading or educating yourself is the first step, but then deep inside of your mind, you must connect the dots, and that's when you gain insight. So just educating people is not enough, it's just the first step. Nevertheless, it is vital that we as a people take this first step before it is too late.

What DeKelaita refers to as "historical consciousness", Yakoub regards as "gaining insight." It can also be described as the battle against ignorance. For instance, during their upbringing, if members of ISIS, many of whom were raised in Iraq, were taught of the importance of their national ruins, then perhaps many of them would still be standing.

### **The Battle Against Ignorance**

During both of the interviews with Counsel DeKelaita and Mr. Afram Yakoub, the topic of the many Assyrians who use biblical texts to justify their own predicaments and cultural decline arose. For example, many Assyrians turn to biblical texts speaking of the supposed cruelty of their ancestors to justify their current modern-day sufferings. This, of course, falls firmly within Yakoub's victimhood mentality, though in a twisted way. These Assyrians justify their political captivity at the hands of those inflicting trauma upon them with a past nearly three-thousand years old. Both Yakoub and DeKelaita believe that the most effective antidote against this malignant mentality is historical consciousness--or gaining insight--backed not solely by biblical texts, but by archeological evidence, and more importantly, the scientific method. Of course, the validity and historical value of biblical texts ought to be challenged at every turn, as often, nations and events are invented out of the imagination of the author. This, while of a certain metaphysical value, is of no historical value on its own, as in theology, the Bible does not intend to establish historical truth, but timeless and time-tested metaphysical truth. Counsel DeKelaita, himself also a teacher of Assyrian history, outlined this battle against ignorance.

This is the great battle that in part I wage myself, and that other Assyrians are waging. It's the battle against ignorance and the narrow-mindedness that a lot of our people have. Keeping Assyrian history in our minds and memory is very important because it allows us to appreciate the creations of our ancestors, which helps link us together through art, architecture, and so on. And I feel that those Assyrians who think in that way have removed themselves from the community that we want to be. Because that kind of Assyrian--that's the culture that we don't want to survive. That kind of ridiculing of and

distancing from your ancient heritage is something that you don't want to survive. We don't want the kind of Assyrian who says all the time that we are cursed people and that there is nothing we can do.

Readers will note that this latter description matches perfectly with Yakoub's powerless and/or apathetic-minded class of people.

That is the kind of culture that I'm constantly arguing against and don't believe in, and I think that it's very detrimental to keep that within us. A little bit of pessimism is okay, but this cycle of endless collective depression and nihilism, constantly dissuading others from action, will drive us straight into the ground. Every generation goes through saying that they tried and failed, and that was it. They ought to say 'We tried, we failed, now you guys have a go. But we took one extra step which means you'll have to take one less extra step to get there.'

This step-by-step mentality can serve as a counter to the constant decline of the Assyrians, described by Yakoub. Counsel DeKelaita also explains his hope that modern technology can contribute to this battle against ignorance, and keep the Assyrian culture alive, despite external pressures, such as assimilation.

You and I, 100 years ago, were much closer geographically. You were in the area of Urmi, and I may have been in Urmi or Mar Bishu. But we dispersed all over the world, and look at the technology that is able to bring us together like this. We can talk every day, we can talk once a week, just like if we were in the village. We would meet once a week and I'd chat with you. We'd exchange what we each had in our minds and keep our community alive. I think this is fantastic because it brings the Assyrian world closer together, which means that Assyria can live in this way. But the Assyria that we want to live in has to have respect for its ancestors, for its past, and hope for the future, all strongly linked together.

Mr. Athra Kado also made a statement on what he called "resistance against ignorance and corruption," which can be likened to DeKelaita's historical consciousness and Yakoub's garnering of insight.

The resistance I'm talking about is of course in the mind--it is psychological. Resistance starts when I don't treat this clergyman or political party leader as a god, and when I see and know they are corrupted. I see them stealing money. I see the clergyman going out of the way of the Cross. And the same thing with the proxy political parties controlled by the KDP. Unfortunately, the majority of them are corrupted. But on the other side, we have youth and people who are seeing what's right and wrong but that can't take these positions because there is no awareness in people. Or, in some cases, the people know that something is wrong, but they are not choosing the right side because they are afraid.

Every religious group or political party that wants to take control creates a situation where you believe that there will be no change. The problem is, when you believe that, they will remain in power and then you really can't do anything.

Hence, one sees all of these terms point to the same set of actions, which entails a sense of higher awareness--both historical awareness and political awareness.

### **Measuring Cultural Output: Shaping the World Around You**

One of the indicators that the Assyrians do not possess historic consciousness, or insight, as Yakoub explains, is the fact that they no longer shape the world around them.

I understand Assyrian history as having two significant periods. The first one which is very ancient and is when the empire rose up, and became the first true empire structure in the world, becoming a template for the others that came after it. That was very significant, because if you have a template for something, that is the original. The original is the difficult one--so the Assyrians created something very difficult when our forefathers created the Assyrian Empire. Afterwards, there was a long dark period. But then through the force of a new ideology, Christianity, we were granted inner strength once again to build something new. We gave birth to a new golden period, which was the church period when we outdid even the Roman Catholic Church in terms of missionary work. We spread our culture, church, religion, and language to many tribes, nations, and

peoples in the East, as far as China. In this respect, I mean that we were mentally and psychologically strong enough to shape the world around us. We were shaping the world around us using our culture. First time by trade and the sword, and the second time by ideology and religion. We have lost that since then, and we have not been able to do anything of such magnitude anymore. Today you see that we are totally shaped by the forces around us. The Assyrian culture and language is not dominant anywhere. In fact, it is under threat of extinction. The Assyrian demography is not strong. All of these point to how the Assyrians have lost insight.

The case made here is that due to continuous atrocities for the past 200 years against the Assyrian populace, the victimhood mentality was developed, which psychologically robbed them of the inner peace needed to shape and effect the world around them. In fact, culture can be reduced down to a collective people imposing their will on the world, but the Assyrian culture, language, and knowledge of history has been on a steady and dramatic decline for centuries. To stop this psychological disintegration, Yakoub explains:

The solution, simply, is gaining insight. You can call it what you want, really. But we must be aware of our history both collectively and as individuals. We have to spread the message and help other Assyrians gain insight about this. They have to gain insight about this behavioral pattern. It is a psychological pattern, and so obviously, there is no physical medicine for it. You just have to gain knowledge, and then knowledge will lead to insight. Assyrians have to realize that this is how they have been behaving and to

understand why they have done it. And once you understand that, you will behave in new, healthier ways. That is why I wrote the book.

Thus, for example, by reading material that points out the follies in certain actions taken by individuals and collective groups alike, both the former and the latter gain knowledge of their harmful actions. With this comes a deeper understanding of and the will to implement change. It could perhaps be that “insight” refers to the psychological interventions implemented, which logically, would have to be reaped from a place of understanding the collective neurosis that has enveloped the Assyrians for centuries: the victimhood mentality.

### **Idealism & Survival**

A question that was asked during all the interviews was whether the Assyrians were hopeful during the retaking of Mosul, and whether it was ever a symbol to them. This led to a lot of interesting, albeit varying, answers. Kado, a resident of the homeland answered, “Yes, but it was more hopeful when we, the NPU, entered Bakhdida.” As previously explored, the majority of Assyrians would have only returned if they had a force serving their own security interests. Kado explains why native Assyrians displayed this mentality: “Before 2003, we had hundreds of thousands of Assyrians in Mosul. But when ISIS came, it was dozens of thousands. So, we weren’t thinking about Mosul, especially when the Nineveh Plain was occupied by ISIS.” Here, one can see that for the indigenous Assyrians, the occupation of the plain was of more distress than the occupation of Mosul. Kado continued:

The people of Tel Keppe, Tel Isqof, and Batnaya were in Alqosh, the people of Bakhdida were dispersed throughout Ankawa, Alqosh, and Dohuk. We were all living the same life. So, the liberation of the Nineveh Plain, especially Bakhdida, was more hopeful for our people than Mosul.

Bakhdida in particular may have been a greater symbol of hope to the Assyrians as the city possessed the largest Assyrian population in the entirety of the Plain, and still does so to this day.

We basically don't have anything left in Mosul. The last hope for the Assyrian people is actually all of the Plain. Logically, we don't have anywhere else. And despite having the majority of Ankawa, it's lost too, because about thirty percent of it is non-Assyrian. The places left that are purely Assyrian are in the Nineveh Plain.

As Counsel DeKelaita previously explained, it is a common theme in modern Assyrian history to lose large swathes of land to wars and genocides, such as the exoduses from Hakkari and Urmia in 1915. In 2015, a hundred years later, the Nineveh Plain was likewise emptied. Thus, the repetition of history is vividly noticeable in the Assyrian psyche, and a general fear of losing the last part of the Assyrian homeland--the Nineveh Plain--is of great concern to many Assyrians. In fact, as was seen with the case of Mr. Misho, his distance from Nineveh rendered him sleepless throughout all nights and imposed on him a great sense of mental and emotional discomfort such as symptoms aligned with severe depression. What is interesting is that it wasn't

solely what had happened during the ISIS campaign that caused pain to Mr. Misho, but as he said, it was also his great distance and inability to see Nineveh. Thus, to many, it is not solely the land that is the Plain, or specific cities such as Bakhdida, that are sources of hope for the Assyrian people. Counsel DeKelaita mirrors this sentiment.

Going back in history, the city of Nineveh was something like 4 times the size of Mosul. So, Nineveh and Mosul had really become one, and now, they're all called Mosul. So, when Mosul grew, its suburbs also grew and crossed the river Tigris and started surrounding the ancient city of Nineveh. They're both symbols of the existence of the Assyrians, and there are many historic churches in Mosul. So I'm not willing to give up the fact that Mosul is a historic place for the Assyrian people. It is important to remember that while Nineveh and Mosul are two different cities, Mosul has always been equated with Nineveh. It used to be called the Mosul Vilayet under the Ottoman Empire, and Saddam changed it to the Nineveh Governorate. He changed the whole name to Nineveh. So, for me, Nineveh, and Mosul included, represent an Assyrian symbol because it's the heartland of Assyrian artifacts and churches. And we're talking about churches going way back in time. In Urmi there's a Church of Mat Maryam which is probably one of the oldest churches in Christianity, and it happens to belong to the Church of the East, which is amazing. Now, remember, there was one church that the Assyrians used to belong to, and that was the Church of the East. Later they broke off into the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Chaldean Church, the Ancient Church, and the Assyrian Church, just like political parties break off. But all of these churches, really, were in the city of Mosul. For example, you can read about Nabi Yunus, which was a Church of Mar Younan [the

Prophet Jonah], settled on top of the Assyrian ruins of the palace of Sennacherib [The Palace Without Rival], in Nineveh, on the mound that was left. This place was originally a prominent Church of the East monastery, and then later became a mosque, and then it became, supposedly, the shrine to Jonah. It too was destroyed by ISIS. And, of course, when they destroyed it, they supposedly blew up the grave of Jonah. Now, who was Jonah? Nobody was Jonah. There was no Jonah at all. This place was the mausoleum for one of the Patriarchs of the Church of the East going back to around 800 AD. Even if they were found, the bones that were thought to be belonging to Jonah actually belonged to one of the Patriarchs of the Church of the East. So, to me, Mosul/Nineveh is *the* Assyrian symbol. You cannot go any higher.

It is interesting that to Counsel DeKelaita, someone who has spent the majority of his life in the diaspora, the highest and most revered Assyrian symbol is the combined entity of the city of Mosul/Nineveh. In contrast, the greatest and most important symbol to the Assyrians in the homeland was that which, in a way, was their livelihood: the Plain itself. Counsel DeKelaita took note of this disparity between the mentality of those in the homeland and those of diaspora.

But you have to remember--you and I, here in the diaspora--this sentiment is partly because of our ideals. You and I, we're comfortable in our homes, and we'd like to think that there is this place called Nineveh that belongs to us. However, people there wouldn't care about that as much because where they live now is different, and they have to make a living, survive, and work. That is where they are, and that is where they feel safe.

Thus, the symbolism of and psychological significance of a “borderless Assyria” for the Assyrians in the diaspora is an idealistic one--compared to that of the homeland, which is one based on the realism of where one’s livelihood is taken from. Despite these differences, Counsel DeKelaita meditated on a potential common ground between the sentiments of the diaspora and the homeland Assyrians.

But, you know, the two could have been combined: our love for our history and our idealism, with the fact that these villages were there. And I blame, first and foremost, the planners amongst our people at the forefront--the Assyrian nationalists in Iraq, who did not see that, and did not work on it as seriously as they should have. The Nineveh Plain should have been the priority. It should not have been Baghdad, Erbil, or Kirkuk. It should have been the Nineveh Plain: the place where we began as a people, and where we should have gone back to as a people. And we’re not just talking about ruins. I’m not saying people should go and live in ruins. I’m saying people should go live in places like Alqosh, and Bakhdida, which are very beautiful places. And if they worked on the sewage, on the streets, on beautifying the place, then you could have had 2 things at the same time: all your ruins and your historic places, and a nice place to live where you ran your administration from.

The common ground between the diaspora, which thinks in idealistic ways, and the homeland, which thinks in terms of survival, appears to be the administration of at least a semi-autonomous state within the Nineveh Plain for the Assyrians. However, as already

explored, the main factor for the stability of the Assyrians within the Nineveh Plain was having an armed force, such as the NPU, officially sanctioned by the government, protecting their towns. Still, Counsel DeKelaita notes that the main reasons for the movement out of the Nineveh Plain were economic.

But partly it was our choice too, as we moved around for economic reasons. Why did the ADM [Assyrian Democratic Movement] move from the North to Baghdad? Because it was felt that politically and economically, it was more viable to be in the center of the entire country. So, they could have built more in the Nineveh Plain, but they decided to separate and go off there. And each individual Assyrian was thinking on his own. The average Assyrian in Baghdad, or even in the Nineveh Plain, thought that Detroit was a much better place for them. Arizona, Canada, Germany, Australia--this was the battle of maintaining the collective, versus the individual interests. And in the end, one could say that the individual won. There aren't many people to form a compact unit in the Nineveh Plain, other than Bakhdida. By no means am I against what is there, because I'm always hopeful that things will always get better. But I think that as a compact unit, we don't have enough there like we used to. We had about three-hundred thousand people in the Nineveh Plain, and nothing was done about it. I also think that the movement out is irreversible. And I blame our political leaders, though I don't want to be very contentious. Something should have been done a long time ago and the Nineveh Plain idea should have been worked on so that even you and I, as Diaspora Assyrians, would be attracted to that place. I'm cognizant of how people are. People say to you, 'What, are you going to live next to these ruins? What would you want to do? I want my kids to go to College, I

want to do this, I want to do that.’ What they don’t understand is that the world is changing. Even though you want to be in that particular place--you could well be in communication with a lot of people and places and still earn money. Through the internet, you should still be able to reach a lot of people. If you’re a food producer in the Nineveh Plain, you could ship your goods just working on a computer, forming relationships. You don’t have to be in another country.

In particular, this raises the question of the collective interests versus those of the individual. It would appear that the survival of the individual comes at the loss of the collective integrity of the Assyrian populace in the Nineveh Plain. Yet, the maintaining of this compact unit in the Plain also comes at the cost of the loss of individual interests of everyday Assyrians. This can be seen as the survival of the group versus the survival of the individual. In the end, idealism, perhaps equatable with future planning, may devise a compromise between the two.

This study has thus far explored how the symbolism of Assyrian motifs diverges between Assyrians of the homeland and the diaspora. Of interest is how the symbol of the Plain for those living in geographic Assyria is also a symbol of survival. In turn, this survival is tied to the newfound post-2014 Assyrian demands that they have some kind of unit protecting their own existence within the homeland. Hence, in a way, the survival of Assyrian culture, its psychological and symbolic significance, and the means of protecting it, go hand-in-hand. Yet this is not a revolutionary or new idea. In fact, Counsel DeKelaita had pushed for the existence of a faction such as the NPU for a long time.

Back in 2003, I wrote an article advocating for some kind of a unit that would protect Assyrians in the Nineveh Plain. And the reason I advocated for this was because, historically, we have lost the Hakkari mountains, we have lost Tur-abdin, we have lost Urmia, and the only place we had left as a compact unit of our people was the Nineveh Plain. Nowhere else in the world does there exist a native area, which happened to be the core of the Assyrian Homeland. This was it. This was what was left. So I constantly advocated for the creation of some kind of an administrative unit where Assyrians could sustain themselves in this area and protect themselves. And they could have protected themselves, as they are doing now. See, what the Peshmerga did was that in the beginning. They worked with our people in places like Bakhdida, which is the largest Assyrian town in the Nineveh Plain back then, with a population of close to fifty-thousand, and helped them maintain their existence there. Then, they went around disarming the people. Then, when ISIS was coming, you know, eight-hundred or a thousand of them, the Peshmerga packed up and escaped. The reality was that if our people were properly armed and allowed to arm themselves, they could have defended themselves, and could have prevented what this catastrophe was. And I believe that the United States could have done something, and it didn't, not because it was inept, but because there was a purpose behind this, which was to annoy and to thwart the designs of the Iranians inside of Iraq. They were using this very destructive entity [ISIS], incompetent though it was, as a way to needle the Iranians inside of Iraq. Of course the Assyrian people paid dearly for it, and so did the Yezidis.

These events were already explored during previous parts of the study, but are repeated here to explain why exactly the psychological symbolism for those remaining in the homeland is essentially tied to the survival of the people--the very land. Having a history of constant loss of life and territory, the Plain itself has evolved into a survival story--the last home of the indigenous Assyrians. In contrast, Assyrians in diaspora who do not have to worry about such pressures (at least directly), tend to idealize and recall the past glories of cities such as Mosul and Nineveh.

### **The Cultural Divergence Between Assyrians in Diaspora & the Homeland**

This difference in idealization and realization in terms of psychological symbolism and abstraction is but one result of the growing gap between the assimilated Assyrians of the West and the indigenous Assyrians of the Near East. Counsel DeKelaita believes:

Culturally, the more we grow up in the West and the more our people remain in the East, we are going to grow culturally different. An Assyrian whose family has been in Sweden for the last hundred years is going to be different from an Assyrian growing up in Iran. But, it's very important now to shift that thinking and take into consideration the fact that we have the internet, which allows us to constantly give and take with each other. So the exchanges will increase between an Assyrian in Sweden and an Assyrian in Iran. I get on the phone and I speak to people in Iraq and Iran. We must also remember that people have tried to destroy our people. They've bullied our people and pushed them out of certain places. But somehow, we've always managed to maintain our existence, and I

think we've maintained it in the most sacred and secure place possible, and that's in our minds and hearts.

It can perhaps be hypothesized that this "Assyria of the mind" is in itself an attempt by the Assyrians in diaspora to maintain their cultural integrity, and not totally disintegrate within the West. While the homeland Assyrians face the physical threat of exodus, the Western diaspora faces the threat of total acculturation and assimilation. Thus, this idealization of the homeland and places such as Nineveh and Mosul can also be seen as yet another survival attempt--this time by the Assyrians in diaspora. Counsel DeKelaita continued:

But it is also important to experience the concrete places where these things happened. Many massacres took place, and in the Nineveh Plain, ISIS destroyed a lot of the ancient Assyrian artifacts. Idealization in and of itself is not enough. Actually experiencing a place like Nineveh is far more effective than imagining it. And you know, some of us can make do, while some of us don't really care, but for many of us, Assyria is still a tangible place, and the suffering and reflection that we have had because of this single word [Assyria], is very real.

From this, one can see that idealization is never enough on its own, and that rather, it is a combination of idealization (imagining what the homeland could be) and realization (what the homeland actually is) that renders a healthy analysis of the current state of things for the

Assyrians. The realization can be likened to analysis and honesty regarding one's circumstances, and good idealization can be likened to planning based on such sentiments.

### **“Self Leadership”**

In his book “The Body Keeps the Score,” Bessel Van Der Kolk outlines multiple methods of healing from trauma, which mirror the findings of this paper. Van der Kolk argues that trauma robs you of what he dubs “self leadership,” or the feeling of being in charge of yourself and in control (Van der Kolk, 2015). This was evident with Yakoub's victimhood mentality, where, for example, older Assyrians felt that their fate was out of their hands, and thus fell into apathy or powerlessness. These Assyrians clearly did not possess what van der Kolk dubs “self leadership”. Thus, according to van der Kolk, the challenge of healing and overcoming trauma is re-establishing ownership of the mind and body. Most interestingly, van der Kolk argues that trauma is not merely something that occurred in the past--a mere unchangeable story--but is also the emotions and physical sensations imprinted during the trauma, which get continually re-experienced as physical reactions in the present (van der Kolk, 2015). This matches the account of Mr. Misho, where he hadn't had a single restful night since fleeing Nineveh. According to him, he stays up thinking over the things that happened to his nation, and how his people were scattered. Needless to say, the effects of restless sleep can be detrimental on the health of any individual, and can rob them of van der Kolk's “self leadership.”

Van der Kolk actually claims that the first step to healing the trauma is to revisit it voluntarily, as opposed to the involuntary revisiting of traumas, the conditions for which must be a feeling of safety and readiness in doing so (van der Kolk, 2015). The goal here is to find a way

to cope with the overwhelming feeling and sensation associated with the past. It is important to note that these sensations manifest as physical reactions, such as a fast-beating heart or abnormal breathing (van der Kolk, 2015).

### **Parallels Between Interoception & Gaining Insight or Historical Consciousness**

One form of therapy that van der Kolk proposes is interoception, which entails becoming aware of one's inner experiences in order to "befriend what is going on inside" (van der Kolk, 2015). This is a very similar idea to Yakoub's "gaining insight" and DeKelaita's "historical consciousness", as both entail analyzing the internal situations which paralyze the Assyrians and their movements today. The difference is that Yakoub and DeKelaita emphasize insight and knowledge, while van der Kolk also ties into his introspective method much of eastern philosophy and religion, where the wellbeing of a person is accentuated by acts such as chanting, breath-work, and movement. Kolk advocates for such methods as they activate the same locations of the brain that interoception activates: the vagus nerve and the related arousal system (Kolk, 2015). In fact, yoga practice, something aimed at achieving "mindfulness" (another term for introspection), was noted as having greatly reduced PTSD symptoms in persons who were unaffected by drugs (Kolk, 2015). Thus, while Yakoub and Dekelaita emphasize the mental aspects of introspection, Kolk emphasizes the physical--as, after all, many traumas, such as rape or torture, have a physical source.

## **Part 2: NGOs & the Current Iraqi Mental Health System**

### **The Ethos of RBJ<sup>5</sup>**

Due to the unstable political situation in Northern Iraq, the study offered participants the option to utilize a pseudonym in order to mask their true identity. One such participant will be referred to as RBJ, and the location of residence of this participant will be left out. RBJ, working with NGOs in Northern Iraq, has primarily assisted GBV (gender-based violence) survivors--both children and women. RBJ's account is of importance because it explores what the current mental health system within Iraq is composed of, how it is viewed by the culture, and what its successes and failures are. RBJ began working as a team leader of a GBV [Gender-based Violence] center for kids and slowly experienced and worked with various other types of victims of violence. RBJ worked with the IRC (International Rescue Committee) and WRO (Women Rehabilitation Organization).

### **Gender-based Violence**

It is important to explore what form gender-based violence (GBV) takes in Iraq. RBJ explains:

---

<sup>5</sup> All participants were given the option to utilize a pseudonym for their own safety. RBJ employed this option, and the participant's location has also been left out.

GBV has multiple points. So, if we talk about Sinjar with the Yezidis, there are more than 5,000 girls and women who are still missing because Sinjar still isn't liberated, unfortunately. They faced sexual abuse and rape. When they take your home, your money, everything you have, these are also GBV. And there's mental abuse and violence, and physical abuse, as well. During the war with ISIS, people suffered from all these things. You have to leave your home, they take your money, they take your rights. They abuse you, they kill your children, they kill your family. All these kinds of GBV happened during the war, and we were dealing with many different stories.

Thus, gender-based violence in Iraq is essentially when all of the aforementioned actions are directed towards vulnerable elements in Iraq, especially women and children. There is also a process to ascribing the GBV label to victims of violence.

During my work, there's a mobilizer or outreach worker who identifies and informs me when there is a case. Not an official case. So when they come to the center or when I visit them, I try to talk to them. Sometimes there are symptoms on the survivor so you notice that it is a case of GBV. But it cannot be officially a case until the case is taken from you. You will never ask them directly because we'll try to talk to them in an indirect way about their life, about their routines in life, about what they are doing. Then you introduce yourself: 'I am from so and so. I am working with X. My work is Y.' In the beginning there are some people that directly inform you and speak about what happened to them. And then there are people where you have to use more skills--you have to work harder to

try to get more information--if they want to do this. After they tell you their story, then it is your turn to tell if this is GBV, or not. For GBV, there are 6 points which identify if this is GBV or not. So gender-based violence is the violence that is applied to a victim, based on their gender. Not because of another thing--it is based on her gender in that community, solely. Otherwise, it would be categorized as something else. When you abuse a woman, you don't allow her to go to work, or to study, because she is a woman. You allow the boy or man to work or to study because he is male. A GBV case is very detailed and there are many sectors and departments. You have to be very careful and have much information and great experience to identify if a case is GBV.

Here, one gets a glimpse into the tedious process behind identifying a victim of violence, and determining if the case qualifies as GBV. This approach of identifying GBV cases passes through multiple NGO personnel until intervention is applied. RBJ continued:

For the psychology sector of the NGO there are different positions. The first position is the mobilizer who is not responsible for knowing if this is a case or not. He is dealing with the community more than the case worker or social worker or case management. So after the case worker, case management, or social worker identifies the case as a GBV, they make a plan for monitoring this case based on the victim's story. They also make a plan for his or her recovery. This plan contains financial services, food, clothes, a home, and a safe area with social activities. If they don't see any differences, they refer the case to a psychologist. The psychologist, during his sessions, can decide 2-3 things. First, he

can give the case back to the social worker, and the social worker tries to deal with the victim. Or he continues with the psychology sessions. Or he refers this case to the psychiatrist if he knows that this case needs medicine. So each position has a duty that only he can use for treatment of GBV, and which is limited to only his responsibilities.

Based on this hierarchical approach within the NGOs, the path that a GBV victim follows can be summarized in this way: mobilizer, to case worker/case management/social worker, then psychologist, and finally psychiatrist. At each step, the victim of violence receives a different form of treatment. For example, if she is in need of antidepressants, then she would be referred to the psychiatrist by the psychologist. RBJ explains that the cases of GBV have seen spikes in recent years due to geopolitical regional tensions.

In 2010 and 2011, GBV was at a high with Syrian refugees who came from Syria to Iraq. It became a lot more common to hear about it. And then of course, after 2014, when ISIS came to Iraq, there was a huge increase of GBV in these places. Until now, there are international and local organizations that keep working in this sector because there are still survivors from ISIS who need help. After the liberation of Mosul in 2017, the organizations started work. I think there is a decrease in GBV cases because the organizations are working, though not all organizations are working as much as they have to work.

Today, there are perhaps dozens of NGOs within Iraq responsible for the mental health system within the country. RBJ also explained the often emotional side of their career, detailing many of the victims of violence RBJ worked with.

In 2017, a little girl came to me. I told her, ‘No dear, I cannot accept your mother because you are too old.’ She said, ‘No, I am a mother.’ I was shocked, and for a moment, I couldn’t say anything. Eventually I said ‘Wow, you are a mother?’ I had to make sure. She said yes. She said, ‘I have a child. She is 3 years old.’ I was clearly shocked, so she looked at me and she said, ‘I will shock you more: I am a widow. I married when I was 13 and I was a widow since I was 14. And now I have a child, but I don’t know how to take care of it.’

Child marriage, a form of gender-based violence, is an issue dominating many third world or developing countries, and Iraq is no exception.

### **“Pain in the Colon”: Potential Culture-bound Syndrome**

Culture-bound syndromes are psychological diseases specific to a certain culture. Van der Kolk, for example, writes of trauma survivors. “They feel heartbroken and suffer from intolerable sensations in the pit of their stomach or tightness in their chest” (van der Kolk, 2015, 208). This matches with the experiences of RBJ, as they described a similar phenomenon plaguing the citizens of war-torn Iraq.

In Iraq, when you have depression or trauma, it begins to be like a balloon, and it keeps hurting you in the colon. So, when you say, 'I am depressed,' they say, 'Come on, all the Iraqi people have pain in the colon. Why do you think you're special?' It is something familiar to have colon pain because they're used to having issues and violence, and used to living in these conditions. I would say most Iraqis have this condition.

It appears that all Iraqis, not just Assyrian-Iraqis, suffer from some form of trauma and violence resulting in the familiar colon pain that has become a culture-bound syndrome. RBJ theorizes this is because:

They are still keeping everything in, internalizing it. Everything in our lives is very difficult to have. I graduated in 2014, I didn't finish my final exams, and then I left my college, and then I was in my house, and then I fled from my house, and then I left everything when I went to Duhok, and then ISIS came, and then so on and so on. It was thing after thing. So everything comes and goes with great difficulty. Do you think the body or the mind can handle all of this without developing any diseases or trauma?

Importantly, RBJ also further extrapolates on the Iraqi view of depression.

For example, I cannot say that I am depressed because I am afraid that the community will look at me in another light. They will label me as sick, and put me in a bad position. For most people in Iraq, when you say, 'I am depressed,' they say, 'Oh my God, all our lives are depressing!' So it's okay for them. They also don't take it seriously because they think that all people are depressed, and so it is normal.

In a way, this would mean that Iraq is a country of people suffering from severe depression left untreated for decades. RBJ explained that the pain in the colon comes from a direct result of bottling up trauma and emotionally charged experiences, which is in line with van der Kolk's findings.

The Iraqi people keep facing trauma, depression, war; everything in this country is negative constantly. So they are familiar with how not to show their depression. They are now familiar with how to deal with it and they can handle it, because it was war after war with bad conditions. So that's why people here can handle it. And then, this turns into a disease. We are seeing more and more young people with blood pressure and heart attacks. Let me tell you that there are people who fled from their areas up to five times, and they're still young. The Assyrians of Mosul fled first from Baghdad to Mosul, then from Mosul to the districts, or Nineveh Plain, then from Nineveh Plain to Duhok, and then some to the West. So they are living with this constantly, and they are never allowed to settle. But they have to keep their life moving; they have to handle this. Some of them

cannot handle it, or accept it, so it turns into diseases like blood pressure, diabetes, or heart problems.

Here one can see that pain in the colon is not just a side effect of bottling up trauma, but also a predictor for life-threatening chronic illnesses, many of them affecting the psychologically-shattered youth of war-torn Iraq. This is, in fact, Yakoub's idea of continuous trauma, though here, it is taking on a far more life-threatening role in the everyday existence of individuals.

### **How NGOs Recruit Staff & Attract Clients**

When assessing how sound the psychiatric system in Iraq is, it is important to look at how it is viewed and received by the general population.

It was very weird to work for people who survived GBV, especially in our area, because it was not something common or familiar, or something we knew, especially in the Nineveh Plain. As you know, there's not too much violence amongst our people. If there is violence, immediately the church tries to stop it or the police get involved directly.

Here one gets a hint that violence and trauma proceed differently in Assyrian areas than in Kurdish or Arab areas. For the former, it is once again up to the church to act as a judicial body, overstretching its ecclesiastical limits, and entering the political arena of civic life--a theme

common throughout this study. Beyond the microcosm of the Assyrian community in the Nineveh Plain, RBJ explains that in the whole of Iraq, “The most important sector that the government has not provided is the psychology sector. Actually, we as Iraqis are not familiar with psychology. It’s mental health, but people here think that it is physical rather than mental.” This is also why phrases like “pain in the colon” have become popular. It is an expression aiming to write off any notion of a mental or psychological dilemma as a physical one, by emphasizing the pain in the colon, and ignoring one’s thoughts and actions that accompany the physical pain. RBJ then went on to describe the step by step nature of their work.

I eventually started to be a mobilizer and parental skills trainer. I was giving training for parenting skills to parents of children who were previously abused. In particular, I gave them advice on how to not treat their children violently and other similar skills, like how to know if their children are facing violence in an area. After this, if I notice there is a serious case, and if it’s specifically a GBV case, then I refer them to the case management sector. I was working directly with the cases of GBV. I attended many training sessions and workshops around it.

The training that RBJ received came directly from the NGO that they worked with. At this point, one has a clearer image of the psychiatric and therapy-based practices within Iraq. It is important to note that this field within Iraq is almost entirely driven by NGOs, or foreign organizations, as the culture does not view psychology in a positive light. In fact, NGOs instruct their workers to utilize underhanded tactics in order to locate and treat victims of violence. This

method is intended to overcome the hurdle of the public eye's view of psychology. The NGOs also target war-torn areas as they do not have enough resources to cover any larger swathes of Iraq.

So, in any area, country, or city that has faced violence, war, or anything, its citizens will have experienced violence or the trauma of PTSD. The organizations target these areas because they know there are many people who are suffering from all of these things, so they try to help them. Firstly, because mental health or psychology is the first service that they need before they turn to bad or worse things.

Another shortcoming of the mental health system in Iraq is the fact that there simply isn't enough personnel on the ground. RBJ mirrors this sentiment recounting how:

In Duhok, there are only 14 psychiatrists. There were times when there were no psychiatrists. When some organizations recruited on social media, no one applied, because they were working full-time with other organizations. A psychiatrist was a very wanted position in the organizations. The psychiatrist came only one day of the week.

This shortage of both psychologists and psychiatrists is likely due to the poor image of the field in the public eye, deterring youth from majoring in things like psychology. RBJ confirms this when stating:

People here do not have a will to study this subject because they are aware that this sector does not have many patients in it. And this in turn is because the people do not have this awareness to be able to go to the psychiatrist and the psychologist.

There is also the factor that mental health is often misconstrued with physical wellbeing. “Here they are seen as just physicians because there is no understanding of mental health.” And regardless of this scarcity of psychologists and psychiatrists, most Iraqis do not enlist their services. “Here in Iraq, it’s not common that if you have trauma, or any mental issue, to go to the psychologist or psychiatrist. That’s why most of them are going to other types of doctors.” This is because mental things like depression are often seen as physical ailments. Very few people go to the psychiatrist or even psychologist.

### **Receiving Psychological Treatment in Iraq**

When asked how people seek out psychological help in Iraq, RBJ replied, “They simply do not seek it out because people here are afraid of judgment, and because they don’t have awareness. They do not think that they are suffering from what could be depression. Instead, they internalize it.” Thus, once an NGO arrives in a war-torn area, they must instead attract victims of violence by first spreading word of their arrival.

It's very easy. When the organization goes to one area, they just provide their services to one family, and if this family is pleased and happy with the services, they will spread the news. Once that happens, they could service the entire village in one day. They come directly to the other families on the second day.

But for victims of violence who do not seek help even at this stage, RBJ says, "There are people that may go to the organizations if the organization pays the transportation, or if they are offering very good services. They may go just to have these services." But services do not necessarily entail psychological ones, but rather, monetary incentives and other such tactics. RBJ explains:

They can get money or food, or can even immigrate to the outside. Many of the survivors immigrated outside. I didn't work with these kinds of survivors, actually, but my colleagues informed me that many of the clients that they worked with went to Germany, or to the outside, because their case was registered as survivor or GBV.

Thus, NGOs appear to offer three tiers of aid to victims of violence. The first is to the most willing person or family, who spread the word about the NGOs' activities and good will.. Next comes the round of people who were at first reluctant, but heard good things from the first tier of treated victims of violence. The third and final group of people are those who will only receive aid on the condition of incentives, such as food, money, clothing, and even aid in immigration to a better life outside of Iraq. These incentives are only complementary to the

psychological aid the NGOs provide, and function as a last resort to attracting the most reluctant and reclusive members of the victims of the gender-based violence community. In fact, NGOs who do not employ such methods are often doomed to fail as:

There are organizations that are offering psychological services, but are not offering other services like money, food, clothes, and other things. These are not successful because people do not want to meet the psychiatrists or psychologists or social workers. They want other services.

This proves that the primary reason people see psychologists or psychiatrists in Iraq is for the complementary services. However, this system also possesses flaws, as many seeking aid simply lie or receive psychological aid in a bid to garner monetary and material incentives, when they do not truly need psychological analysis and intervention.

About 5% of them were lying because when the organization registers that you are a violence case or a GBV case, they keep you on a list for monitoring. Maybe this client needs clothes, food, and sometimes money. If someone comes to me and says she was a survivor, but she's not in actuality, I have to write that she was a survivor anyway because she informed me, and we cannot go and check to see if she is a survivor or not.

In this way, foreign aid and psychological intervention is often misdirected and taken away from individuals in actual need of it. However, the aforementioned system of bringing aid to victims of violence is the more recent model. Back before Mosul was entirely liberated from ISIS, NGOs would go to the refugee camps where there were already concentrated populations of victims of violence, making administering aid far easier and more efficient. RBJ notes how:

In the camps, all of the refugees are under the control of the security, government, and the international organizations. But in the cities, no. You come back to your home and you do whatever you want to do. And if the organization comes and talks to your wife or daughter or anyone, then when they leave, you could violently punish them. But in the camps they could not do so because they were under control and they were living in tents, so the neighbors could hear everything.

This passage in particular is important because it shows how even seeking aid in the first place could result in gender-based violence against women and children. RBJ goes on to explain where a lot of this anger and violence is sourced.

After ISIS, when I was working in the camp, the men there were in a very bad condition because they didn't have money, didn't have work, didn't have a house. They only had their wives and their children. They felt like they were in a box. They could not do anything, so they kept abusing their wives or children. One of the participants in my training session was crying one day. I asked her why she was crying. She said at their

camp, they give you a tent if your family numbers 8 or more. They were 7. She could not get pregnant, so her husband married another woman and she became pregnant. When they had another baby, they gave them another tent.

### **The Clan System & Its Weight on the Iraqi Mental Health System**

Part of the reason GBV cases are prevalent within the nation of Iraq is that the law of the land is often not upheld. RBJ laments how, “They are trying to combat violence and gender-based violence, but here in Iraq, because the government does not fully control the country, they cannot stop it efficiently.” This is because the country is effectively ruled by a clan system. “See, when they try to pass laws on these things, often the culture gets in the way. The mullahs, clerics, or the priests refuse these things.” Here, there is more evidence of religion being tied into even the judicial and governing systems within Iraq. Religious leaders hold great power, and fanatical followers can make any law combating gender-based violence essentially useless. RBJ explains how:

Tribal culture is even in big cities like Baghdad. Imagine all of the accidents happening here in Iraq. For example, if someone kills another person from another tribe, the two tribes gather together and they sit down and solve this problem between them without going to the court, without going to the police, and without getting the law involved.

Because of this practice, often, GBV cases get overlooked, or resolved behind closed doors in tribal meetings between all male parties. This would create an environment where GBV cases are kept hidden from the law and courts, and as a result, actually encouraged due to there being no repercussions.

## CONCLUSION

Various factors have led to a fracturing of the Assyrian identity even before ISIS in 2014. Among these was the Ottoman millet system which, for centuries, divided citizens of the Ottoman Empire along religious lines, and granted the clergy class judicial and governing powers, something that haunts the Near-Eastern theocratic fabric to this day. The Millet system also fueled tribalist sentiments, as denominational adherence became more important than one's ethnic identity, especially for the Assyrians who have produced five traditional churches. This fracturing rendered the Assyrians exposed to massacres and genocides over the course of two centuries, beginning with the Meri Koor Massacre, as they could no longer act cohesively in their own interests. During massacres such as the Meri Koor Massacre, the Assyrians often failed to defend themselves due to the church doctrine of martyrdom, which glorified dying for one's beliefs. In the coming decades, and even to this present day, Assyrians were continuously expelled from regions of their homeland. The effects of this were the fracturing of the Assyrian identity, the halting of rituals, and the degeneration of the Assyrian language in the face of acculturation, as the majority of Assyrians eventually moved into diaspora host nations. This study found that the best practices to resist this degradation of the Assyrian identity on an individual level was to strive for historical consciousness and to gain insight about how one's life had been affected by the past, as described by Counsel Dekalaita and Mr. Yakoub, respectively, as well as to strive for van der Kolk's introspection method. The threat to this emerging mentality of connectedness and understanding of one's history and trauma was described by Yakoub as collective victimhood. This study found that there were two pathways to eventually succumbing to the collective victimhood mentality, both arising from the conditions caused by

the continuous atrocity wrought upon the Assyrians, and the subsequent continual retreat in every collective aspect, including political and civic. The first pathway begins with the individual who is active, yet in a powerless mindset, due to the tendency to overemphasize the setbacks of Assyrians both in civic and political arenas. These people then tend to stop their activity, becoming apathetic to their previous efforts and all future efforts. The second group begins in the escapist mindset. These individuals are active, but once again, have become disillusioned with the lack of progress coupled with constant setbacks, a sense that comes to overwhelm them. They become inactive in all civic and political Assyrian organizations, instead taking their resources and time to church institutions, or even to the group causing the trauma in the first place. In other words, they adopt the submission mindset. All of these mindsets come with a suspicion and even hatred of the group imposing or suspected of imposing the trauma. This process was described as “self-fulfilling,” as continuous supply of atrocities and suppression drove the Assyrians from area to area, cementing their status as second-class citizens and reinforcing their inferiority complex.

Examining the account of Mr. Misho, it was found that much of this trauma is actually embodied and experienced as real mental and even physical pain. Mr. Misho described having sleepless nights as well as constant regret and pain for what befell his nation, town, and friends in 2014. This is backed by van der Kolk’s findings that trauma is the emotions and physical sensations imprinted during the traumatic event which gets re-experienced as physical reactions in the present. Multiple solutions were explored that could potentially mitigate future traumas on the Assyrians in the Nineveh Plain. It was found that the majority of Assyrians, before returning from their exodus to the refugee camps, demanded the formation of the NPU, or the Nineveh Plain Protection Units--an Assyrian army, backed by the central Iraqi regime. In other words, the

residents of the Plain wanted their security in their own hands. Though this was established, it was learned that the main hurdles in this achievement were the political divisions between denominational leaders. In fact, the towns that saw the greatest returns were those controlled by Assyrians themselves. The state of the current mental health system in Iraq also had to be examined. It was found that it was almost entirely run by NGOs, non-profit international aid organizations. This is because the culture in Iraq does not view disorders like depression as mental diseases, but rather physical ailments. There was an overall shortage of both psychologists and psychiatrists, and abnormal amounts of gender-based violence. Depression, itself a taboo word in Iraq, was referred to by the “pain in the colon” euphemism, matching van der Kolk’s descriptors of physical pain in the abdomen accompanying the internalization of trauma.

Furthermore, a fracturing of and loss of tangible identity due to the destruction of historical artifacts, past divisions and traumas such as the millet system, an inadequate mental health system, and the fact of continuous tragedy and atrocity all combine to weigh down the Assyrian psyche and impede all psychological, political, collective, and even individual progress, despite one’s realism or idealism. Assyrians in the homeland tended to be more realistic, while Assyrians in the diaspora were more idealistic. For example, it was found that the Assyrians in the homeland had to take into account multiple factors that those in diaspora were not affected by, such as the Sunni dispossession by the Shiites, and the constant appeasement of greater powers at war with one another. In contrast to this, the idealism of diaspora Assyrians is a survival method utilized in order to resist total acculturation in host nations.

Trauma was also imprinted on the collective memory of the Assyrians, an affliction that contributed to their collective victimhood mentality. Parallel to this, studies were examined

which looked at how the children of the female trauma survivors epigenetically inherited lower cortisol responses and higher chances for various diseases such as PTSD, and mood and anxiety disorders. A future study that could perform similar empirical experiments, such as those with the female survivors of the World Trade Center attacks, with Assyrians from various generations (preferably related to each other), is highly recommended. In order to preserve evidence of the effects of these traumas, eyewitness accounts on the ground revolving around the events of the ISIS invasion of the Nineveh Plain were recorded in unadulterated form. Beyond just ISIS, the KDP's political hijacking of the Alqosh mayorship, as well as how the Assyrian refugees were used as political pawns and a means of boosting the KRG's economy by the KDP, to their psychological and physical detriment, was also examined at length. And lastly, how the refugees made it to the safety of Western nations such as the U.S. or France, and how they were harassed in the immigration, foreign policy, and judicial systems of the West, was also analyzed.

### References

- Assyrian Policy Institute. Assyrian Policy. (n.d.). Retrieved November 19, 2021, from <https://www.assyrianpolicy.org/>.
- Bowers, M. E., & Yehuda, R. (2016). Intergenerational Transmission of Stress in Humans. *Neuropsychopharmacology* : official publication of the American College of Neuropsychopharmacology, 41(1), 232–244. <https://doi.org/10.1038/npp.2015.247>
- Daskalakis, N. P., Xu, C., Bader, H. N., Chatzinakos, C., Weber, P., Makotkine, I., Lehrner, A., Bierer, L. M., Binder, E. B., & Yehuda, R. (2021). Intergenerational trauma is associated with expression alterations in glucocorticoid- and immune-related genes. *Neuropsychopharmacology* : official publication of the American College of Neuropsychopharmacology, 46(4), 763–773. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41386-020-00900-8>
- Dekel, S., Ein-Dor, T., Gordon, K. M., Rosen, J. B., & Bonanno, G. A. (2013). Cortisol and PTSD symptoms among male and female high-exposure 9/11 survivors. *Journal of traumatic stress*, 26(5), 621–625. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.21839>
- Donef, R. (2014). *The Hakkâri Massacres: an Anthology of Documents Related to Massacres and Deportation of Assyrians in Northern Mesopotamia: Ethnic Cleansing by Turkey, 1924-25*. Tatavla Publishing.
- Gaunt, D., Atto, N., Barthoma, S. O. (2019). *Let Them Not Return: Sayfo - the Genocide against the Assyrian, Syriac and Chaldean Christians in the Ottoman Empire*. Berghahn.

Lazar, B.M. (2015). A Comparative Study of the Assyrian and Guatemalan Genocides. UNLV Theses, Dissertations, Professional Papers, and Capstones. 2373. doi:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.34917/7645938>

“Population Project.” Shlama Foundation, [www.shlama.org/population](http://www.shlama.org/population).

Stafford, R. S. (2006). *The Tragedy of the Assyrians*. Gorgias Press.

Suny, R.G. (2018). The Hamidian Massacres, 1894-1897: Disinterring a Buried History. Open Edition Journals. doi: <https://doi.org/10.4000/eac.1847>

Talia, P. H. (1980). *Our Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow: History, Dilemma and Destiny of the Assyrian People*.

Van der Kolk, B. (2015). *The body keeps the score: Mind, brain and body in the transformation of trauma*. Penguin Books.

YAKOUB, A. (2020). *The Path to Assyria: A call for National Renewal*. LULU.COM.

Yehuda, R., Engel, S. M., Brand, S. R., Seckl, J., Marcus, S. M., & Berkowitz, G. S. (2005).

Transgenerational effects of posttraumatic stress disorder in babies of mothers exposed to the World Trade Center attacks during pregnancy. *The Journal of clinical endocrinology and metabolism*, 90(7), 4115–4118. <https://doi.org/10.1210/jc.2005-0550>

YouTube. (n.d.). Ishtar TV. YouTube. Retrieved December 7, 2021, from

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC6AKXBIwDhEMpG5ODlwQpNg>.