



Assyria Council of Europe

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Press Release

“THE STRUGGLE TO EXIST” – A HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT CONCERNING ASSYRIAN CHRISTIANS IN IRAQ

The plight of the native Assyrian Christians of Iraq is a serious one that continues to worsen with time. The Assyrians have suffered greatly last century, suffering genocide under an ailing Ottoman regime in Turkey and massacres by the ruling elites within their native homeland of Iraq. A further threat to their existence in their homeland has manifested with the rise of radical Islamists who seek to cleanse the region of any Christian groups.

The Assyria Council of Europe (ACE) has collaborated with the Iraq based Hammurabi Human Rights Organisation to produce a report detailing the horrible experiences Assyrians living in a new, democratic Iraq are going through. The ACE board said “We are very worried about the situation of Assyrians in Assyria, and if the European Union and other influential organisations do not intervene, there will be no Assyrians left in modern day Iraq”.

The report is inspired by a six-week fact-finding mission in the northern Iraq between November 2009 and January 2010. It is split into three separate papers, each with their own focus. Together, they represent a conclusive assessment of the problems facing the Assyrians, complete with recommendations to the Iraqi government, the Kurdish Regional Government, and the international community. The break down of each part is as follows:

- **Part 1:** The first part tells of the tragic history of Assyrians and other ethno-religious minorities *in Iraq*. More than 1,300 Christian families fled Mosul in the wake of the 2008 terror campaign alone, with over 700 targeted killings committed post-2003. Of the 750,000 Iraqi refugees in Jordan for example, Assyrian Christians number up to a disproportionate 150,000 considering their population in Iraq. With this in mind, both past and present relevant legal standards are addressed, with deficiencies brought into focus.

The oil rich Nineveh Province is constitutionally under the jurisdiction of Iraq’s central government with Kurds representing a minority. However, discoveries within the report suggest the KRG is effectively trying to reshape the region with an influx of Kurdish military *peshmerga* and a widespread political campaign to curry favour with Nineveh’s inhabitants. It is imperative that all such attempts must be repelled to prevent a ‘Kurdification’ of this area, with proper investigations undertaken regarding murders and illegal land seizures.

- Part 2: The focus shifts here to specifically analysing the violence committed against Assyrian Christians *in the disputed territories*. Nineveh's minorities are described as "tormented" from all sides, suffering the most post-2003. The ruling dynastic KDP party is responsible for much of the civil unrest in the disputed territories alongside Islamists who are to blame for the bombing of over 60 Churches and the murder of hundreds of Assyrian Christians.

The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) is said to deny many aid organisations funding for assistance programs unless they support the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP). This has hampered development by giving it an extremely divisive political agenda that is in line with the forceful expansionist policies of the KRG which are described in this report. Elections have also been an avenue for the KDP to exercise its authority, with many irregularities reported since free elections began.

- Part 3: Central to this report is the treatment of Assyrian Christians *in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region*. The treatment of the Assyrians by the KRG is similar to how they were treated under the Ba'ath party who did not discriminate Assyrians due to their (Christian) religion, but rather their ethnic identity. The same policies were used by the Ba'athist regime to oppress the Kurds, are now being used by the Kurdish authorities against ethnic Assyrians.

Oppressing the "largest minority" within their judicial boundaries by not practicing a genuine system of proportional representation also furthers the KDP goal of expanding their region to often oil rich areas such as Kirkuk. Many non-Kurds are discriminated against for not speaking Kurdish. The issue of land seizures is worryingly becoming an overlooked one for the authorities as Assyrians try to return and settle in their dispossessed homes and villages with little documentation other than their memories. Kurdish squatters often demand sums of \$20,000 in compensation to leave – unaffordable for desperate Assyrians. A reported 10,000 hectares of land has been taken illegally from Assyrian Christians in the region.

These three papers vividly document the struggle Assyrian Christians face living in their homeland. They are also a call for action to be taken by the Iraqi government, the KRG, and the international community to address this problem with urgency and commitment that has been severely lacking thus far. Each paper ends with a set of recommendations relevant to its focus, and it is imperative these recommendations at the very least seriously considered by appropriate authorities.

Assyrians in Iraq are desperately in need of economic aid and political settlement. Many of the areas they inhabit are neglected, offered little funding, high in unemployment, and low on education and health facilities. This combination of problems can only result in the eradication of the marginalised ancient Assyrian community of Iraq unless immediate action is taken. The Assyrians are being exploited from all sides while receiving nothing meaningful to improve their dire situation.