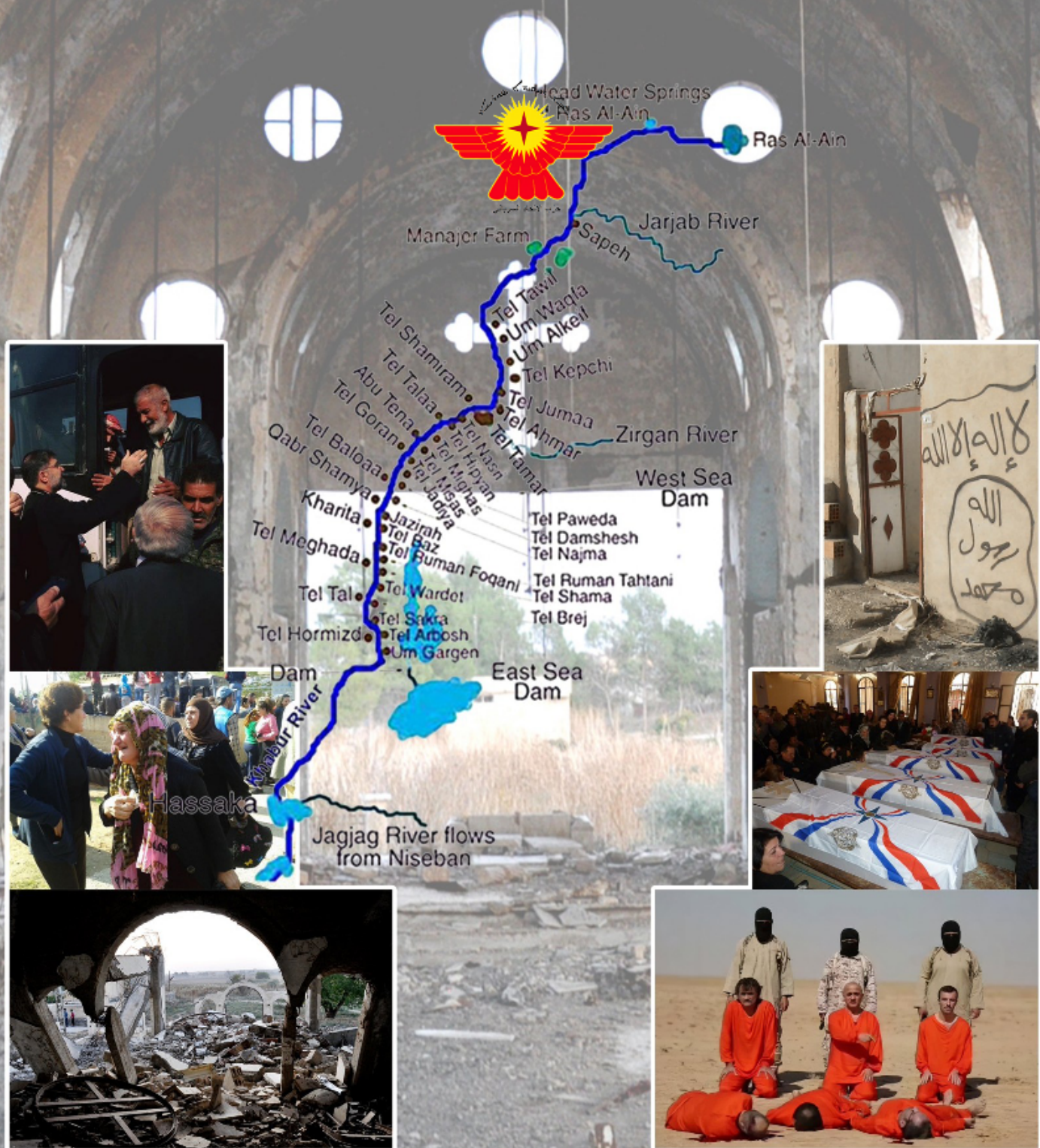


قَهْلًا حَسْبُكَ قَهْلًا قَهْلًا وَنُحْمًا وَنُحْمًا Genocide in the Khabur الإبادة العرقية على الخابور



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حزب الاتحاد السرياني

Introduction

The Syriac-Assyrian people are among the most ancient indigenous communities of Syria and Mesopotamia. Descendants of a rich and deep-rooted culture, the Syriac-Assyrians emerged as a people who developed their language and cultural values as early as the fourth millennium BCE. This indigenous population has lived in this geography throughout its history, making it an integral part of the region's heritage, possessing a rich and enduring legacy that distinguishes it from other regional communities.

The ancestors of the Syriac-Assyrians—namely the Assyrians, Arameans, and Chaldeans—laid the foundations for cultural, religious, and civilizational advancements, excelling in governance, architecture, economy, science, art, and music. They also played a pivotal role in the development of global civilization, exemplified by the great empires they established. The first and oldest state in recorded history—the Akkadian Empire—was founded in 2350 BCE, followed by the Chaldean and Assyrian empires in Babylon and Nineveh, which lasted until 539 BCE.

The legacy of these empires extended across the known world at the time, leaving a profound cultural imprint on all aspects of human life. This heritage persists to this day, reflected in a vibrant and fertile culture that has withstood challenges and oppression over millennia. Indeed, the Syriac-Assyrians' enduring culture has maintained its linguistic and societal essence for over 6,000 years, influencing history and global politics under various names (Akkad, Assyria, Babylon, Chaldea, etc.).

Due to their long and rich history, and their interactions across empires, religions, and sects—from Christianity to Islam—the Syriac-Assyrian people have been known by various names, such as Assyrians, Arameans, Chaldeans, Syriacs, Maronites, Melkites, Nestorians, Jacobites, and Mhalamis. These names have been used in political and religious literature to define and document specific historical periods and events experienced by different Syriac groups. Names like Maronite, Melkite, Nestorian, and Jacobite were often employed to clarify particular eras in Syriac history.

However, it is crucial to note that the names Assyrians, Arameans, Chaldeans, and Syriacs all trace back to the same people and culture, sharing the same historical and cultural roots. Consequently, these names are considered national identifiers for one unified people. The name "Syriac" became universally accepted around 300 BCE and has been used to represent the collective identity of the people in literature and documentation.

Despite belonging to different religions and sects, the Syriac-Assyrian people have exhibited remarkable tolerance—a cornerstone of their social unity, binding together various communities across Mesopotamia (Beth Nahrain, Land of Two Rivers, Mesopotamia). This region was among the earliest areas inhabited by the Syriac-Assyrians, who established multiple civilizations throughout its historical phases. Their cultural imprint remains visible through archaeological sites and the names of cities and villages still in use today in the Syriac language.

Mesopotamia holds immense geopolitical and strategic significance, rich in resources such as water, oil, gas, and fertile agricultural lands. Its location has made it a focal point of conflicts in the Middle East, as well as a gateway between East and West. Historically and in contemporary times, Mesopotamia has been intersected by vital trade routes, including the Spice Route and the Silk Road, as well as pipelines transporting oil and gas.

The Present-Day Status of the Syriac-Assyrian People

Today, the Syriac-Assyrian people continue to preserve their culture across Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, central and northern Iraq, the Urmia region in Iran, and southeastern Turkey. However, a large portion of this population has emigrated to Europe, the Americas, Australia, and other parts of the world due to systemic denial of their existence, oppression, persecution, exclusionary policies, forced assimilation, and various pressures they have endured in their ancestral homeland.

The Syriac-Assyrian Presence in Khabur Villages Before the Syrian Crisis

The settlement of Syriac-Assyrians in the Khabur region is a direct consequence of previous genocides they faced in their homeland, such as those in the Hakkari Mountains, Urmia, and later Semele. Their distinct ethnic identity and aspiration for self-governance were met with oppressive regimes, leading to a series of atrocities against them. This drove them to seek refuge in the Khabur region in 1933 under French protection. The Syriac-Assyrians began to establish settlements along the Khabur River, which they initially referred to as "camps." These settlements flourished with the founding of modern Syria, as they developed the area, planting trees and utilizing the flowing waters of the river to create a sustainable community. By 2011, with the introduction of public infrastructure, the region had been transformed significantly.

Prior to the Syrian crisis, Syriac-Assyrians lived in 36 villages along the banks of the Khabur River, extending about 30 kilometers. The population of the Khabur Basin was estimated to be between 30,000 and 35,000, and the tightly-knit communities became cultural and religious hubs. Churches and schools doubled as cultural centers, fostering literacy and education in Eastern Syriac. These villages distinguished themselves from larger urban areas by their unique cultural identity.



With the onset of the Syrian war and the ongoing conflict, these areas faced repeated attacks by successive extremist armed groups, resulting in a mass exodus of Syriac-Assyrians. Many fled to other parts of Syria or emigrated abroad, drastically reducing their numbers in the region. By 2012, the population of these villages had dropped to between 20,000 and 25,000. The Syriac-Assyrians in the Khabur Basin engaged primarily in agriculture, cultivating wheat, barley, and fruit-bearing trees such as grapes and pomegranates, alongside livestock farming.

By the late 1990s, Turkey's water policies played a significant role in drying up the Khabur River. These actions were linked to large-scale dam projects along regional rivers, which significantly reduced water flow. Additionally, unregulated groundwater well drilling near the river's source further decreased water levels and redirected its course. The previous Syrian regime's policies compounded the problem, leaving the region suffering from severe water scarcity.

Violations Against Syriac-Assyrians Under the Syrian State

The Syriac-Assyrians in Khabur have endured various forms of persecution, including tactics categorized as "special warfare," such as the deliberate drying of the Khabur River, which served as the lifeline for their villages. These actions have had devastating cultural and demographic impacts on the Syriac-Assyrian presence in the region. The resulting hardships forced many to seek livelihoods elsewhere, often migrating to Lebanon or other countries.



Threats and Risks of Forced Displacement

The Syriac-Assyrian people continue to face significant threats, including the risks of forced displacement,

which further endangers their cultural and demographic continuity in their ancestral lands.

As a result of the war, security vacuums, and ongoing conflicts in Syria, several villages were subjected to indiscriminate shelling. On November 14, 2012, at precisely 11:33 a.m., Syrian regime aircraft bombed the village of Tel Nasri, causing significant destruction and claiming the life of 16-year-old Ninos. Syriac-Assyrians also suffered from forced displacement and repeated kidnappings, often for ransom, as well as the confiscation of their properties due to migration. With escalating violence and instability, thousands of Syriac-Assyrians fled to Lebanon and Iraq, and later to Australia, Europe, and the Americas, leaving behind their families, properties, and lands. This mass migration significantly reduced their population in the region, severely impacting their cultural and demographic presence.

ISIS Invasion and suppression against The Khabur

One of the darkest periods of persecution faced by Syriac-Assyrians in the 21st century occurred during the control of the terrorist organization ISIS over large parts of Syria between 2014 and 2017. This included areas such as Sadad in Homs countryside, Hasakah, Khabur, Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, and other occupied regions. Like other communities, Syriac-Assyrians were subjected to widespread attacks by ISIS. A notable example was the 2015 assault on the Khabur region, where ISIS targeted 36 Syriac-Assyrian villages. The attack resulted in the destruction of many villages and the abduction of hundreds of residents, including women, children, and the elderly, who were taken as hostages. Churches and religious landmarks in the area were also destroyed under the pretext that they were "infidels" and non-Muslim communities. Many hostages were extorted by ISIS, with the extremist factions demanding large ransoms for their release. Numerous families were forced to pay substantial sums to secure the freedom of their loved ones.

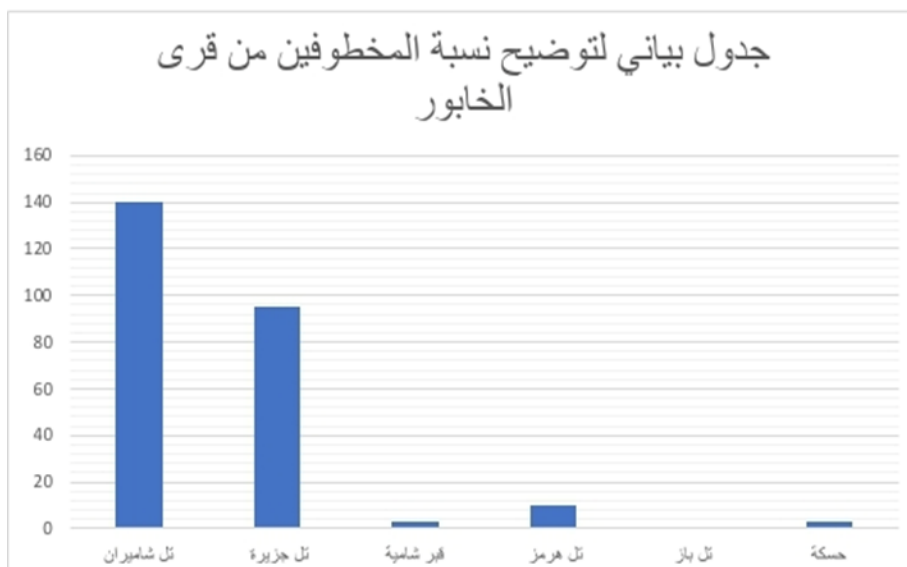


The forced displacement and migration of Syriac-Assyrians were exacerbated by the escalating violence, the expansion of extremist groups, armed conflicts, and the absence of security. Thousands were compelled to flee to relatively safer areas within Syria or to migrate abroad, particularly to Europe and North America. This mass exodus had a profound impact on the demographic composition of the region. The population of Syriac-Assyrians declined drastically, leading to the loss of most of their properties and homes, which were either abandoned or occupied by displaced individuals from military operations. These homes and the surrounding greenery were altered, turning once-thriving villages into desolate areas.



Many religious and cultural landmarks, which are integral to the Syriac-Assyrian heritage, were destroyed or threatened. ISIS and other extremist groups targeted numerous churches, aiming to erase the cultural and religious identity of the Syriac-Assyrian people. These attacks were seen as deliberate attempts to obliterate their historical and cultural legacy.

On the night of February 23, 2015, the terrorist organization ISIS launched a violent attack targeting the villages of Khabur, located west of the city of Hasakah. The group seized control of villages such as Tel Shamiram, Tel Jazira, Tel Tal, Tel Hermiz, Qabr Shamieh, Tel Baz, and others situated on the southern bank of the Khabur River. Due to the rising and flowing waters of the Khabur River that same night, ISIS detained large numbers of peaceful Assyrian civilians. The attack resulted in casualties among the Assyrians, with several killed and injured, and 259 individuals were abducted, including dozens of women, children, and elderly residents from the aforementioned southern villages. The ongoing battles led to the displacement of Syriac villagers from northern Khabur to the cities of Hasakah and Qamishli, with the number of displaced families estimated to exceed 1,380.



The attacks that targeted the Syriac-Assyrian people, victims and Slavery

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After Khabur was liberated from ISIS control, the group executed three Assyrian Christians and released a video showing the execution of three Assyrian hostages by shooting them in the head. The victims were identified as:

- Abdulmasih Azaria Noya, 36 years old, from Tel Jazira.
- Ashur Abraham, from Tel Jazira.
- Bassam Issa Michael, 39 years old, from Tel Shamiram.

The video also depicted three other hostages pleading for their release, with ISIS demanding a large ransom for their freedom and threatening that all hostages would face the same fate if the ransom was not paid. The church, through its members abroad, contributed to raising the ransom, and the terrorist organization released the hostages in several batches.



During ISIS’s invasion of the Syriac-Assyrian villages, the group carried out acts of killing and displacement, in addition to burning villages, desecrating churches, and destroying them. A total of 11 churches were either completely or partially destroyed, beginning on Easter Day, April 1, 2015, with the bombing of the Church of the Virgin Mary in Tel Nasri. This act was a clear message that Syriac-Assyrian Christians were considered infidels and polytheists by the group.



church	village	city/region
Church of the Virgin Mary	Tel Nasri	Khabur Region (Tel Tamer)
Church of Mar Bishu	Tel Shamiran	Khabur Region (Tel Tamer)
Church of the Cross	Tel Talat	Khabur Region (Tel Tamer)
Church of Mar Zia	Tel Kzwan	Khabur Region (Tel Tamer)
Church of Mar Shimun	Abu Tina	Khabur Region (Tel Tamer)
Church of Mar Qeryaqos	Tel Baloua	Khabur Region (Tel Tamer)
Church of Mar Shallita	Qabr Shamieh	Khabur Region (Tel Tamer)
Church of Mar Shimun	Tel Khreita	Khabur Region (Tel Tamer)
Church of Mar Qeryaqos	Tel Mkhada	Khabur Region (Tel Tamer)
Church of Mar Odisho	Tel Tal	Khabur Region (Tel Tamer)
Church of Raban Hormizd	Tel Hermiz	Khabur Region (Tel Tamer)

Among the most prominent violations was the targeting of churches.



The psychological damages to the Syriac-Assyrian people

The psychological damage inflicted on the Syriac-Assyrian people has been profound due to a series of criminal acts, including kidnappings, killings, and identity-based displacement. These violations have deeply affected their collective identity and individual psyche, embedding fear into their subconscious. Many have retreated into isolation from society as a result of widespread abuses such as torture, enslavement, rape, forced marriages of minors, and the assassination of intellectuals and prominent figures within the community. This has led to feelings of anxiety, stress, sadness, self-doubt, shame, personality disorders, and reliance on sedatives and alcohol as coping mechanisms.

The security, financial, social, and livelihood challenges

In addition to threats from extremist groups, the Syriac-Assyrians have faced challenges stemming from Turkish military operations targeting northern and eastern Syria indiscriminately. Living alongside Kurds and Arabs on the frontlines of military operations has made their region perpetually vulnerable, especially after Turkey's "Operation Peace Spring" in 2019. Increased attacks have resulted in violations against churches, cemeteries, and homes, turning these areas into theaters of military operations. This has exacerbated the suffering of residents, forcing them to flee and displace once again from villages and areas near Turkish forces and their allied factions. The current state of these villages is no better than the frontlines, as they suffer from destroyed infrastructure, including water, electricity, and sewage networks. Some villages have been closed off, converted into military barracks, or used as shelters for displaced individuals who have encroached upon properties and homes, further exploiting the region.

Like other communities in Syria, the Syriac-Assyrians have endured the economic and social crises caused

by the war. Damaged and destroyed infrastructure, poverty, and resource shortages have made it difficult for them to rebuild their lives in their native areas.

Recommendations:

Given the various forms of persecution faced by the Syriac-Assyrians of Khabur—one of the oldest peoples deeply rooted in history—it is imperative to conduct a comprehensive and strategic study of their situation, as they are now at risk of extinction, which contradicts fundamental human values. It is of utmost importance for the new Syrian state to recognize and acknowledge the genocide they endured, enshrine their rights in the constitution, and take steps to prevent future genocides. Emergency and strategic solutions should be adopted to address the consequences of the genocide against this ancient ethnic group. International entities must enforce a cessation of military operations across Syria, particularly in the Khabur region, neutralize the area, and entrust its protection to its Syriac-Assyrian inhabitants in collaboration with relevant authorities. The region should be cleared of displaced individuals, violations should be rectified, and infrastructure such as electricity, potable water, sewage systems, and other essential services should be restored. Churches should be rebuilt, roads reopened to all villages, and bridges constructed between northern and southern villages by the government responsible for the area. Efforts should be made to encourage the return of expatriates and compensate them for the material and emotional damages they suffered, while holding perpetrators accountable for their crimes.

Finally, it is the responsibility of governments, international human rights organizations, and nations committed to protecting human rights to support efforts to safeguard these communities and ensure they live in a safe and stable environment, free from conflict.

The Syriac Union Party - Media Office