

The Assyrian Community of the Middle East is on the Brink of Extinction

The Assyrians are a predominantly Christian, Aramaic-speaking ethnic community who have lived in parts of Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Iraq since ancient times. Assyrians do not live freely and securely in any of those countries. Absent major change, it is difficult to imagine the continued viability of Assyrian communities in the Middle East. Iraq, home to the most Assyrians in the region, once held at least [800,000 Assyrians](#) before the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Today, Iraq only contains around [200,000 Assyrians](#), who mostly live in the Nineveh Plains region of northern Iraq. During the Iraq War (2003-2011), Assyrians, like other non-Muslim minorities, [faced violent persecution](#) at the hands of Islamic extremist insurgents. At various times, armed groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq [systematically murdered Iraqi Assyrians](#). Bombing Assyrian churches and homes, these groups created a disproportionate number of Assyrian refugees from Iraq. During the Islamic State's invasion of northern Iraq in 2014, [Assyrians were forced](#) to either flee their villages or face killings and abduction by the terrorist group.

Since the defeat of the Islamic State, some Iraqi Assyrians have returned to their villages, but they are hardly more secure today. According to a January Assyrian Policy Institute (API) report, Turkey, without regard for civilian life, launched [operations Claw-Eagle and Claw-Tiger](#) in June 2020 to stamp out its longtime rival: the Kurdish separatist militant group known as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), based in Iraq since the 1990s. In 2020, Assyrians living along the Iraqi-Turkish border were [bombed by Turkish jets](#) on more than fifty-two occasions. Needless to say, Turkish airstrikes have exacerbated an already dismal humanitarian situation in northern Iraq by killing and displacing civilians and destroying homes, farmland, and other infrastructure.

Neutral Assyrians living in the Duhok Governorate of Iraq have been “caught in the crossfire” of this new-old conflict, in the words of the January API report on the violence. Many Assyrians living in the region are already IDPs from Mosul and the Nineveh Plains, and have had their property and food confiscated by local PKK troops.

In the Nineveh Plains, Iranian-backed militias and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) that rules Iraqi Kurdistan have [engaged in intimidation and violence](#) against the local Assyrian population. The KDP seeks to [annex the Plains](#), claiming that they are “historically Kurdish.” In 2017, the KDP [removed Assyrian Christian](#) mayors in Nineveh Plains villages, [replacing them with their own loyalists](#) to bring the region into its own sphere. According to a January API report, the KDP effectively permits Turkey to maintain bases in northern Iraq for its anti-PKK operations.

In 2019, [Assyrians in the Khabour region](#) of Syria were displaced by a Turkish campaign against the PKK-affiliated People’s Protection Unit. Because Turkey has not withdrawn from its positions from northeastern Syria, the few Assyrians and other religious minorities who remain in the region continue to face [violence, kidnapping, forced conversions, and looting](#) at the hands of the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army.

The [Assyrian population in Turkey](#) itself numbers 25,000. It lives under the constant scrutiny of the Turkish government. The community has been dwindling in size since the [Assyrian Genocide of 1914](#), when around half of the 600,000 Assyrians living in the Middle East died as a result of deportations and massacres organized by the Ottoman Empire. Although the Assyrians were concentrated in the territory that is currently southeast Turkey, the [Turkish government does not legally recognize](#) them as a minority group nor acknowledge their genocide.

For decades, the Assyrians of Turkey have been besieged on all sides by Kurdish tribesmen, Turkish soldiers, and the PKK. Many Assyrian community leaders, priests, and human rights activists have been [arbitrarily arrested by Turkish authorities](#) on allegations of terrorism and/or PKK ties. [Village guards installed by the Turkish government](#) to control regions of Kurdish unrest in southeast Turkey have played a major role in driving out Turkish Assyrians: they have raided the few remaining Assyrian villages in the region and allowed neighboring Kurdish tribesmen to do so as well. Turkey has also [seized hundreds of Assyrian properties](#), including ancient religious sites. The government only returned some properties in response to widespread European and American condemnation. There is little hope for Assyrian community revival in Turkey.

Once home to up to [100,000 Assyrians](#), today Iran has no more than [17,000 Assyrians](#), mostly in Tehran. Most Iranian Assyrians left the country after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. As a Christian minority living under an Islamic theocracy, Assyrians cannot hold office in the country. According to a 2019 report by the Assyrian Confederation of Europe, Assyrian churches are frequently arrested and their churches closed for supposedly “proselytizing” their faith. The Iranian courts sentenced Assyrian Pentecostal Victor Bet-Tamraz and three others to a combined 45 years in prison [for practicing their faith](#) in a private Christmas gathering.

When analyzing the disastrous situation in the Middle East today, it is easy for the international observer to forget how minority communities like the Assyrians, Mandeans, and Yazidis have been impacted in the process. These communities are so few and ignored that it is difficult to calculate their population numbers in any country in the region. It is no secret that entire countries in the Middle East suffer from widespread human security issues. But it is precisely small groups such as the Assyrians that not only suffer from the same poverty,

unemployment, water shortages, and violence that others do, but also face total extinction as a Middle Eastern community. Assyrian security issues are worsened by their persecution; they do not belong to any of the dominant ethnic or religious groups in the region, making them easy targets for radical groups. Assyrians are largely unaligned with any major faction in the region. They typically lack the numbers and resources to defend themselves absent government support.

After the 2014 ISIS offensive, the Assyrian community of Iraq persists (with difficulty) as the only Middle Eastern Assyrian community with significant numbers and villages. The most reliable security guarantor for Iraqi Assyrians has been themselves, in the form of the Nineveh Plain Protection Unit (NPU). The [US-trained NPU](#) is a local Assyrian militia formed in 2014 to beat back ISIS in the Nineveh Plain. Since the liberation of the Nineveh Plain in 2017, villages controlled by the NPU have experienced the highest rate of Assyrian return by far, according to the January API report. Local Assyrians simply do not trust the central Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). These entities have shown indifference and even hostility to Assyrians in the past years. As ISIS approached the Nineveh Plain in 2014, KRG security forces disarmed the local population and later [withdrew from the region](#) without informing them.

Unfortunately, NPU control in the Nineveh Plain [is limited in several respects](#): it has a limited mandate from the Iraqi government, only a few thousand soldiers belong to it, and it possesses no heavy weaponry. The NPU and Assyrian Democratic Movement's vision of creating an autonomous Nineveh Plain province for Iraqi minorities seems like a distant possibility today.

The powers that could assist in the Assyrian plight are uninterested at best. Although the US has sent hundreds of millions of dollars in [aid for the Nineveh Plain](#) and other regions in Iraq

that are home to minorities, it has not addressed the systematic problems that inhibit Assyrian safety and return. As the API wrote in a June 2020 report, “the US has distanced itself from the key political issues that undermine any positive development” in the Nineveh Plain.

There is no sign that the new US administration will work to improve the status quo for Iraqi Assyrians. When the Biden campaign formed a [“Chaldean/Assyrian Advisory Council”](#) in an effort to gain key votes in Michigan, it tried to appeal to Assyrian voters with Biden’s immigration and healthcare policy: his foreign policy was not mentioned. Though the Biden administration may maintain aid to Assyrians that began during the Trump era, the administration has shown [little interest in engaging in Iraq](#) so far.

It’s not clear that its engagement would be beneficial, either. In 2006, Biden presented a [widely-criticized plan](#) to divide Iraq into three autonomous provinces along sectarian lines that excluded non-Muslims: Kurdish, Shia Arab, and Sunni Arab. Biden [defended this proposal](#) as recently as 2019.

During the confirmation hearing for now-Secretary of State Antony Blinken, [no policy plans for Iraq](#) were discussed. Blinken’s first call to an Arab country was to the Iraqi foreign minister, where he discussed basic economic and democracy issues in the country. There are few signs that the US has an appetite for involvement in the Middle East beyond its existing commitments, let alone to help Iraqi Assyrians. If US foreign policy changes Iraq, it will be as an indirect result of US-Iran negotiations.

The European Union cannot do much more than follow suit with the US in maintaining the status quo in Iraq. In recent years, it has [issued a series of resolutions](#) calling attention to the Assyrian plight in Iraq. The EU has also sent [over a billion dollars in aid to Iraq](#) since 2014,

including [resources for the rejuvenation of agriculture](#) in the Nineveh region. However, the EU lacks the ability and will to negotiate with the Iraqi government about Assyrian human rights.

[Pope Francis's recent visit to Iraq](#) was a positive step, but it ultimately symbolized the inability of the West to act as a dove for Iraqi Assyrians. While he spoke up for Iraq's Christians, Pope Francis legitimized the existing leadership in Iraq. During his trip, the Pope [thanked the KRG President for protecting Christians](#) during the very ISIS war where the KRG disarmed and abandoned its Assyrians. Like Assyrian communities elsewhere, the Assyrian community of Iraq continues to hang on by a thread. One more disaster could finish the last viable Assyrian community of the Middle East.