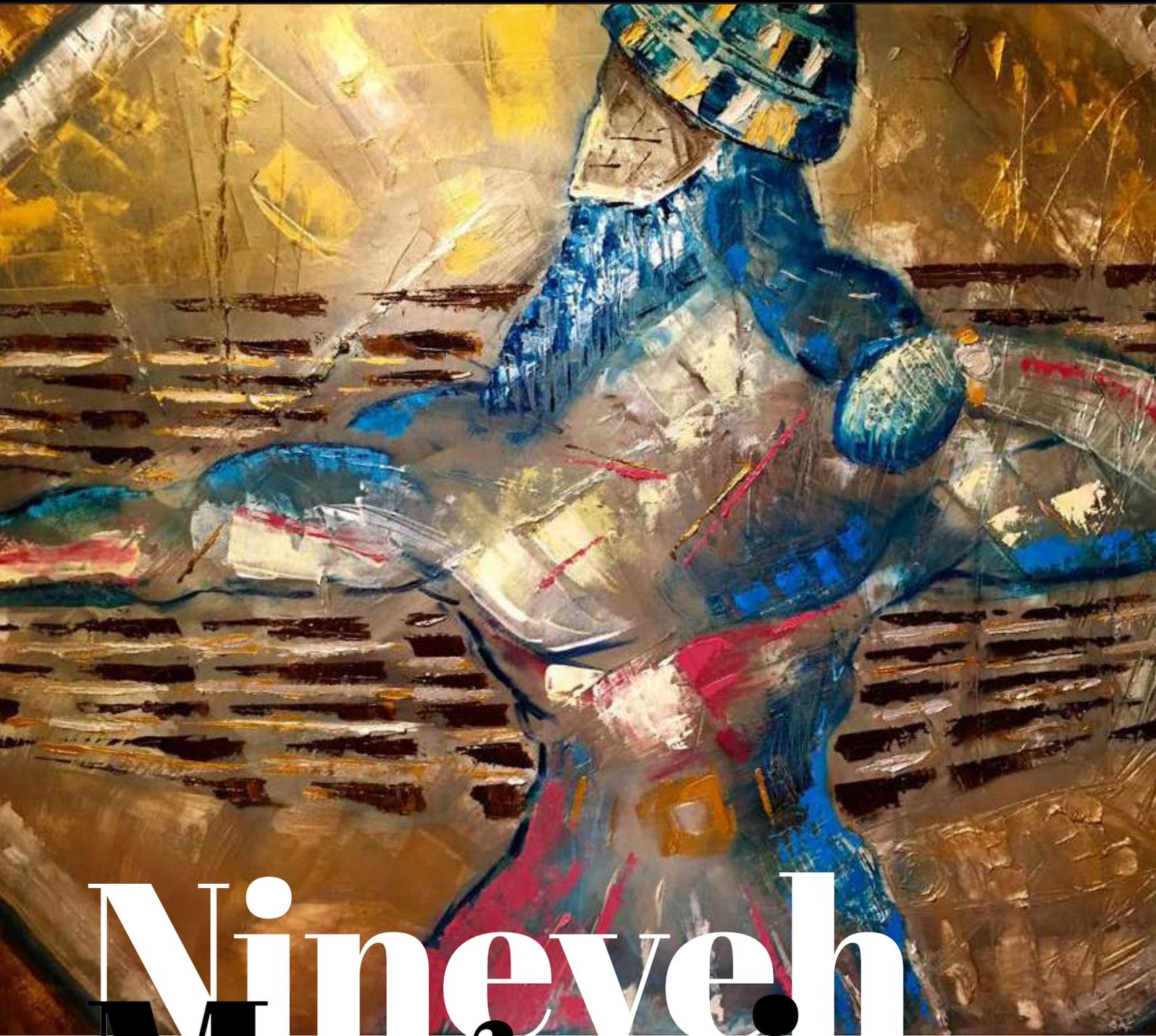


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Nineveh **Magazine**

Cultural • Educational • Social

Nineveh Magazine

(cover: Art by Sargon Maraha)

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POLICY

Articles submitted for publication will be selected by the editorial staff on the basis of their relative merit to Assyrian literature, history, and .current events

Opinions expressed in NINEVEH are those of the respective authors and not necessarily those of NINEVEH or the Assyrian Foundation of America

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6TH ANNUAL AFA APPRECIATION
presented by: Dr. Helen Malko

topic:

Destroyed and Recycled: Cultural Heritage of Iraq and Syria

"You can wipe out an entire generation, you can burn their home to the ground and somehow they'll still find their way home. But if you destroy their history, you destroy their achievements and it's as if they never existed."

(from the movie "The Monuments Men")
Image caption: Art by Teodora Maraha

Nowadays the news is filled with reports of the looting and destruction of Iraq and Syria's monuments, museums and treasures by ISIS terrorists.

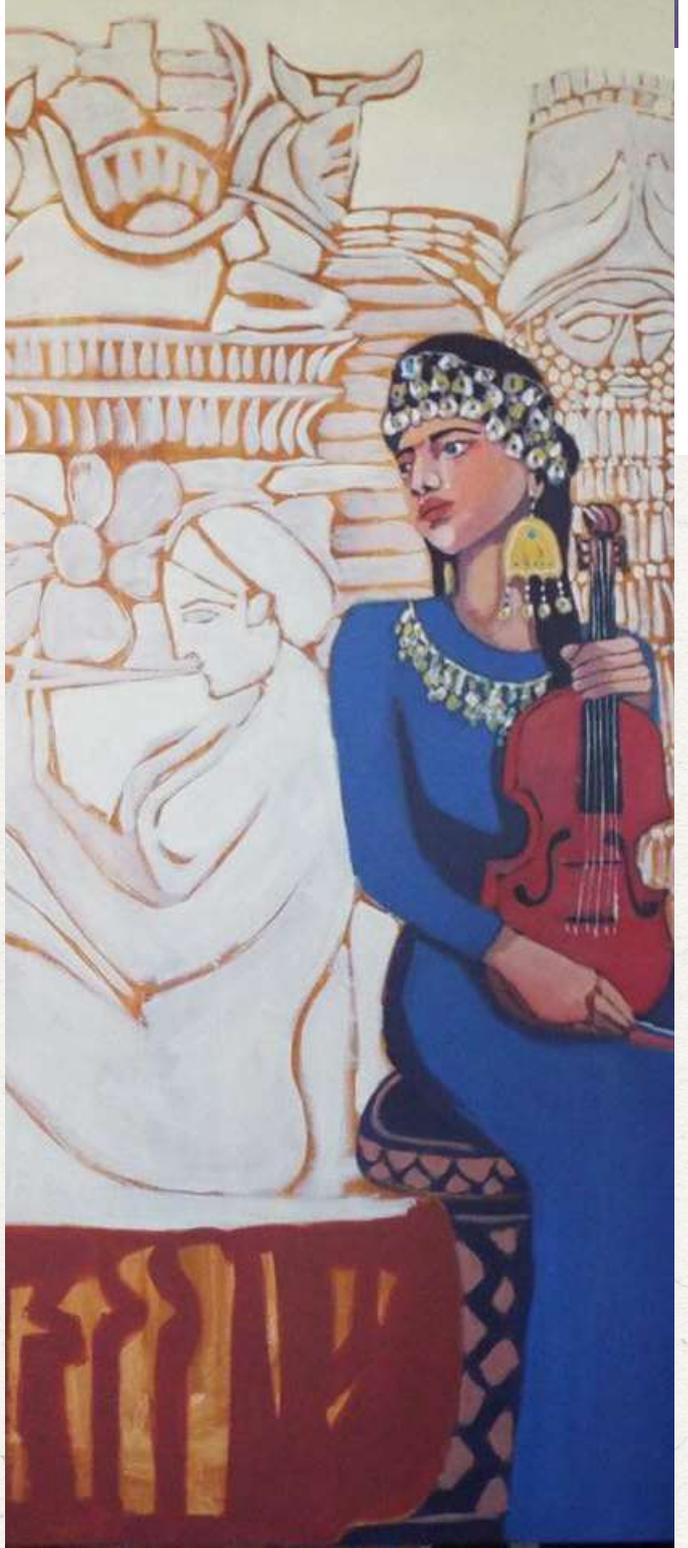
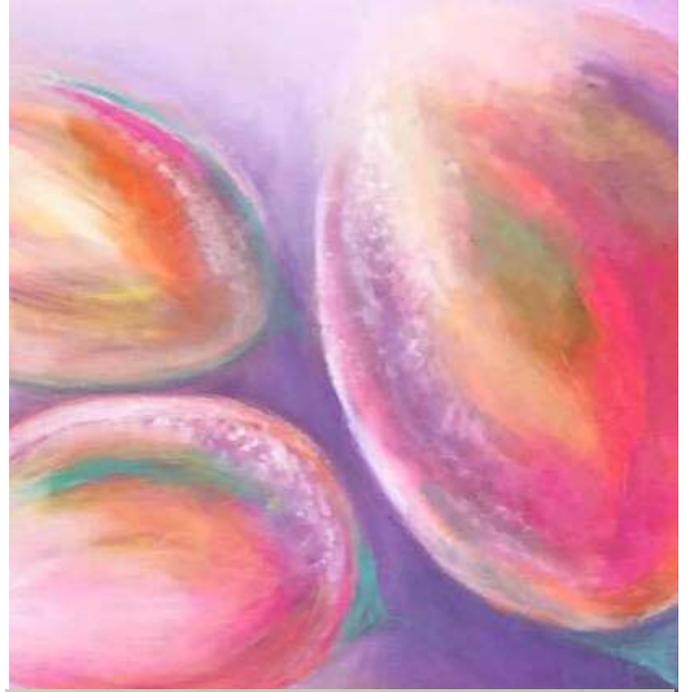
In an effort to fund their efforts to establish an Islamic State and drive all of us "infidels" out of the region, ISIS leaders have given looters license to ransack the areas that they have gained control of and sell whatever they find in return for a 20% levy. Consequently, archaeological sites throughout the area are being dug up or "mined" for artifacts that can be easily sold on the black market or to private collectors. Smaller items are sold off but larger items that can't be easily moved or are considered by ISIS to be "idolatry" are defaced or outright blown up with explosives.

We may not be able to do much about the destruction and devastation that has already taken place but we can document the heritage sites still remaining so there will always be a record of their existence.

Archaeologists and anthropologists around the world have taken up this task and we were privileged at our Appreciation Event in May to have Dr. Helen Malko share with us some of her research and documentation.

Image caption:

- 1) Art by Teodora Maraha
- 2) Art by Paul Batou



Dr. Helen Malko is a Research Associate at Columbia University in New York City.

She holds a PhD in archaeology and anthropology from SUNY at Stony Brook University. She has a master's degree in archaeology of the Ancient Near East from Baghdad University and a diploma in Historic Preservation from Rutgers University. She is currently the content manager for the website of the Columbia project "Mapping Mesopotamian Monuments" in the Department of Art History and Archaeology. In addition to her fieldwork in Turkey and Iraq, Dr. Malko helped coordinating and implementing the Iraq Museum Residency Program at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. She is a strong advocate for cultural heritage preservation and works on documenting heritage sites throughout Iraq and southeast Turkey.

The members were fascinated by the slideshow presentation that Dr. Malko narrated. Not only did Dr. Malko give a pictorial outline of the mapping project, but she had "before" and "after" images of some of the destruction done by ISIS's looting. Dr. Malko also logged onto her website and showed us the latest tool in documenting a site, a camera that pans across the landscape so you can get a 360 degree view of the surrounding area. Archeologists have recognized that it is important to know the setting and topography of the area where these heritage sites are located in order to understand more about the people and motivation for creating the sites.

Our appreciation goes out to Dr. Malko for such an informative presentation and all her hard work and dedication to the Assyrian community.

Papers Dr. Malko has published:

- Preserving the Past: The Mapping Mesopotamian Monuments Project
- Neo-Assyrian Rock Reliefs: Ideology and Landscapes of an Empire
- At the Mercy of the Elements: Cultural Preservation of Ancient Sites in Mosul (Nineveh Province), Iraq.
- Dur-Kurigalzu: Insights from unpublished Iraqi excavation reports
- A Comparison of Social and Economic Organization of Cities and Small Settlements in Mesopotamia

Through our partnership with ANB, you will be able to view the presentation on ANBSAT.COM once it has been edited and is ready for showing. You can access it online at ansat.com or if you have a satellite dish, here are the settings.

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Satellite name: Galaxy 19

Frequency 11.867 MHz

Polarity Vertical

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FEC 3/4

Assyrian flag flies above San Jose City Hall

By Ramona Giwargis



More than 50 people gathered Friday at San Jose City Hall for the third annual Assyrian-flag raising, a tradition that celebrates the contributions of Assyrians in Silicon Valley while remembering the harrowing plight of those back home.

"We know that many Assyrians are suffering," said San Jose Mayor Sam Liccardo during the ceremony. "We want to make sure in Silicon Valley we're a place where all of our members of the global community can find a place and a voice."

The event, held just before Assyrian New Year, showcases the rich history, language and culture of the Assyrians, one of the world's oldest Christian communities, by raising the flag above San Jose's downtown City Hall. The flag will fly for one week.

Keeping the Assyrian culture alive in California's third largest city is especially important as Assyrians around the globe are being persecuted, displaced from their homes and held hostage, leaders said Friday.

"My speech today is mostly about the atrocities and persecution our nation has been going through for many years and centuries," said Father Lawrence Namato of the Assyrian Church of the East who led the group in a prayer. The San Francisco Bay Area is home to more than 6,000 Assyrians. Namato says Assyrians must unite and call on U.S. government leaders to do whatever it takes to save those who are being attacked around the world.

"We need to make sure they're aware of those atrocities," he said. "The Assyrians are not cruel people. We're mentioned in the Bible and our civilization gave the world many things that are known today."

The event, which included traditional music, dancing and an art exhibit, was sponsored by Councilman Johnny Khamis, who represents San Jose's District 10, which includes Almaden and Blossom Valleys.

San Jose Councilmen Raul Peralez and Chappie Jones also attended the flag-raising.

Khamis, who was born in Lebanon, led the Assyrian flag raising at San Jose City Hall since it began in 2014. The councilman, who is Arabic, says he understands what it means to have a population of people who are forced to leave their homes.

"I have a deep respect for the Assyrians and their plight," Khamis said in an interview last week. "My parents are Palestinian and I know what it's like to have your family live in diaspora."

Khamis, who began Friday's event by wishing attendees a happy new year in Assyrian, says the flag-raising is "near and dear" to his heart because he has many Assyrian constituents, neighbors, supporters and friends.



"I'm honored to do this every year and I love to highlight this community," Khamis said. "I feel close to them because my own culture has to live in diaspora."

Rochelle Yousefian, president of the Assyrian American Association of San Jose, said the Assyrian flag raising makes a "huge impact" in the community and Assyrian employees at major Bay Area high-tech companies like Apple are talking about it.

"We want to show the world Assyrian people are not dead," Yousefian said. "Our people are suffering and being uprooted. But we can show our existence and raise our voice!"

Ramona Giwargis is the San Jose City Hall reporter for the San Jose Mercury News. She wrote this for Nineveh Magazine.



The men who uncovered Assyria

Courtesy of BBC News Magazine



Two of the ancient cities now being destroyed by Islamic State lay buried for 2,500 years,

it was only 170 years ago that they began to be dug up and stripped of their treasures. The excavations arguably paved the way for IS to smash what remained - but also ensured that some of the riches of a lost civilisation were saved.

Image caption A reconstruction of the palaces built by the Assyrian King Ashurbanipal by Austen Henry

In 1872, in a backroom of the British Museum, a man called George Smith spent the darkening days of November bent over a broken clay tablet. It was one of thousands of fragments from recent excavations in northern Iraq, and was covered in the intricate cuneiform script that had been used across ancient Mesopotamia and deciphered in Smith's own lifetime. In 1872, in a backroom of the British Museum, a man called George Smith spent the darkening days of November bent over a broken clay tablet. It was one of thousands of fragments from recent excavations in northern Iraq, and was covered in the intricate cuneiform script that had been used across ancient Mesopotamia and deciphered in Smith's own lifetime.

Some of the tablets set out the day-to-day business of accountants and administrators - a chariot wheel broken, a shipment of wine delayed, the prices of cedar or bitumen. Others recorded the triumphs of the Assyrian king's armies, or the omens that had been divined by his priests in the entrails of sacrificial sheep.

Smith's tablet, though, told a story. A story about a world drowned by a flood, about a man who builds a boat, about a dove released in search of dry land.

Smith realized that he was looking at a version of Noah's Ark. But the book was not Genesis. It was Gilgamesh, an epic poem that had first been inscribed into damp clay in about 1800BC, roughly 1,000 years before the composition of the Hebrew Bible (the Christian Old Testament). Even Smith's tablet, which had been dated to some point in the 7th Century BC, was far older than the earliest manuscript of Genesis.

A month or so later, on 3 December, Smith read out his translation of the tablet to the Society for Biblical Archaeology in London. The Prime Minister, William Gladstone, was among those who came to listen. It was the first time an audience had heard the Epic of Gilgamesh for more than 2,000 years.

Smith's reading caused a sensation. There were some who seized on the poem with pious satisfaction, taking it to corroborate the essential truth of the Bible. But there were others who found it more troubling. As the New York Times put it in a front page article the following day, the Flood Tablet had exposed "various traditions of the deluge apart from the Biblical one, which is perhaps legendary like the rest".

Coming less than 15 years after Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, the Epic of Gilgamesh felt to many like another great crack in the edifice of Victorian Christianity.

The story of how **the Flood Tablet** emerged from the mud of northern Iraq begins in a place called Kouyunjik - one of the archaeological sites now being mined for Assyrian antiquities by IS. It's a story told by Prof David Damrosch of Columbia University in *The Buried Book: the Loss and Rediscovery of the Great Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Kouyunjik sits directly opposite the Iraqi city of Mosul on the banks of the Tigris, and 2,700 years ago it was part of Nineveh, the last capital of the Assyrians. At its height, this was an empire that stretched from the shores of the Persian Gulf to the mountains of Anatolia and the flood plains of Egypt.

For a period of about 300 years (roughly 900 - 600BC), it was the most advanced civilization ever seen, a technological superpower built on the wealth of its merchants and the ruthlessness of its armies. A carving found at Kouyunjik shows the Assyrian King Ashurbanipal enjoying a picnic in his garden while the severed head of his enemy, the Elamite king Teumman, swings from the branches of the trees.

But Assyria was not invulnerable. In 612BC, Nineveh was sacked in a rebellion led by the Babylonians. They left the world's richest city in ruins, its palaces smouldering, its people dead or deported into slavery. Dust settled over the shattered library of the dead King Ashurbanipal, and over his carefully transcribed copy of the Epic of Gilgamesh.

Two-and-a-half millennia later, in the winter of 1853, the poem was lifted out of the dirt by a man called Hormuzd Rassam.



Assyrian Empire (650BC), and modern borders

Rassam had grown up in Mosul, just across the river.

At a time when the imperial powers saw the locals as little more than spade handlers and donkey boys, he had been appointed by the British Museum to lead the most important archaeological excavation of the age. He was, by some distance, the first archaeologist born and raised in the Middle East.

Rassam's family were Chaldean Christians, descendants of the ancient Assyrians who had converted to Christianity in the Fourth Century and had remained ethnically distinct from the Arab and Kurdish populations of Iraq. This is the same community that has, in the past year, been forced by Islamic State to convert to Islam, pay a special tax, or be killed. Most of Mosul's Assyrian Christians now have fled east into the autonomous region of Kurdistan or north, across the border, into Turkey.

When Rassam was growing up, Mosul was a peaceful place. The city was part of the slowly dying Ottoman Empire, a provincial backwater that offered few prospects for a young man of energy and talent. But in 1845, when Rassam was 19 years old, he met someone who changed the trajectory of his life - Austen Henry Layard.

Layard was an adventurer who had arrived in the Middle East on horseback at the end of the 1830s, armed with plenty of cash and a pair of revolvers. By the time he got to Mosul he had already seen the temples of Petra and Baalbek, as well as the living cities of Damascus and Aleppo. But it was the unexcavated ruins of Iraq that really captured Layard's imagination.



"A deep mystery hangs over Assyria, Babylonia, and Chaldea. With these names are linked great nations and great cities... the plains to which the Jew and the Gentile alike look as the cradle of their race," he wrote.

"As the sun went down, I saw for the first time the great conical mound of Nimrud rising against the clear evening sky. It was on the opposite side of the river and not very distant, and the impression that it made upon me was one never to be forgotten... my thought ran constantly upon the possibility of thoroughly exploring with the spade those great ruins."

After years of negotiation with the Ottoman authorities, Layard finally sank a spade into the mound at Nimrud, 20 miles south of Mosul, in the summer of 1845. This is the site that, according to Iraqi officials, IS **began bulldozing earlier this month.**

Ancient Assyrian city of Nimrud

- Nimrud covers some 3.5 sq. km (1.35 sq. miles), with a prominent "citadel" mound within the city walls
- Main administrative and religious buildings include the enormous palaces of several Assyrian kings and the temples of Ninurta, the god of war, and of Nabu, the god of writing
- The Palace of Ashurnasirpal, also known as the North-West Palace, was first excavated by Austen Henry Layard in the 1840s
- Extended excavations were next carried out in the 1950s-60s by Max Mallowan, the husband of Agatha Christie



Unrivalled riches of Nimrud

On the first day of the dig, Layard found the outlines of a royal palace. A week later he was unearthing the huge slabs of alabaster that had lined its walls, panels that depicted the power of the Assyrian king and the groveling submission of his enemies. Within three or four years, Layard had unearthed the civilization of ancient Assyria - until then nothing more than a name mentioned in the pages of the Bible - and had filled the British Museum with sculpture and writing from the birthplace of urban civilization.

Published in 1849, his account of his excavations, *Nineveh and its Remains*, became an immediate bestseller. But by his own admission, none of this would have been possible without Hormuzd Rassam.

The Englishman may have known how to get funding from the trustees of the British Museum, but it was Rassam who knew how to deal with the villagers of northern Iraq, and spoke Arabic, Turkish and Syriac Aramaic, the language of the Assyrian Christians. It was Rassam who knew how to haggle with a tribal sheikh, how to bribe a local governor with a gift of coffee, how to hire 300 workmen to drag a colossal statue of a winged bull down to the Tigris and float it on a raft of wooden planks and inflated goatskins.

Determined as they were, Rassam and Layard could not ship everything to the British Museum.

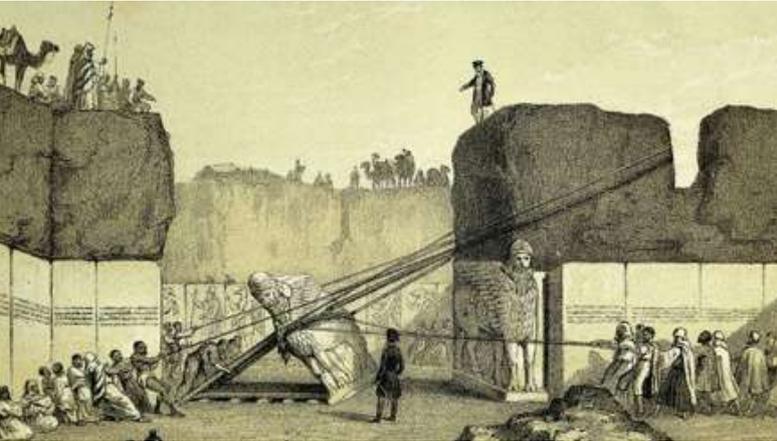


Image caption A winged bull being excavated by Austen Henry Layard



Among the sites they excavated was the gate of Nergal in the northern wall of Nineveh - the same gate where an IS jihadi stood last month to film a tirade against the polytheism and idolatry of the pre-Islamic world.

The gate is flanked with what Layard described, in his 1853 book *Discoveries among the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon*, as "a pair of majestic, human-headed bulls, fourteen feet in length and still entire, through cracked and injured by fire".

Known as Lamassu, these beasts were set into the gates of Assyrian cities to intimidate enemies and ward off demonic spirits. They did not ward off the vandals of IS, who broke the Lamassu's face with a pneumatic drill.

As they jointly brought Assyria back from oblivion, Layard and Rassam forged a friendship that lasted the rest of their lives. Where Layard - like so many European Orientalists - delighted in dressing up in eastern clothes, Rassam did his best to present himself as a Victorian Englishman. He rode across the plains of Iraq in a waistcoat and jacket. He converted to Protestantism, which he described as "the pure religion of Great Britain". He spent 18 months studying at Oxford, where he learned to ice skate and from where he wrote to Layard, "I'd rather be a Chimney Sweeper in England than a Pasha [lord] in Turkey."

The excavations were so reliant on Rassam that, when Layard retired from archaeology to become a diplomat and politician, the British Museum appointed the young Iraqi to continue the excavations alone. Returning to Mosul, he demonstrated an astonishing devotion to the interests of his adopted country.

Archaeology was central to those interests.

Across the whole of the upper Tigris, the British were vying with the French for the antiquities of the ancient world. The first to excavate Nineveh had been a Frenchman called

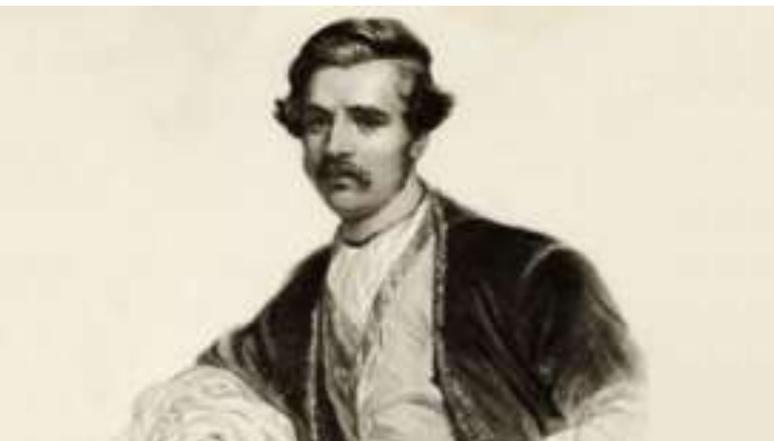


Image caption Austen Henry Layard depicted in Oriental costume

Paul Emile Botta, and, although he had suspended his dig to focus on the nearby village of Khorsabad, it was generally understood that the site remained within the French sphere of influence. Rassam, though, was on his home turf, right opposite the town where he had grown up.

He was not going to see the treasures of Nineveh, like those of Khorsabad, shipped off to the Louvre.

Without any kind of official permission, and working under cover of darkness, Rassam had his team dig into the northern corner of the mound. In December 1853, about a week into the excavation, a huge bank of earth collapsed and Rassam heard his men shouting "Suwar!" - images. There, in the moonlight, were stone panels that had been carved more than 2,500 years earlier for the rooms of the Assyrian King Ashurbanipal (who ruled from 668 to 627BC).

This was art of a breathtaking quality - scenes of a lion hunt across the plains of Mesopotamia, of the animals succumbing to the arrows of the king, scenes that held a pathos and a dramatic intensity beyond anything that had previously been excavated from the Middle East. "The lion hunt scenes date from the most developed period of Assyrian art," says Dr John Curtis, President of the British Institute for the Study of Iraq. "The lions are depicted in a wonderful way, full of life and naturalism. They are the finest products of Assyrian relief carving."



Image caption Assyrian relief of lions being hunted

If it had contained nothing other than the lion hunt, Ashurbanipal's palace would still have been one of the most important archaeological finds of the 19th Century. But the floor of the palace was strewn with the broken remains of the king's library. "Amongst these records," wrote Rassam, "were found the Chaldean accounts of the Creation and Deluge." Rassam, although he didn't read cuneiform and didn't yet know it, had found the Flood Tablet.

The crates containing Ashurbanipal's library arrived in London around the time that the young George Smith was leaving school. Like Rassam, Smith was not a natural member of the Victorian establishment. Born into a working-class family, he was apprenticed at the age of 14 to a firm of banknote engravers. The boy was a fine draughtsman, but by the time he started work, his imagination had already been caught by the swashbuckling adventures of Layard and by the antiquities that were arriving from Nimrud and Nineveh. By the middle of the 1850s, Smith was hanging around the British Museum in his lunch hour, peering at the cuneiform tablets that had come from the palaces of the Assyrian kings.

By 1860, when he was 20, Smith had started to understand both the cuneiform script and the Akkadian language in which most of the tablets were written.

A year later the museum's staff hired him to clean and sort the tablets. He had an astonishingly good visual memory, reassembling and deciphering lines of near-illegible text that were dispersed across hundreds of shattered fragments. It was not long before Smith, who had never attended a university and had never left Britain, was making major discoveries in the history and literature of the Assyrian empire.

Smith was gratified by the recognition of his fellow Assyriologists, but what he really wanted was something that would make his name with a wider public - something that might justify an expedition to Iraq. In November of 1872, as he spelled out the poetry of the Flood Tablet line by line, he knew he'd found it. Smith was so excited, wrote one of his colleagues, that he "rushed around the room" and "to the astonishment of those present, began to undress himself".

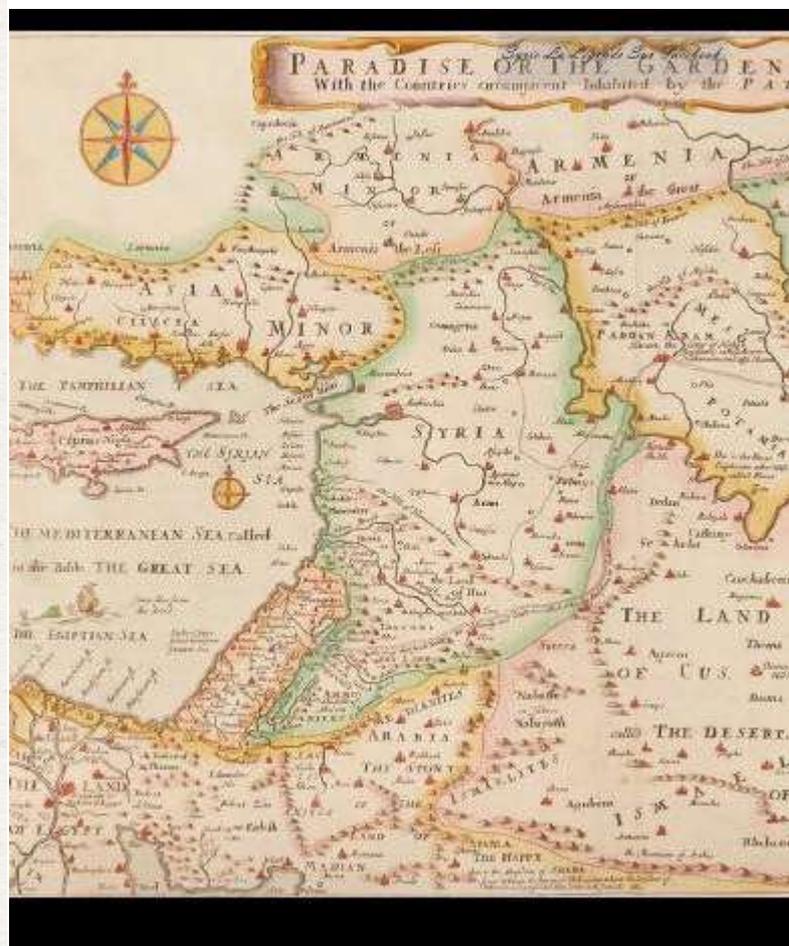
Two months later, with 1,000 guineas put up by the Daily Telegraph, George Smith was dispatched to Iraq to resume the excavations that had begun a generation earlier. Lacking the flamboyance of Layard and the street smarts of Rassam, Smith struggled to cope with the heat and squalor of the Ottoman Empire. He was, says David Damrosch, appalled by the hygiene, revolted by the sight of a kebab, too naive to pay the small baksheesh that could have eased every transaction.

But there can be no doubt that George Smith was an out-and-out genius. By the time he died in 1876, wasted by dysentery in Aleppo, he had published eight groundbreaking books on Assyrian history and linguistics, made dozens of major archaeological finds, and rediscovered the world's first great work of literature. He was just 36 years old.



Image caption Head of a winged bull from Nimrud, in the British Museum

With Smith dead, Rassam was recalled to the service of the British Museum. He went on to find and excavate the Babylonian city of Sippar, to discover the great bronze doors of the palace of Balawat, and to send more than 70,000 cuneiform tablets back to London. These were discoveries that should have made him famous - but by the time of his final expeditions in the 1880s, Hormuzd Rassam was being erased from the record.



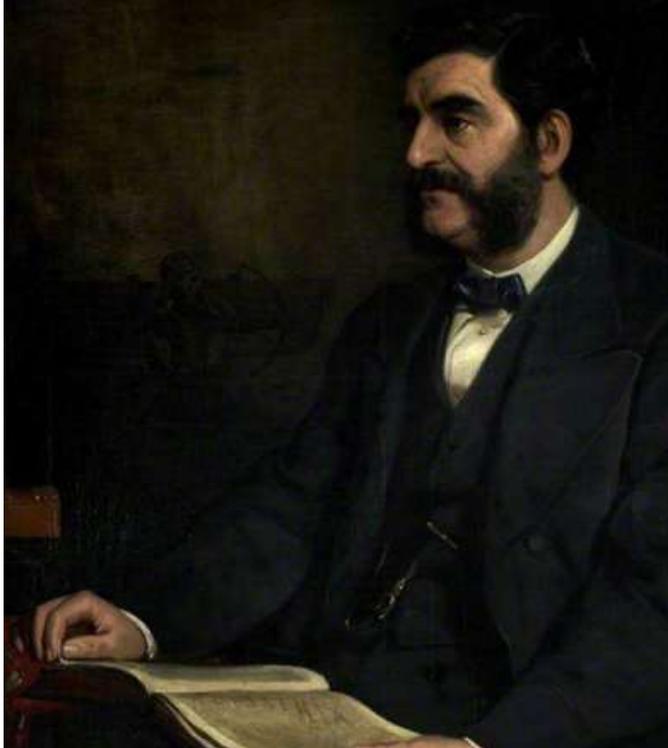


Image caption Hormuzd Rassam after he settled in England

Sir Henry Rawlinson, who had been British Consul in Baghdad at the time of Rassam's nocturnal excavations at Nineveh, now claimed the discovery of Ashurbanipal's palace for himself.

Museum's curators, that Rassam had profited from the illicit antiquities trade that had grown up around the excavations in Iraq.

Hormuzd Rassam, who had been so impressed by the manners of the Victorian elite, and who had given his entire career to the service of the British Empire, was treated to a generous serving of snobbery, racism, and contempt. He could find no British publisher for his memoirs, and by the time he died at his home at Hove in 1910, even his name had been removed from the plaques and visitor guides at the British Museum.

The one Englishman who stood by Rassam was his old friend Layard. Rassam was, wrote Layard, "one of the honestest and most straightforward fellows I ever knew, and one whose services have never been acknowledged".

"Rassam is still remembered in Mosul," says Dr Lamia al-Gailani, an Iraqi archaeologist at University College London. "They are very proud of him."

In the UK, though, his reputation has never been fully rehabilitated. A generation after he left the field, archaeology developed into a disciplined, scientific search for knowledge rather than a greedy, imperialist scramble for treasure. Every handful of earth was now sieved, every seed and tooth collected, every shard of pottery measured and analysed. Layard and Rassam, who had been paid by an imperial power

to dig out the masterpieces of Mesopotamian art before the French, had gone shovelling through the mud walls of ancient buildings without even noticing them, had kept only the most rudimentary records, and had churned up sites that, explored with less haste and more method, could have yielded a wealth of knowledge about the lives of the Assyrians. By the standards of modern archaeology, they were not much more than treasure hunters in the pay of the British Museum.

"For Iraqis, of course, it's emotional," says al-Gailani. For a long time they've come to the British Museum and seen these antiquities, and they feel that they should be returned to Iraq. But at the moment they keep quiet.

Because they see what's happening in Iraq, and they see that these things in the British Museum and in the Louvre have at least been saved."

Not everyone is so willing to exculpate the colonial powers. But for all the treasure that Layard and Rassam removed from Mesopotamia, there were lines that they did not cross.

On the smaller of Nineveh's two ancient mounds was a shrine that the locals called Nebi Yunus. It was the burial place, they said, of the Prophet Jonah. For centuries it had been a site of prayer and pilgrimage for Mosul's people, Christian and Muslim alike. Layard and Rassam knew that it stood above an Assyrian royal palace. But this was a sacred place, and it could not be disturbed.

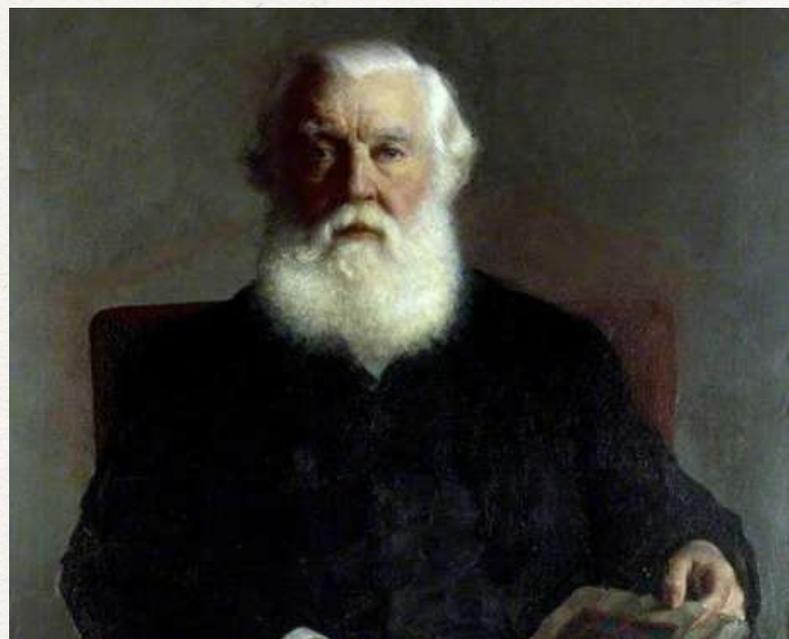
IS, though, has no such scruples. On 24 July 2014, its fighters packed the shrine of Nebi Yunus with explosives and blew it to smithereens, sending a cloud of debris into the sky above Mosul.

Thieves working for Islamic State began digging into the ruins beneath the demolished shrine. According to Qais Hussein Rashid, Iraq's Deputy Minister for Tourism and Antiquities, artworks from the site have already been smuggled into the hands of private dealers in Europe.

There are hundreds of ancient sites now in the hands of IS. But beneath the rubble of Nebi Yunus is a stretch of ground untouched by archaeologists - ground that holds the palace of the Assyrian King Esarhaddon, and that might contain some of the great artistic or literary treasures of the ancient world.

In all likelihood, we'll never know.

Image caption Austen Henry Layard



“Christmas is most truly Christmas

when we celebrate it by giving the light of love to those who need it most.” Ruth Carter Stapleton

The Christmas season is a time of celebration and sharing, a time filled with joy, laughter, light and music. It is a celebration of the birth of Christ, but moreover, a time of giving and sharing for all. It is a time to give hope by letting those in need know that they are not forgotten. Your donation can provide hope to our Assyrian brothers and sisters in need and put a smile on the face of a helpless Assyrian child.

The last few years have been particularly challenging for our people in the Middle East, as they continue to suffer from the brutality of the Islamist extremist group known as ISIS. In order to save their lives as well as those of their children and elders, hundreds of thousands of families have been displaced and forced to leave their homes without any belongings. With little help and support from the international community, Assyrian families are left with no one to help them other than their own communities in the diaspora. Thus, as brethren living in countries that afford us opportunity and liberty, it is truly our duty to help them in anyway we can.

Furthermore, amid the bloody situation in our homeland, we are also racing against time to protect Assyrian cultural treasures from the hands of terrorists whose goal is to erase all traces of the cradle of civilization.

Engaging in cultural genocide, ISIS aims to remove our foundational identity and to replace it with its own extreme ideology. As stated in the famed movie *The Monument Man*, “You can wipe out an entire generation, you can burn

their homes to the ground and somehow they’ll still find their way back. But if you destroy their history, you destroy their achievements and it’s as if they never existed.”

For the past 52 years, the Assyrian Foundation of America (AFA) has proudly worked to keep the Assyrian torch burning brightly by providing help for needy Assyrians around the world, as well as to financially support Assyrian students working towards advanced degrees in Assyriology and related Assyrian studies, individuals who will be the protectors of our rich history and heritage. This year, thanks to you and your generous donations, via reputable Assyrian organizations which are on site in the epicenter of the turmoil with direct access to help our people (ACERO, Assyrian Aid Society, Shlama Foundation, and Assyrians Without Borders), the AFA has sent over \$30,000 in desperately needed aid.

Additionally, we have provided over \$20,000 in scholarships to students of Assyrian history and cultural studies. These students are and will be our hope to save and preserve the Assyrian identity from its cruel enemies.

This Christmas season, we ask you to please donate to the AFA to help ease the suffering of our internally displaced people in the Middle East, to support our Assyrian scholars who preserve our history and heritage, and to help our beautiful Assyrian nation stay alive and healthy. Please feel free to use the enclosed envelope to send your generous donations.

Wishing you and your family a blessed Christmas and a Happy & Healthy New Year!

Sincerely,
Jackline Yelda
Assyrian Foundation of America, President

Extraordinary life of a confessor

Extraordinary life of a confessor who speaks the language of Jesus from Nazareth

Courtesy of Georgian Journal

36-year-old deacon Father Seraphime is Assyrian by ethnicity and his native language is Aramaic.

The deacon lived an ordinary life until 24 years of age, trained in Eastern wrestling and was head of security of a government member in Ukraine.



But certain events that had occurred in his life made him take up the mantle of a priest. Catholicos-Patriarch of All Georgia Ilia II learned of his fate and presented him to Assyrians living in Georgia as a “confessor of all Assyrians”. It was Ilia II’s idea of Father Seraphime learning Aramaic and then perform public worship in the presence of Assyrians in this language. Currently Father Seraphime lives in the village of Kanda, where we visited him for an interview:

– As we know, you lived an earthly life until you were 24: you did martial arts and worked as a bodyguard. What made you turn your life towards divine worship?

– I didn’t really believe in God back then. I would enter a church, light a candle or two and think myself a believer. I read the Bible when I was eleven years old, but took it as a fairy tale. Then when I actually realized God existed, I went and became a monk. That’s pretty much it.

– Was there any significant event in your life that pushed you towards this decision?

– I spent a large part of my childhood and youth in hospital beds. I experienced a most devastating trauma when I fell into a concrete mixer. Not a single man in history returned alive from such an incident – except me. For two years I wasn't even able to walk. First I was chained to a bed, then to a wheelchair, then to crutches.

– What other injuries did you receive in the past?

– Once I got hit by a car. Then there was this bottle of hydrogen peroxide: I took it for a bottle of water and drank it. I survived a lot of things by a hair's breadth, such as falling from several meters' height. Long story short, a lot of occurrences pushed me towards taking up a monk's life. Once I had quite an experience: someone very close to me, a relative, was in mortal danger. I went to the grave of the last Georgian saint, Father Gabriel, and said "God will, I shall become a monk, just leave him with his life" And when we thought all hope was lost, a miracle happened and this man survived. For some time after this, I lived in Kiev. As I told you, I was into martial arts back then, namely wrestling. I even won a Trans-Caucasian Championship. Soon I became chief of security for a government official. Then something happened that I do not wish to speak of. It was a miracle: you can call it enlightenment or a dream. I was reminded that I was chosen and that it was time to keep the promise I made to God about becoming a priest. This miracle reminded me of my words daily for two months, so eventually, at Holy Trinity's Jonah Monastery, I died, figuratively speaking, and was reborn as a monk.

– What can you tell us about your people, the Assyrians?

– My people, Assyrians are probably the only ethnic group in the world who still pay with their lives for their worship

of Christ. In Eastern countries such as Iraq, Iran, Syria and other warzones, Assyrians get attacked in their churches and beheaded if they refuse to convert to Islam. They are being destroyed en masse. The apocryphal story regarding Assyrians being the first Christians comes from the story when Christ's face appeared on a canvas. The canvas was presented to the last king of Assyrians, Abgarus the Fifth. As for Assyrians in Georgia, there are about 4000 of them. The Assyrian language is basically Neo-Aramaic. Many historians write about Christ speaking the Chaldean language, which almost exactly the same as Aramaic. Just like in Georgia there exist Gurjans, Imeretians and Megrelians, so were Assyrians and Chaldeans: the same people but from different corners, so to say. Neo-Aramaic language is about 2500 years old. The wonderful thing is that this language allows us insight into what people living centuries ago sounded like. Out of 4000 Assyrians living in Georgia, 2000 of them live in my village of Kanda and comprise 95% of its population. Almost 90% of these people speak Neo-Aramaic.

– Upon becoming fluent in Aramaic, you are now able to perform divine service in it. How difficult is it for you and in general, what is the process like?

– When His Holiness talked with me, he confided with me this idea: since I am Assyrian, why not perform divine service for my people in my own language? He conferred a lot of responsibility on me. Ilia II treated Assyrian issues with great attention, responsibility and love. I love him a lot as well. There was a time when I said to myself "I probably love him the most of all" But after I was appointed as shepherd over my people, the Assyrians, I realized that they were who I loved the most. We are very grateful to His Holiness for giving us the right to praise God in our own language while living in Georgia.

– The video that depicts you, together with the church choir, chanting in Aramaic, is quite popular on the internet. What is chanting in Aramaic like, what quirks does it have? How is it different from chanting in another language, Georgian for example?

– Chanting, be it in Aramaic or Georgian, is a unique thing. The main difference is, of course, in the language itself, and another in the tune and cadence. Chanting in Aramaic is completely different culture-wise. It is Eastern, after all, and we replicated it exactly as it sounded in ancient times. Well, almost exactly.

– You have probably seen Mel Gibson's movie "The Passion of the Christ", where Aramaic is spoken. Can you understand it? Is it identical to the language you speak?

– There are three languages used in the movie: Aramaic, Latin and Hebrew. And yes, I can freely understand Aramaic that is spoken in "The Passion of the Christ" – it is the same language that I wield.

Assyrian New Year

By Wilfred Bet-Alkhas

The Assyrian Calendar begins with the first recorded year of the "beginning of civilization" (shooraya d'mdeetanayoota) as seen through the eyes of the ancient Bet-Nahranaye (Mesopotamians).

These ancient inhabitants of Assyria, Babylon, and Sumer believed that civilization was a "gift from the gods" and it was marked from the time "kingship was lowered from heaven."

possessed a religious complex (i.e. ziggurats). Each city was administered by a "local king" or lugal. Archeologists refer to this period as the Early to Middle Uruk Periods.

In the 1950's Assyrians believed that based on the research findings of their contemporary archaeologists the first construction of the city of Ashur's temple during the Uruk Period took place around 4750 B.C. This date was then recorded as the beginning of "civilization" in Mesopotamia. In fact, the impetus behind this decision was the publication of a series of articles in the Assyrian magazine Gilgamesh, edited by the famous poet-brothers, Addi and Jean Alkhas, and Nimrod Simono.

It is possible that the exact date of the beginning of civilization in Mesopotamia may vary as more accurate



The earliest sign of municipal administration (kingship in pre-historic sense) appears during the Halaf Period in Mesopotamia (over 7000 years ago). The most notable characteristics of this period are the "sitting goddess figurines" indicating a goddess-worshipping culture and the distinctive colored potteries with geometric designs pointing to the existence of a high-culture civilization in Mesopotamia.

The Sumerian term akiti meant "building life on earth" symbolizing the handing of life from gods to humans. The Babylonians adopted this term and called their New Year festival Akitu (modern-day Kha b'Neesan).

According to the latest archeological findings in Anatolia, the transformation of localized settlements to the first cities took place between 4300 to 3450 B.C. Religion was the main focus of socialization during this period and each city

research reveals the existence of a more ancient and "civilized" culture in Bet-Nahrain. This fascinating topic remains as enigmatic as the exact date of the birth of Jesus Christ whose year of birth has been the fulcrum of historicity for the past two thousand years.

Incidentally, the Jewish Calendar has very questionable origins also. It begins with the year 3760 B.C. (as opposed to Assyrian 4750 B.C.). Indeed the year 3760 B.C. coincides with the time "kingship was lowered to mankind" in the city of Kish, southern Bet-Nahrain.

This year of 2016 we celebrate the Assyrian Year 6766.

Ancient Babylonians first to use geometry

Courtesy of BBC News



Sophisticated geometry - the branch of mathematics that deals with shapes - was being used at least 1,400 years earlier than previously thought, a study suggests.

Five Babylonian tablets revealed that these ancient people were using sophisticated geometry

Research shows that the Ancient Babylonians were using geometrical calculations to track Jupiter across the night sky. Previously, the origins of this technique had been traced to the 14th Century.

The new study is published in *Science*.

Its author, Prof Mathieu Ossendrijver, from the Humboldt University of Berlin, Germany, said: "I wasn't expecting this. It is completely fundamental to physics, and all branches of science use this method."

The Ancient Babylonians once lived in what is now Iraq and Syria. The civilisation emerged in about 1,800 BC. Clay tablets engraved with their Cuneiform writing system have already shown these people were advanced in astronomy. This figure - a rectangle with a slanted top - describes how the velocity of a planet, which is Jupiter, changes with time. Prof Mathieu Ossendrijver, Humboldt University of Berlin said: "They wrote reports about what they saw in the sky." Prof Ossendrijver told the BBC World Service's Science in Action programme.

"And they did this over a very long period of time, over centuries."

But this latest research shows they were also way ahead when it came to maths. It had been thought that complex geometry was first used by scholars in Oxford and Paris in medieval times. They used curves to trace the position and velocity of moving objects. But now scientists believe the Babylonians developed this technique around 350 BC.

Prof Ossendrijver examined five Babylonian tablets that were excavated in the 19th Century, and which are now held in the British Museum's archives. The script reveals that they were using four-sided shapes, called trapezoids, to calculate when Jupiter would appear in the night sky, and also the speed and distance that it travelled.

"This figure - a rectangle with a slanted top - describes how the velocity of a planet, which is Jupiter, changes with time," he said.

It could be that there was an earlier tablet, written by a genius, by one individual. Prof Mathieu Ossendrijver, Humboldt University of Berlin

"We have a figure where one axis, the horizontal side, represents time, and the other axis, the vertical side, represents velocity.

"The area of trapezoid gives you the distance travelled by Jupiter along its orbit.

"What is so special is this type of graph is unknown from antiquity - so making figures of motion in this rather abstract space of velocity against time - this is something very, very new."

He added that there was evidence that the Greeks used a "more straightforward" form of geometry, which dealt with the spatial relationships between the Earth and the planets rather than the concepts of time and velocity. Prof Ossendrijver told the BBC that it was unclear how common this technique was.

"It could be that there was an earlier tablet, written by a genius, by one individual, who came up with this new way of doing astronomy.

"It could also be that in fact this is a method that was more widely applied by different scholars. We don't know."

Asylum at Last

In June 2014, Shamiran left her village outside Mosul with her three teenage children on temporary visitor visas to attend a family wedding and visit her parents in the Bay Area, who are parishioners at Mar Yosip. But when ISIS overtook Mosul that summer, her husband, who had remained in Iraq, told her not to return because of the security risk.

Unable to return to Iraq, "Shamiran" — who didn't want her real name used because of security concerns — and her children applied for asylum in the United States. In June, nearly a year after their arrival, they were granted asylum. In broken English, Shamiran described the experience of Christians in Mosul who were forced to flee the city and have their houses marked as being inhabited by Christians. "There were many Christian families in Mosul," she said. "They left everything in Mosul and they went. [ISIS] put Arabic letter "Nun" [on our houses]. It means Christian — "Nazarene."

Shamiran's husband's request for asylum has also been approved, but he's still waiting for the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad to certify his identity and complete a background check.

Having been in the United States for a year and a half now, Shamiran has found a job working at a grocery store, and her three children are earning A's in Bay Area high schools. But she yearns for the day when she can be reunited with her husband. "My husband is safe now, thank God. I need for him to come here to live in peace with us to be a family again."



Iraqi Assyrian Christians attend a ceremony at Saint Youhanna church in Arbil, the capital of the autonomous Kurdish region of northern Iraq, on Sept. 18, 2015.

Waiting for Visas

For the few Assyrian Christians left in the Middle East, the threat of attacks by the Islamic State makes each day more perilous. But migrating to the West has become increasingly difficult, as waves of refugees from the Middle East and North Africa pour into Europe. In the United States, fears of terrorism have prompted debates about how many — if any — refugees the United States should admit.

In June, Eshoo, who is the co-chair of the Religious Minorities in the Middle East Caucus, called on President Barack Obama to do more to help Middle Eastern religious minorities like Assyrians by prioritizing additional security support for vulnerable populations, especially the ancient Christian community.

Eshoo has also called on the president to designate an additional 5,000 priority refugee visas for religious minorities from the Middle East.

Rep. Anna Eshoo, the only Assyrian member of Congress, serves California's 18th Congressional District, covering parts of San Mateo, Santa Clara and Santa Cruz counties. Eshoo, a Democrat whose parents are Assyrian Christians who fled persecution in the Middle East, voted in November against a House Republican bill to pause the admittance of Syrian refugees into the United States. Despite its passage by a wide majority that included many Democratic votes, Eshoo voted against the measure because it amounted to a "bureaucratic blockade for all refugee applicants."

But the process, said Eshoo in a recent interview, is "very, very slow," since the United States has a complex system of rules for granting refugee visas. Eshoo says her goal is to expedite visas for Middle East Christians, since she fears that relief might not arrive before they are "dead and gone."



California Rep. Anna Eshoo, the only Assyrian member of Congress.

Torn From Their Homeland,

Bay Area Assyrians Yearn for Persecution to End
Courtesy of Peninsula Press



Parishioners worship at Mar Yosip Assyrian Church of the East in November 2015. Assyrians -- one of the Middle East's oldest ethno-religious groups -- now face extinction at the hands of the self-described Islamic State. (Kaitlyn Landgraf/ Peninsula Press)

On a recent Sunday morning inside Mar Yosip Assyrian Church of the East in San Jose, sunbeams slant through clouds of incense smoke onto the face of the Rev. Lawrence Namato as he leads his congregation in a liturgy nearly 2,000 years old. The suited men and veiled women in the pews — nearly all of them Assyrian — join in the ancient chants as they pray for peace and resolution to a crisis both historic and modern: the persecution of their brothers and sisters in the Middle East.

Indigenous to northern Iraq, Assyrians have lived in the region for more than 6,000 years. They converted as a people to Christianity in the first century A.D. and are one of the oldest continuous Christian communities in the world. But in the past century, violence and religious persecution have escalated, forcing most of them to seek safety in other countries. Some 10,000 now reside in the Bay Area. With the rise of the self-described Islamic State, they now risk vanishing from their homeland altogether.

The problem is that “the Christians have nowhere to go,” said Namato, whose family fled Kirkuk, Iraq, when he was 14 as former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein rose to power.

Most of the parishioners at Mar Yosip are from Iraq or Iran, although a few are from Syria and other countries in the Middle East.

Many in the community still have family in the Middle East: some who have remained by choice, others who are caught in the limbo of refugee camps as they await a chance at a new life.

Since the rise of the Islamic State, Assyrians in the Bay Area have tried multiple avenues to help their relatives in the region. Some have petitioned the State Department to more forcefully defend Christians in the Middle East. Others are urging the United States Agency for International Development to directly fund Assyrian humanitarian aid groups. And others are working to get families approved for asylum in the United States.

‘Before the war the Assyrians [in Syria] had a good life and they were safe. Now, they are targeted by everybody.’ But many in the community feel disappointed so far in the U.S. response. And there is a deep worry that this ancient group could disappear completely.

“We kind of feel like our life is paralyzed,” said Rochelle Yousefian, president of the Assyrian American Association of San Jose. “The government that we are so proud of living in, in the country of peace, is not taking any actions. It’s not even open to listen to these atrocities. It makes us feel hopeless; it makes us unproductive because we don’t know what to do, we don’t know how to help.”

The history of Assyrian Christians in the Middle East has been punctuated by periods of violent persecution. In 1915, the year Assyrians call the Seyfo — “the year of the sword” — the Ottoman Empire slaughtered as many as 300,000 Assyrians. In 2003, it was estimated that 30,000 Assyrian Christians still lived in the city of Mosul in northern Iraq. But after the Islamic State captured the city in the summer of 2014, none remain — having been either killed or forced to flee.

The Assyrian liturgy — which has been used by the Assyrian Church of the East for nearly 2,000 years — is printed in English and the Assyrian language. (Kaitlyn Landgraf/ Peninsula Press)

“This is a genocide,” said Albert Nissan, a Mar Yosip parishioner who emigrated from Baghdad in 1975 and has family members still living there.

“The people who emptied Mosul of its Christians are the same people who bombed Paris,” he added, referring to the November attacks by Islamic extremists that killed 130 people and injured hundreds more.

No Safety in Syria

When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, many Assyrians sought refuge in Syria, which was comparably peaceful at the time.

But they were held in U.N. refugee camps “for years,” said Namato, and when civil war broke out in Syria five years ago, some were trapped again by the violence they had hoped to escape.

Conditions for Assyrians in Syrian refugee camps are “horrible,” said Poline Mael, a parishioner of Mar Yosip. Girls risk being kidnapped and Christians are frequently targets of violence, she said.

“Whatever we think about [Syrian President Bashar al-] Assad, before the war the Assyrians [in Syria] had a good life and they were safe. Now, they are targeted by everybody.”

In February, the Islamic State captured around 230 Assyrian Christians in Syria and held them for a ransom of around \$14 million. That month, Assyrian bishops in the United States called on Secretary of State John Kerry to take “concrete steps to help the remaining Assyrian Christians in the region to protect themselves.” The Islamic State released some of the sick and elderly prisoners, but continues to hold around 150 Assyrian Christian hostages.

In October, three of the hostages were executed. One of the victims was the first cousin of a parishioner at Mar Yosip, and other family members are still being held for ransom by the Islamic State.

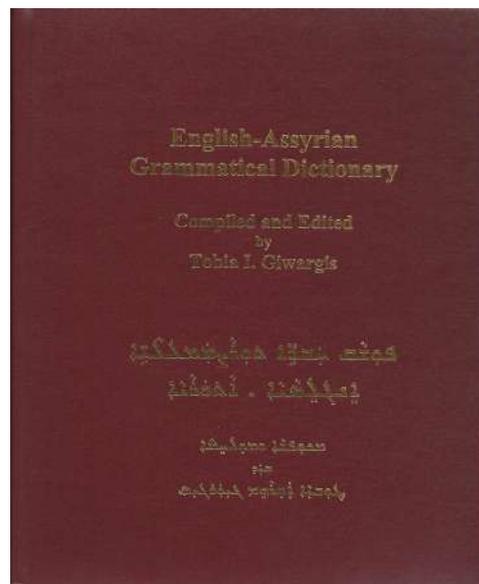
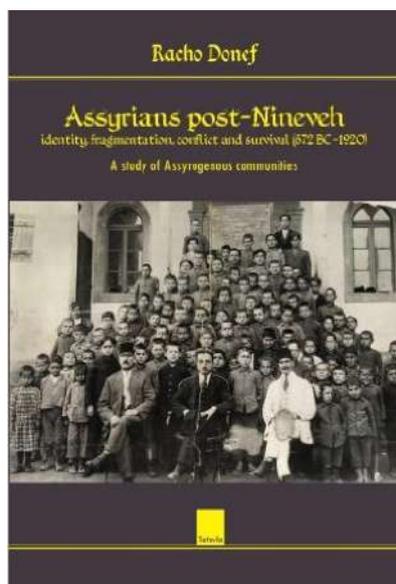
New Books

This study examines the distant past to see the connection between Imperial Assyria and the Assyrians in the nineteenth century and the hypothesis that the Assyrians identity is purely a western construct of the nineteenth century.

There have been a number of studies, which discuss the Assyrians, continuity of their culture from Ancient times, and identity. However, this study examines a number of sources, which by and large, have not been utilised.

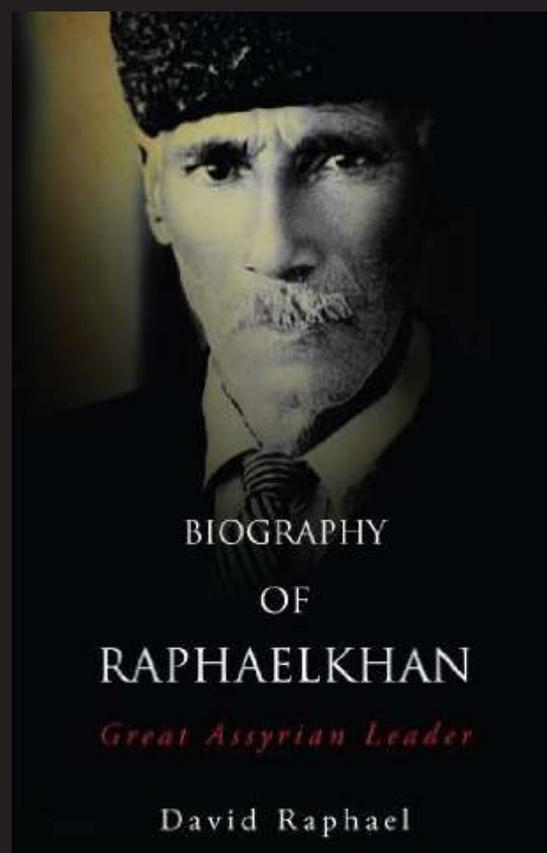
Many travellers, missionaries, and explorers, travelled to the East between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries and wrote about the peoples they visited. Furthermore, there are Vatican sources, which up to now have not been used in the study of the religious schisms among the Assyrian communities.

These primary accounts in French, Latin, Spanish and English and certain Greek sources shed light to the problematic. Sources in Turkish, often as translated documents from Arabic and Syriac, clarified the extant information.



Biography of Raphael Khan:

Great Assyrian Leader tells the long overdue true-life story of the renowned World War I Assyrian hero who fought on the side of the Allies (Britain, France and Russia) against the Ottoman Empire. Biography of Raphael Khan is a thrilling read, and an eye opener to a part of history from wartime Urmia/Persia, Hakkari/Turkey and mass exodus to Mesopotamia (Bet-Nahrain), and the final attempt to regain back the ancestral homelands. It's about survival of the small Assyrian nation, once 'Mighty Assyrian Empire' —the cradle of civilization—struggling to preserve its national identity against the evils of aggression and massacres perpetrated during WWI events (1914-1918). The Assyrians and Armenians have suffered massive genocide over the last centuries. The Assyrians have lost control of their ancestral lands and are in a struggle for survival. Today, the Assyrian nation stands at a crossroad.



About Rev. Khoobyar

The Ministry of Rev. Stephen O. Khoobyar

Stephen Khoobyar was born in Ada, Urmia, province of Azerbaijan, Iran on April 20, 1895. He rose from humble origins in Urmia to prominent pastoral services in the cities of Tabriz, Tehran, Iran and later in New Britain, CT, and Turlock, CA.

While his parents had little or no formal education they did not want their son to grow up uneducated. His father labored hard to save enough money to send Stephen to study at the Urmia College under the auspices of the Presbyterian Church mission. Stephen received his academic degree in 1912 followed by a degree in theology. Upon graduation Stephen and his schoolmate Piour Sargis got married in Ada. It was at this time that Stephen manifested his gift for evangelical work that led to his appointment as the pastor of the Assyrian Presbyterian Church in Ada.

After serving five years in Ada he accepted a similar but more challenging position in the Presbyterian Evangelical Church of Tabriz, Iran in 1921. Stephen served faithfully in Tabriz church for 27 years (1921 – 1948). His talents brought him to the attention of American missionaries and they offered him a one year scholarship to do graduate work at Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, NJ (1924 -1925). While Stephen was at Princeton he attended several conferences including one on missionary policies and methods sponsored by the Presbyterian

Board of Foreign Mission held in Lakeville, CT. In 1938 he was chosen to attend the International Missionary Council meeting in Madras, India to be followed immediately by another conference in Delhi, India.

During his thirty-two years of ministry in the Presbyterian Church in Iran, those who came to know Stephen considered him a true friend and an inspiring preacher. His passion for preaching the Christian message and his understanding and expressing the power of the Christian faith was the hallmark of his ministry. Upon his return to Tabriz from Princeton, Stephen resumed his duties in the Tabriz Presbyterian Church for six more years. Stephen loved speaking and meeting with people. Piour often accompanied him when he called on the sick in their homes or in hospitals. He would read from the Bible, pray for them, and assure them of the God's love in their lives. Because of the great affection he had for his parishioners he often counseled those who were troubled by personal problems, those who had experienced loss of family member.

As part of mission work Stephen and a missionary physician, Dr. Joseph Cochran, would travel by a horse-drawn carriage from Urmia to small towns and villages to preach the Gospel of God and to attend to the sick. Stephen would preach to their situation, as he understood it as well as respond to their human condition, assuring them that they were important people in the eyes of God. Dr. Cochran, on the other hand, saw patients with a variety of ailments some that needed urgent attention that had to be referred to nearby hospitals for further treatment. Respiratory infections and diarrhea, particularly in children were most common in those villages. As they traveled from village to village they took up lodging in tea houses on roadsides for a few days before moving on to the next village.

Throughout his ministry in Tabriz Stephen had a unique opportunity to evangelize to the people of Muslim faith, as well as to their leaders, the Mullahs, and high ranking public officials.

While some Muslims were interested to learn about Christianity they seldom attended Sunday worship services, since they were afraid of being stigmatized by fellow Muslims. Stephen would invite them to meet in his office during the weekdays for exchange and fellowship.

Since he had a good knowledge of the Koran and understood the Islam religion he was well prepared to discuss and examine questions of vital importance to Muslims. Many sessions were devoted to discussions about the fundamentals of Christian doctrine. Some Muslims indeed converted to Christianity. It was through Stephen's courage and Christian faith that he was able to inspire fellow humans to embrace Christianity.

Stephen continued his ministry in Tabriz until he was called to serve as a pastor of the South Congregational Church's Assyrian Mission in New Britain, Conn. (1948 – 1956). Here he preached regularly to both the English and Assyrian-speaking congregations. Eight years later Stephen accepted an invitation from the San Joaquin Presbytery in California to become senior pastor of St. John's Assyrian Presbyterian Church in Turlock, CA until he retired. (1956 – 1961).

Diyarbakir's Christians suffer in margins of Turkey-PKK war



The peal of church bells mingles with children's laughter. The Muslim call to prayer floats through the air. In the cobbled courtyard of the Surp Giragos Armenian Orthodox Church, young lovers sip wine and plan their weddings and lives. It's a typical day in Sur, the ancient heart of the Kurds' unofficial capital, Diyarbakir.

Diyarbakir's Christians, many of them ethnic Armenians, have been caught up in the violence between the Turkish security forces and the Kurdistan Workers Party. Author Amberin Zaman Posted December 31, 2015

Armenian-Christian women pray during an Easter mass at Surp Giragos church in Diyarbakir, in the Kurdish-dominated southeastern Turkey, April 5, 2015. (photo by REUTERS/Sertac Kayar)

So it was until armed teenagers with the Patriotic Revolutionary Youth Movement (YDG-H), the urban youth branch of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), declared “self rule” over large swathes of Sur, erecting barricades and digging trenches to keep state authorities out.

The pattern is being repeated in towns and cities across the Kurdish-majority southeast, part of the escalating war between the Turkish armed forces and the PKK that was reignited following the collapse of a two-year cease-fire in July. Over 150 civilians, including dozens of children, have been killed, most of them by the security forces, claim rights advocates.

In Sur, Turkish special forces teams backed by tanks, helicopter gunships and armored personnel carriers have laid virtual siege to the district, which now lies in ruins.

The youths remain dug in, but over half of Sur's residents have fled. And while their suffering has been well-documented, little has been said about the clutch of Christians who have been quietly toiling to resurrect

Sur's once vibrant multi-faith community. It was brutally destroyed in 1915, when Ottoman forces and their Kurdish collaborators slaughtered hundreds of thousands of Christians (most of them Armenians) and other non-Muslims in what many respected scholars call genocide.

“Now we are caught between two fires, between the PKK and the state,” said Gaffur Turkay, who has helped to run Surp Giragos, the largest Armenian church in the Middle East, since it reopened its doors in 2012.

“Because of the ongoing violence our church has been forced to shut down. We were meant to open a museum in September on the church premises but had to cancel,” Turkay told Al-Monitor in an interview in Diyarbakir. The cafe, which used to draw hundreds of visitors and with it sorely needed income to help maintain Surp Giragos, is deserted.

In Turkey live the descendants of tens of thousands — some say many more — of Armenians who converted to Islam in the aftermath of the genocide to avert certain death. These “leftovers of the sword” embraced Islamic traditions, but everyone knew they were Armenians.

“Our tragedy is that Muslims never accepted us as true Muslims, nor Armenians as **true Armenians.**” Gaffur noted. “And in this [cycle of] violence we are again stuck in the middle,” he added.

The reopening of Surp Giragos, after a costly and meticulous restoration project, encouraged many **“hidden” Armenians** like Turkay to emerge from the shadows to reclaim their identities, and never so many as on April 24 of this year, which marked the centenary of the genocide.

They came out to formally join diaspora Armenians from far-flung corners of the world in a poignant commemorative service amid the ruins of Surp Sarkis, another Armenian church in Sur.

Popular historian Osman Koker notes in “Armenians in Turkey 100 Years Ago” that prior to 1915, “Some 10,000 of 35,000 inhabitants of Diyarbakir were Armenians. ... Half of the members of the town council and a significant portion of the members of the provincial council were Christian, notably Armenians. ... Nearly all of the lawyers, physicians and pharmacists of Diyarbakir were Christians, and **the majority of them were Armenians.**”

For decades the genocide, formally and vigorously denied by Turkey, remained a taboo subject. Those who dared to challenge the official line, that the majority of the empire's Armenian subjects fell victim to starvation or disease during their forced deportation to the Syrian desert, faced prosecution. But under Turkey's Islamist Justice and Development Party, which came to power over a decade ago, open debate of 1915 has grown louder and in line with European Union-oriented reforms, some confiscated church properties are gradually being returned.

In this new spirit of openness, Armenians descended from victims of the genocide found the courage to come to Turkey to rediscover their roots. Many traveled to the Kurdish areas, where local Kurdish-run municipalities welcomed them in an effort to make **amends for the horrors of the past.**

Khatchig Mouradian, an Armenian Lebanese academic at Rutgers University in New Jersey who has done extensive research on the genocide, was until the fighting erupted a frequent visitor to the Kurdish areas and brought fellow diaspora Armenians, including students, there a couple dozen times over the past five years.

“In recent years, Diyarbakir had become a laboratory where shards of Armenian memory were mended as the city braved the difficulty of confronting the legacy of the Armenian genocide,” Mouradian told Al-Monitor in an interview.

“Today, alongside the lost lives and pulverized historic stone and glass, the memory and legacy is being buried under yet another layer of violence.” Mouradian added that he would “never bring groups now.”

Abdullah Demirbas, Sur's former mayor, spearheaded the campaign for Armenian Kurdish reconciliation, making the ancient tongue of Armenian and Syrian Orthodox Christians, Aramaic, part of the official menu of languages used by his municipality. Demirbas was instrumental in helping to raise funds for the restoration of Surp Giragos and other non-Muslim places of worship.

“Sur was my child. I cannot believe what is happening,” he told Al-Monitor over tea in Istanbul. But like many Kurds, he blames the state for the breakdown of the peace process. “The trenches are not the cause. They are the result of the government’s refusal to accept the Kurds as equals,” said Demirbas, who has been repeatedly jailed and prosecuted on thinly supported charges of “membership of a terrorist group.”

Save for a few shattered windows, Surp Giragos has survived intact. So too have Chaldean, Protestant and Syrian Orthodox churches.

But another Sur landmark, the 500-year-old Kursunlu mosque, was not as lucky. The once imposing structure has been reduced to rubble, its remaining walls blackened by smoke from a fire that the YDG-H insists was caused by rockets fired by the security forces. The government claims that the PKK was responsible. On a recent morning when the government briefly lifted its round-the-clock curfew over Sur, small groups of people gathered around the remains of the mosque, cataloguing the destruction with their cellular phones and praying before the tombs saints buried in its garden as masked youths stood guard.

“Look,” said one of the youths, pointing to an armored vehicle parked within a direct firing line of the mosque. “Who do you think did this?”

As the bloody standoff in Sur enters its second month, the city’s Christian worshippers have had to celebrate Christmas elsewhere.

“It was a very sad Christmas for us,” said Ahmet Guvener, the pastor of the Protestant church in Sur. He counts some 100 souls in his flock. “If the fighting doesn’t stop our community, our whole way of life is going to die,” he told Al-Monitor in an interview. Guvener has other reasons to worry. Suspected Islamic State sympathizers posted a chilling video on YouTube showing footage of Guvener and fellow “infidels” who are called **“a big threat to Islam.”** It ends with an image of the IS flag planted in the sand on an unidentified beach. Guvener said a group of pastors targeted in the video filed a criminal complaint in October.

“The government has censored hundreds of videos on the grounds that they constitute a threat to national security. But for some reason this video, which is a clear invitation for us to be harmed, remains online,” he concluded with a bitter laugh.

David Yonan

Internationally acclaimed concert violinist DAVID YONAN was born in Berlin, and quickly recognized as a child prodigy after winning the Berlin Youth Competition at age ten. He made his recital debut in Berlin, Moscow and St. Petersburg at age eleven.

A year later, he debuted in the Berlin Philharmonic Hall as a soloist with the Berlin Symphony Orchestra and was invited the following year by conductor Gerd Albrecht to perform at the "Violinists of the 21st Century" concert at the Berlin Philharmonic Hall, which was televised globally by Deutsche Welle TV. The Berliner Morgenpost wrote, "Yonan is a name to memorize for the future," while legendary violinist Ruggiero Ricci wrote, "Yonan is one of the most gifted violinists of his generation." Since then, he has toured as a soloist and recitalist throughout the United States, Europe and South America with major orchestras in prestigious concert halls around the globe. Yonan is one of a select few violinists who have performed the complete cycles of the Twenty-Four Paganini Caprices, the 6 Bach Solo sonatas and Partitas and the 6 Ysaye Sonatas in live concerts, earning him standing ovations at the Aspen Music Festival, in Berlin, Germany, and in Chicago. He is a winner of many international competitions, including the International Ruggiero Ricci Competition, the Vina del Mar Competition Chile, the International Kloster Schoental Competition, and the 2012 Alexander and Buono String Competition New York, among others.

In 2015 he won a Global Music Award for his live-recording of Ysaye's virtuoso Six Sonatas. He has performed on TV and radio for major networks and radio stations, including ABC, NBC, CBS, and the German ARD and ZDF networks. In 2001, the celebrated violin pedagogue Dorothy DeLay selected him as a young artist at the inaugural Starling DeLay



Violin Symposium at the Julliard School where he also performed with Itzhak Perlman. A champion of new music, Yonan has worked with distinguished composers, including Arvo Pärt, John Adams, Augusta Read Thomas and Ilya Levinson. Formerly the Coordinator of Strings and visiting Artist-In-Residence at Columbia College-Chicago, and Director of the Chamber Strings at North Park University, he has presented masterclasses and guest lectures at Northwestern University, University of Chicago, San Francisco State University and the Franz Liszt Music Academy in Weimar, Germany. He studied at the Berlin Music Academy "Hanns Eisler" under Professor Werner Scholz, where he earned his Masters and Soloist Diploma and at Northwestern University with Roland and Almita Vamos, as well as in masterclasses with Ruggiero Ricci. Highlights of the 2015-16 Season include the world-premiere of "Assyrian Lament" for violin and orchestra, written by Ilya Levinson for Yonan with the Highland Park Strings at the North Shore Center of the Performing Arts Chicago, as well as the brand new CD release "Four Centuries" with pianist Susan Merdinger. Yonan is the Founder and Artistic Director of the Fine Arts Music Society and Festival Chicago, which is now in its 12th season, as well as Director of the Adiana Strings Academy.

www.davidyonan.com

Head of Assyrian church in Shrewsbury

says ISIS is destroying history



PHOTO/ CHRIS CHRISTO
The Very Rev. Raban Maroutha A. Hanna, at St. Mary's Syriac (Assyrian) Orthodox Church, thinks about the last time he visited the museum in Mosul.

SHREWSBURY — Raban Maroutha A. Hanna vividly remembers as a teen visiting the museum in his birth city of Mosul in northern Iraq and seeing the beautiful statues and other historical artifacts that date back thousands of years.

"I was so impressed by everything ... Those old things, you want to look at them close. I don't ever remember if I ever saw everything despite the fact I went a couple of times," he said. "To look at things somebody made 3,000 years ago, it's just special."

Rev. Hanna, 41, who was ordained as a monk while living in Iraq in 1996, is the priest at St. Mary's Syriac (Assyrian) Orthodox Church at Route 9 east and Industrial Drive. Rev. Hanna has lived in this country for 10 years. He last visited the Mosul Museum, the second largest museum in

Iraq, when he was 18.

Recently, he spoke about the contentedness he felt growing up in Mosul, one of the areas in Iraq considered the cradle of civilization. And how ISIS, the armed Islamic extremist group, has waged a cultural and religious cleansing crusade, in which they are kidnapping and killing Christians, and destroying irreplaceable, centuries-old Bibles, books, art and other relics that predate the birth of Jesus Christ and Christianity.

"They are erasing history. Christianity is a part of history that everybody should be proud of. Or, if not proud of, at least everybody should know and realize it and put it under study," Rev. Hanna said, before offering an analogy of the value of the items.

"A letter from George Washington that's written in his hand would be sold for millions of dollars and it's only a couple hundred years old. Now, you're talking about ... all of those handwritten manuscripts are hundreds of years old and many of them are over 1,300 years old," he said.

The zealots justify their destruction by saying they have to destroy the artifacts because people are worshipping them as if they are gods.

Tahir Ali, a spokesman for the Islamic Center of Worcester, said that is only an excuse for the radicals to do what they want to do. He said ISIS is giving the majority of Muslims who are peaceful a bad reputation.

"What's happening has nothing to do with Islam," said Mr. Ali, an engineer who lives in Westboro. "When you go to a museum, you see historical artifacts that remind us of where we came from ... how humanity evolved. There is so much history behind those artifacts, historical monuments, if somebody destroys them, that is such an unforgivable act." Rhys F. Townsend, an archeologist and professor of art history at Clark University, said he was particularly disheartened when he heard about ISIS bulldozing the Nimrud archaeological site.

"These particular pieces that are being destroyed predate Christianity by a long stretch. This is irreparable damage to the history of the Middle East," he said.

"If you were to go into the Museum of American Art and destroy paintings and sculptures and artifacts, it would be tantamount to doing that. If one went down to Sturbridge Village and destroyed that, think how people would react," Mr. Townsend said.

Rev. Hanna said growing up in Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, was nice. Most of his childhood friends were Muslims. Christians were highly educated and very successful, he said, but they were always treated as second-class citizens by many Muslims, he said.

Life was turned upside down in June 2014 when ISIS took over the city of more than 1 million people. The terror group declared Mosul an Islamic state and the Christians were given two ultimatums: They could either leave or stay and pay a protection tax, called Jezia, or be killed, Rev. Hanna said.

He said an estimated 100,000 Christians left their homes and businesses in Mosul and moved north toward Christian villages that were controlled by the Kurds. Kurds are also Muslims, but they are an enemy of ISIS. During battles with the ISIS forces, the Kurds, who are being defended by Americans, pulled back, causing Christians to move to other villages.

Rev. Hanna said his two brothers and two sisters who fled their homes in Mosul are now in Dohuk, a Kurdistan city that has a large population of Assyrians, sometimes called Syriac Christians.

"They have no hope. They have almost nothing. It's just sad, sad," Rev. Hanna said before a long pause. "Thank God it is safe where they are."

Rev. Hanna said the problem stems from fanatical Muslims who want to live the way Muhammed, the founder and chief prophet of Islam, lived 1,400 years ago. Muhammed is also said to have been the first to verbally receive the words of the Quran, the Muslim holy book, from God.

Muhammed, Rev. Hanna said, was a warrior who went into many wars. When he and his followers raided villages, they killed the men and took the women as well as all the money and valuables. Muhammed, as written in the Quran, also had many wives and mistresses.

Muslims also don't like Christians because they think Christians believe in three gods because of the belief in the Trinity, "the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit," he said. Rev. Hanna said he does not usually discuss what's happening to Christians in Syria and Iraq during his sermons. Church, he pointed out, is for faith and spirituality.

"Of course, from time to time, we have to mention what's happening to comfort people. Many of them still have relatives in Iraq and Syria," he said. "As a Christian, Jesus did not promise us peace in this life. He said you're going to be persecuted for my name. But, whoever keeps his faith and trust in him would be given eternal life in the Kingdom of Heaven."

The original St. Mary's Syriac Assyrian Orthodox Church was built on Hawley Street in Worcester in 1924 by about 30 Assyrian families who came to this country from southern Turkey. In the 1960s and 1970s, more people started coming from Turkey, as well as from Syria and Lebanon. In the past five to seven years, Assyrians from Iraq have found their way to Central Massachusetts, Rev. Hanna said.

St. Mary's moved to its new home last year. The church will host the 52nd Syriac Orthodox Convention of North America July 23-26.

The problems between Muslims and Christians are not new. They are more extensive now because of more advanced weaponry, and people around the world are more aware of what's happening now because of the media, including social media, Rev. Hanna said.

Asked if he thinks the problems between Muslims and Christians will ever end, Rev. Hanna said: "When (Islamist extremist) reinterpret their holy book in favor of making peace and acceptance of others.

"The things that cause all these troubles are envy in the world and selfishness. As long as there is selfishness and envy in the world, there's going to be problems as far as what's happening in Iraq and Syria."

**Contact Elaine Thompson at
elaine.thompson@telegram.com.**

Iraq's oldest Christian monastery

destroyed by Islamic State

Satellite images confirm that the oldest Christian monastery in Iraq has been destroyed by the jihadist group Islamic State (IS).



Satellite images showing the site of St Elijah's Monastery in March 2011 and September 2014

St Elijah's stood on a hill near the northern city of Mosul for 1,400 years.

But analysts said the images, obtained by the Associated Press, suggested it had been demolished in late 2014, soon after IS seized the city.

A Catholic priest from Mosul warned that its Christian history was "being barbarically levelled".

"We see it as an attempt to expel us from Iraq, eliminating and finishing our existence in this land," said Father Paul Thabit Habib, who now lives in Kurdish-administered Irbil.



St Elijah's Monastery, or Deir Mar Elia, was believed to have been built in the late 6th Century

IS has targeted Christians in Iraq and neighbouring Syria, seizing their property and forcing them to convert to Islam, pay a special tax or flee.

The group has also demolished a number of monasteries and churches, as well as renowned pre-Islamic sites including Nimrud, Hatra and Nineveh in Iraq and Palmyra in Syria.

'Important place'

St Elijah's Monastery, or Deir Mar Elia, was believed to have been constructed by Assyrian monks in the late 6th Century. It was later claimed by a Chaldean Catholic order. In 1743, its monks were given an ultimatum by Persian forces to convert to Islam. They refused and as many as 150 were massacred.

Analysis - Ahmed Maher, Iraq correspondent, BBC News

Had it not been for these satellite images, we would probably not have learnt about the monastery's destruction. This is because journalists and archaeologists cannot go to IS-controlled areas for security reasons. But more importantly, IS did not release any video on its propaganda outlets showing the demolition of this particular ancient site.

The jihadists have released footage showing themselves destroying shrines, churches and antiquities with sledgehammers and dynamite. More than 100 churches and monasteries have been razed to the ground in Mosul and the predominantly Christian villages surrounding it, like Bashiqa and Qaraqosh, since they took control of the area in 2014.

The militants believe that Islam is the only religion that must be adopted by the followers of other faiths. And that is why they have targeted minorities and destroyed their places of worship. Those who have remained in these areas have been forced to choose between conversion and execution.

Why IS destroys ancient sites

Palmyra: Blowing ruins to rubble Understanding sadness at loss of sites

Fr Thabit told AP that the monastery "became a spiritual place for Christians to visit and to have religious ceremonies, and to ask forgiveness from the saint who founded this monastery".

"The monastery attracted all the people from Mosul - Christians and Muslims. All the poets, historians and travellers wrote about this monastery," he added. "It became a very important place for the history of the Church in Iraq." In the 1970s, the monastery became a base for the Iraqi Republican Guard, and in 2003 one of its walls was damaged

by the impact of a T-72 tank turret that was hit by a missile during the US-led invasion of Iraq.

The US Army used the monastery as a base itself, before a chaplain recognised its importance and a commander ordered it to be cleared.

Stephen Wood of Allsource Analysis told AP that the satellite images published on Wednesday suggested the monastery was destroyed between August and September 2014, two to three months after IS captured Mosul and ordered Christians who had not already fled to leave.



The images showed "that the stone walls have been literally pulverized", Mr Wood said.

"Bulldozers, heavy equipment, sledgehammers, possibly explosives turned those stone walls into this field of grey-white dust. They destroyed it completely."

A security source in Nineveh province separately confirmed to the BBC on Wednesday that IS militants had blown up the monastery, completely destroying it.

1) Local Christians visited the monastery to celebrate the feast of St Elijah

2) The US Army used the monastery as a base after the 2003 invasion of Iraq

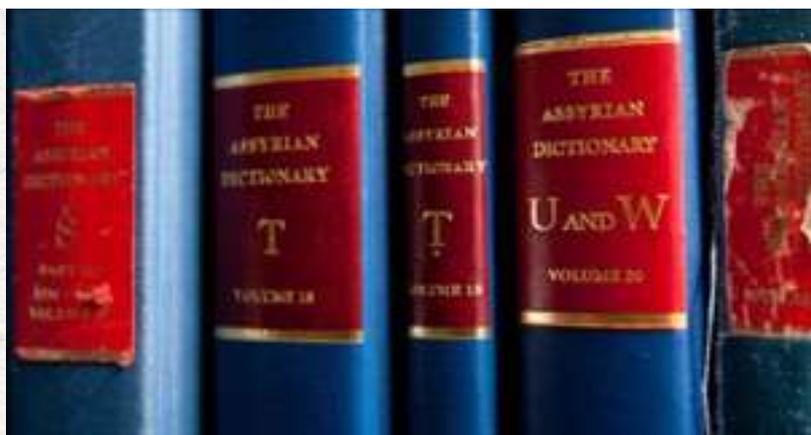
Dictionary of dead language complete after 90 years

Image caption The first volumes of the dictionary were published in the 1950s

A dictionary of the extinct language of ancient Mesopotamia has been completed after 90 years of work.

The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary is 21 volumes long and is encyclopaedic in its range. Whole volumes are dedicated to a single letter, and it comes complete with extensive references to original source material throughout. It all sounds like a lot of work for a dictionary in a language that no-one speaks anymore. It was "often tedious," admits Prof Matthew W Stolper of the Oriental Institute, who worked for many years on the dictionary - but it was also hugely rewarding and fascinating, he adds.

Assyrian and Babylonian - dialects of the language collectively known as Akkadian - have not been spoken for almost 2,000 years.



"This is a heroic and significant moment in history," beamed Dr Irving Finkel of the British Museum's Middle East department. As a young man in the 1970s Dr Finkel dedicated three years of his life to The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary Project which is based at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. That makes him something of a spring chicken in the life story of this project, which began in 1921. Almost 90 experts from around the world took part, diligently recording and cross referencing their work on what ended up being almost two million index cards.

A sizeable chunk of my scholarly identity feels like it's going to be missing Professor Martha Roth, Dictionary editor

"It's like looking through a window into a moment from thousands of years in the past," he told the BBC World Service.

Ancient life and love

The dictionary was put together by studying texts written on clay and stone tablets uncovered in ancient Mesopotamia, which sat between the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers - the heartland of which was in modern-day Iraq, and also included parts of Syria and Turkey. And there were rich pickings for them to pore over, with 2,500 years worth of texts ranging from scientific, medical and legal documents, to love letters, epic literature and messages to the gods.

"It is a miraculous thing," enthuses Dr Finkel.

"We can read the ancient words of poets, philosophers, magicians and astronomers as if they were writing to us in English.

"When they first started excavating Iraq in 1850, they found lots of inscriptions in the ground and on palace walls, but no-one could read a word of it because it was extinct," he said.

But what is so striking according to the editor of the dictionary, Prof Martha Roth, is not the differences, but the similarities between then and now.

"A lot of the history of how people went from being merely human to being civilized, happened in Mesopotamia," says Prof Stolper.

All sorts of major advances are thought to have their earliest origins there, and - crucially - Mesopotamia is believed to be among three or four places in the world where writing first emerged. The cuneiform script - used to write both Assyrian and Babylonian, and first used for the Sumerian language - is, according to Dr Finkel, the oldest script in the world, and was an inspiration for its far more famous cousin, hieroglyphics.

Its angular characters were etched into clay tablets, which were then baked in the sun, or fired in kilns.

This produced a very durable product, but it was very hard to write, and from about 600BC, Aramaic - which is spoken by modern-day Assyrians in the region - began to gain prominence, simply because it was easier to put into written form, researchers believe.



Image caption Inside the Assyrian Hall of the Iraqi National Museum in Baghdad



Image caption An example of cuneiform script from the ancient city of Babylon

A sizeable chunk of my scholarly identity feels like it's going to be missing
Professor Martha Roth,
Dictionary editor

"It's like looking through a window into a moment from thousands of years in the past," he told the BBC World Service.

Fresh minds

With the dictionary now finally complete, "there are mixed emotions", says Prof Roth.

"As someone who has been so deeply engaged every day of the last 32 years with this project, there is a sizeable chunk of my scholarly identity that feels like it is going to be missing for a while," she told the BBC World Service.

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"This is a heroic and significant moment in history," beamed Dr Irving Finkel of the British Museum's Middle East department. As a young man in the 1970s Dr Finkel dedicated three years of his life to **The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary** Project which is based at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. That makes him something of a spring chicken in the life story of this project, which began in 1921. Almost 90 experts from around the world took part, diligently recording and cross referencing their work on what ended up being almost two million index cards.

The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary is 21 volumes long and is encyclopaedic in its range. Whole volumes are dedicated to a single letter, and it comes complete with extensive references to original source material throughout. It all sounds like a lot of work for a dictionary in a language that no-one speaks anymore. It was "often tedious," admits Prof Matthew W Stolper of the Oriental Institute, who worked for many years on the dictionary - but it was also hugely rewarding and fascinating, he adds.

"It's a great achievement and a source of pride," adds Prof Stolper.

"It was like a living thing that grew older and changed its attitudes, that made mistakes and corrected them. Now that it's done, it's a monument, grand and imposing, but at rest".

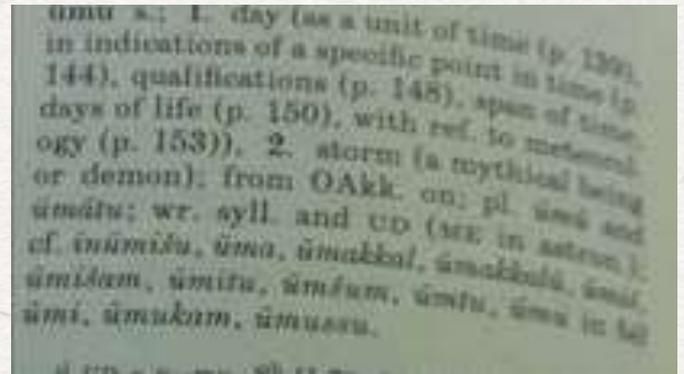


Image caption An entry from the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary

But those involved most closely in the dictionary, are also the first to stress its limitations. They still do not know what some words mean, and because new discoveries are being made all the time, it is - and always will - remain a work in progress. Prof Stolper for one says he is stepping aside; any future updates or revisions would be best done by "fresh minds" and "fresh hands", he believes. The entire dictionary costs \$1,995 (£1,230; 1,400 euros), but is also available for free **online** - a far cry from the dictionary's low-tech beginnings. Turning philosophical, Dr Finkel reflects on the legacy of our own increasingly electronic age, where so much of what we do is intangible.

"What is there going to be in 1,000 years' time for lunatics like me, who like to read ancient inscriptions - what are they ever going to find?" he asks.

"They will probably say that there was no writing - it was a dark age, that people had forgotten it, because there may be nothing left."

On the Run from the Islamic State,

Iraqi Christians Are Trying to Save Their Heritage

Courtesy of VICE.com

The international community is struggling to come up with a strategy to defeat the Islamic State (IS) — but on the ground in northern Iraq, a Roman Catholic priest has found his own way to fight the jihadists.

Father Gabriel Tooma is not going after them with weapons. He is not involved with any of the several Christian militias that have taken it upon themselves, in Iraq and neighboring Syria, to defend their villages against IS onslaught. What he is doing, he says, is even more important to the Christian minority's fate in northern Iraq: He is rounding up ancient manuscripts and relics and hiding them in secure locations around Kurdistan, hoping to save them from the iconoclastic fury of the terror insurgency.

"If Daesh burns down a church we can rebuild it, but the manuscripts are our history. They trace back our roots, they are part of our civilization," he said, using the Arabic acronym for the group. "If they get destroyed, then we are lost, and our culture will be forgotten."

The 55-year old priest, a Jesuit-like Pope Francis, spoke during a meeting late last year at a monastery in al Qosh, in the Nineveh Plain.

His words took on a new, urgent meaning on Wednesday, when news broke that IS fighters had done exactly what he had said. The extremist militants had razed the oldest Christian church in Iraq, the 1,400-year old St. Elijah Monastery in Mosul, about 30 miles (50 km) from AlQosh.

In the face of this threat, Father Gabriel is trying to save what he can, including manuscripts dating back as far as the 11th Century. They are mainly liturgical books, but there are also Old Testament stories, books on medicine, and miniatures drawn by monks. "These books have an inestimable value," he said. He has been at work for four years on scanning and saving them in digital format, with the help of the Italian NGO Un Ponte Per and funds from the Italian Episcopal Conference.

The manuscripts are delicate objects, handled carefully by an Italian art restorer, Irene Zanella, who trains Iraqis on how preserve ancient books from her base in Erbil, the capital of Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan. Zanella and her staff first dust the books with a soft brush, then each page is photographed, rather than scanned. "This technique avoids squashing the pages and preserves the pages and the ink," she said. Her work is part of a larger project to save the cultural heritage of Iraq, started in 2004 in Baghdad and then expanded throughout the country, as it plunged into a civil war that often overlaps with religious and sectarian divisions.

Iraq has a Shiite Muslim majority, now in power, and a Sunni minority that was in charge until the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime. A small Christian minority, about three percent of the population, is made up mostly of Chaldean Catholics like Father Gabriel.

Along with the Yazidis, who practice a pre-Islamic religion and are also targeted by IS, the Christian heritage is in grave danger in Iraq. But it has been for years, since well before IS began its campaign of cleansing from the territory it controls anybody who is not a Sunni Muslim in 2014.

In 2006, a wave of terrorist attacks hit the Iraqi Christian community. At least three archbishops and dozens of priests were killed; hundreds of the faithful died in church bombings.



A view of al Qosh, overlooking the Nineveh plain, in northern Iraq.

As a result, the Jesuits ordered Father Gabriel, and eight other priests, to leave Baghdad immediately. "We left just one person behind to guard the monastery of St. Anthony, and I was told to go to AlQosh," he said. Father Gabriel was also told to take with him the most ancient and precious manuscripts, which had been in the monastery for centuries. But he was afraid the Iraqi Army would confiscate the books at checkpoints and try to sell them. So he decided to smuggle them: "We stored the manuscripts in boxes, covered by blankets. We hoped for the best." He traveled more than 300 miles (500 km) in a four-vehicle convoy, passing by his count through 63 checkpoints. "They never stopped us," he said. "We arrived safely in AlQosh."

That adventurous move, it turned out, bought Father Gabriel and his books — and many Iraqi Christians — just a few years of safety. On August 6, 2014, IS launched a major operation in the Nineveh plain, taking most of it in just a few days. It encountered no resistance from the Iraqi security forces, which fled before the militants' advance. As the militants approached al Qosh, Christians there panicked.

"As soon as we heard they were coming, I thought everything was lost. So I encouraged everybody from the village to flee.

We knew what happened to the Yazidis and didn't want to meet the same fate," said Father Gabriel, referring to the religious minority's near-extirmination by the Islamic State just a few months earlier. "I took the most important manuscripts with me and hoped for the best."

But AlQosh was spared. The IS advance stopped a few kilometers away. Father Gabriel went back to retrieve what he had left behind — 1,000 manuscripts, which he scattered in remote locations in Kurdistan, the autonomous region of Iraq. "I will not say where they are, it's not safe. Just I and another priest know where they are," he said, smoking a thin cigarette, a habit he picked up in Italy, where he lived for almost ten years while in training for the priesthood. The waves of violence he experienced since Saddam's fall, he said, made him extremely wary of strangers. AlQosh, under the gaze of an eighth-century monastery built on the mountain overlooking the town, is the last remaining Christian village in the whole plain of Nineveh, but its situation is precarious. The front line in the battle with IS is just six miles (10 km) away, and Mosul, the largest Iraqi city occupied by the extremists, is 28 miles (50 km).

The 7,000 people of AlQosh are protected by the militia of Assyrian Christians, but their de facto leader is the local priest — Father Gabriel himself, who also manages a school and the local orphanage.

It is he who decides who can and cannot live in the town. Yazidis on the run from IS are welcome, he said, and so are other refugees, but on one condition: They must not be Muslim. The Christian mandate to help one's neighbor does not extend to Muslims in AlQosh. "They can go to many other villages around here, where there are no Christians," Father Gabriel said. "AlQosh is the last place in the area where we can live our faith in peace. And many of them are also ISIS collaborators. I don't want them here."

He does, in fact, see himself as a sort of religious warrior, fighting to save Iraqi Christians with a righteous zeal. "There was a Christian boy who lost his parents in Baghdad, and the local mosque wanted to raise him," he said. "I couldn't allow that." So he organized a convoy to get him and bring him to AlQosh, he said, so that the boy would not be raised as a Muslim. The other 34 children at the orphanage have similar stories. Most of them lost their parents in the conflict; in some cases, families lost everything and left them with the priest, so they could eat and have a roof on their head.

He is not the only Christian religious figure in the area with such harsh views of Muslims. "I can tell you Islam doesn't have peaceful messages," said Friar Najeeb Michael, a 50-year old Dominican monk in Erbil, who fled the IS advance on the town of Qaraqosh, about 18 miles (30 km) from Mosul. His views of Islam may have been shaped by the 1996 killing in Algeria by Islamist militants of the priest who he said had ordained him, French Archbishop Pierre Claverie.

He, too, is involved in saving ancient manuscripts, which he began working on, to preserve at his first post in a monastery in Mosul in the 1980s. In 2007, he got death threats from groups affiliated with al Qaeda in Iraq, and moved to Qaraqosh, with some of the ancient books.



Father Gabriel Tooma with some of the children in the Al Qosh orphanage.

On August 7, 2014, he had to escape again. IS was coming. "It was 5.30am when I saw Daesh coming with their cars and the black flags waving. They were trying to cut in front of us to kill men and kidnap women. I gave everybody the last rites. I thought it was finished for us," he recalled. Instead, the people fleeing Qaraqosh found a checkpoint on the road to north Iraq open, and got through — but had to leave their vehicles behind.

"Thousands of people were trying to flee. We had several manuscripts in the cars with us. So I asked everybody, young and old, to carry at least ten at a time to the other side of the border. We had to make several trips, but we made it." Qaraqosh remains in IS hands.

In 2006, a wave of terrorist attacks hit the Iraqi Christian community. At least three archbishops and dozens of priests were killed; hundreds of the faithful died in church bombings.

"What they try to destroy we protect. This is how we can really defeat IS,"

he said. In Erbil, he bought a building with the help of American Benedictine monks and private donations. About 60 families from Qaraqosh live there, but most of them are trying to leave the country and head for Europe.



"The situation is very hard. Most of these families were middle class, they had everything they needed, but now they have nothing and they can't really accept this," he said, describing a massive exodus of Christian families trying to get to Europe.

According to Emily Fuentes, coordinator for Open Doors, an American NGO focusing on persecuted Christians around the world, the Iraqi Christian community has shrunk to 200,000, compared to a million people in 2003.

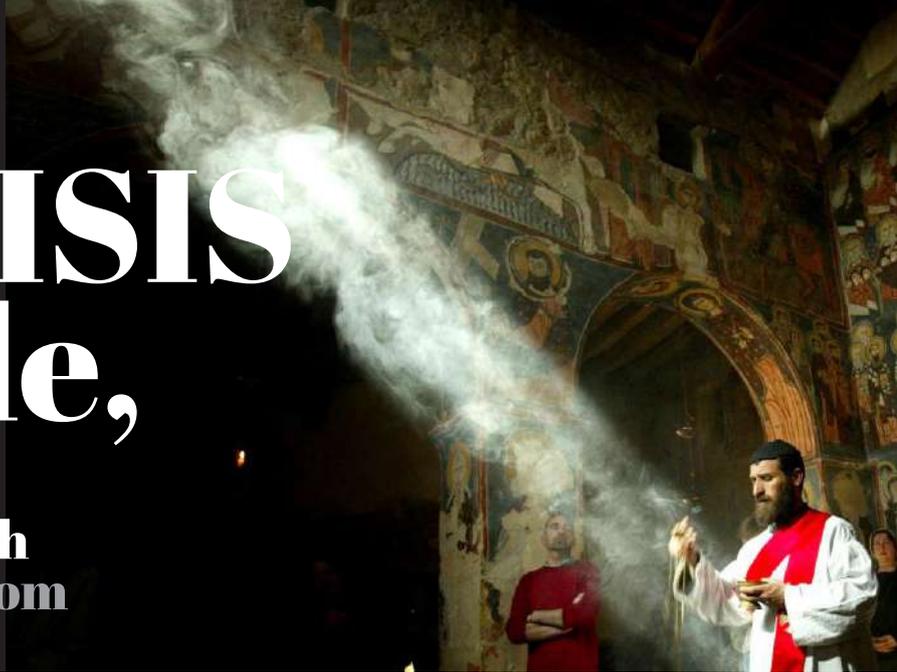
"The numbers are diminishing daily. More and more people are trying to leave," she said. Most of the remaining community found shelter in north Iraq, but adapting to life there it's very difficult. "It is a completely different culture, the language is different. Technically they are still [in Iraq], but it almost feels like a different country."

A view of al Qosh, overlooking the Nineveh plain, in northern Iraq.

Even Father Gabriel doubts there will ever be peace for Iraq's Christians. "I have no idea what will happen to us. The future is gloomy. Take what happened in Paris, those terrorist attacks. I am afraid to say this is just the start," he said, in a phone conversation after VICE News visited him in alQosh. But he is hanging on to hope: "We will continue to oppose terrorism, in our own way."

Fleeing ISIS into exile,

**syriac christians sing
the oldest music on earth
courtesy of newsweek.com**



The last time they came along the road to the monastery of Mar Mattai in northern Iraq, it was September. Then, there was a queue of cars stretching back to Mosul. There were little girls in white dresses with curly hair tied up in ribbons. Mothers carried sponge-cakes in boxes on their knees. Their husbands, moustaches combed and blazers brushed, were looking forward to an aniseed tot of arak when they arrived.

As they left the city behind, the road climbed into the mountains, dusty, sandy and dotted with oleander bushes. The stickiness of the plain gave way to a cool, dry breeze. At the end of the road, the monastery was overflowing: this was one of the great festivals for Syriac Christians in Iraq and beyond. There was feasting and prayers, and the singing of Syriac chant, perhaps the oldest extant music in the world, a sacred and archaic call and response in a language that would have been understood by Jesus.

This time, eight months later, they drive by night while, behind them, Mosul burns. The fathers stay eyes-front, following the rear-lights of the car ahead. Children are quiet but awake. There is no laughter and no singing, no cars toot their horns. The monastery is dark, lit only in flashes from the headlamps. Otherwise, it is only by the smell of the oleander, and the steady cooling of the air, that they know they are on the road to Mar Mattai.

Among them is Sarmad Ozan, formerly a young deacon in the cathedral in Mosul, where he sang the daily liturgy. When ISIS captured the city, the cathedral clergy thought they would stay. In a few days, however, ISIS issued its infamous decree: convert to Islam, pay a tax on unbelievers or die. Sarmad, his fellow clergymen and this band of 50 Christian families fled to find sanctuary in their mountain stronghold. They leave behind the bodies of brothers and fathers, and the shelled-out ruins of their shops and houses. They also leave behind much of what it meant to be a Syriac Christian. The ancient cities of Nimrud and Nineveh that they visited proudly to show their children the glories of the Assyrian empire from which they claim descent – soon these will

A Syrian monk swings incense during mass in the monastery Mar Musa al-Habashi in Nebek, north of Damascus

be bulldozed by ISIS. They leave behind the treasures of Assyria in the Mosul museum – ISIS will loot the smaller antiquities for the black market and smash the statues too big to sell. And on the way to Mar Mattai, they pass the monastery of Mar Behnam: its gates are already barred by ISIS. From the steeple flies the black flag. In a few months, it will be destroyed.

What they carry with them is their liturgical music. It preserves strains of the earliest religious chants of Mesopotamia and of court songs sung for Assyrian emperors 2,000 years before Christ. Its antiquity is matched by its simplicity: clergy and congregation sing together, dividing between boys with high voices and older, bigger men who sing more deeply. Beyond this there is no distinction of note or pitch, and no melody. The call and response format is thought to enact a conversation between man and God.

Tonight, they will again sing the old songs. They make for the inner rooms: the hermits' cells burrowed into the cliff-face; the Saints' Room, with its reliquaries set in niches in the rock; the chapels dug deep into the holy mountain. There, crammed into the rough caves, Sarmad and the other deacons push to the front and stand in a line. They are joined by the old monks and the priests, in black cassocks and embroidered skull-caps. The priests start the singing in deep voices, then the deacons and younger men answer at a higher pitch. Now the other men in the congregation fall in, back and forth, call and response, as it has been for millennia.

It grows quicker, and louder, filling the small rooms in the belly of the monastery. But Sarmad hears something else – the congregation are weeping as they sing. Because tomorrow, or soon after, they will leave for the Kurdish territories, for the refugee camps and then for abroad, in Sarmad's case for Newcastle in the north of England, where he was when I spoke to him; and they may never hear this music again.

Football, Politics and Assyrian National Identity

large Assyrian flag is displayed by Assyrian fans at a game played by Assyriska, an Assyrian football club in Sweden. (AINA) -- In Iraq, Syria and Turkey, Assyrian identity and culture is being undermined by simply being labelled as Christian.

Although it may seem irrelevant or even trivial, this is an attack on a stateless people with a 6700 year history, language, culture and identity.

But in the very large Assyrian diaspora where their culture, identity and language are not under threat of extinction, Assyrian culture is thriving. One aspect of this is community football clubs, which have provided a basis for immigrant communities in foreign countries. Some of these immigrant clubs have become the biggest teams in their respect countries. Palmeiras in Brazil, which was formed by Italian immigrants; PAOK, which was formed by Greek immigrants leaving Turkey for Thessaloniki; and Sydney Olympic FC, created by Greek immigrants to Sydney.

Justin Civitillo, PhD in Geography, Environment and Population, explains that immigrants found their involvement with a football club assisted in their integration into a new country as well as a mechanism in building new relationships and social networks. It also provides a safe space where immigrants can intermingle with those in their community. This has been no different in the vast Assyrian diaspora.



The following are some of Assyrian football clubs found all over the world:

- Fairfield Bulls in the western suburbs of Sydney
- Moreland United FC in Melbourne
- Assyrian Star Football Club in Auckland
- FC Assyria in West London.
- Assyrian FC in Chicago
- Assyriska FF and Syrianska FC in Sweden

Fairfield Bulls was formed in 1971 and fell under the umbrella of the Assyrian Australian Association and later with the Nineveh Club.

Although mostly an amateur club for most of its history, in 2001 it was promoted to the semi-professional NSW's Premier League. As it fell under the umbrella of the Assyrian Australian Association, it provided an avenue for Assyrian football lovers to congregate, intermingle or play. Hosting teams in the local amateur district competition, it also has the semi-professional team that provides an avenue for potential Assyrian-Australians football stars to progress in their careers. This is not an uncommon story across the Assyrian diaspora.

Assyriska FF and Syrianska FC are another example of this. They were established in 1974 and 1977 respectively in Sodertälje, Sweden, the center-piece of the Assyrian communities in Europe. The Assyriska cultural association were the first to form a football club with the Syriac's following suit a couple years later.

Assyriska FF, which is by far the more popular and successful team in Sweden between the two, has especially been the main community point for Assyrians in Sweden. It is not uncommon to hear of Assyrians from Australia, the United States, Canada and elsewhere in Europe making an almost pilgrimage like visit to see the club dubbed as 'the unofficial Assyrian National team.' Assyriska has become so important to Assyrian identity that in 2004, a second match play off against Örgryte IS in Gothenburg was broadcasted across 84 countries which had an Assyrian diaspora.

Both clubs have reached the pinnacle of Swedish football, the Allsvenskan. This brought great awareness to the plight of the stateless Assyrians around the world, so much so that Dr Mehmet Celik announced on Turkish television "They are called Assyriska. They will spread that name all over the world!"

The first game for the club in the Allsvenskan was politically driven, with players wearing a black armband in commemoration on the 90th anniversary of the Turkish genocide of Assyrians in World War One, when 750,000 Assyrians were killed.

This is a demonstration of Assyrian self-identity being expressed in a football context, allowing Assyrians to display their history, plight and political astuteness. Reverend Ashur D. Elkhoury of St. Paul the Apostle church in California stated in an interview with assyriska.se that: "no other organized movement with political ambitions has reached such high level of innovative recognition for our Assyrian people internationally as this club has. Assyriska fights for our awareness worldwide as the indigenous people of Mesopotamia and battles for the knowledge of our people's recognition by the international community on their Football Arenas."

Although Assyriska and Syrianska are hailed as brilliant examples of Assyrian culture and identity in Sweden, they have also been praised for their effectiveness in helping their communities integrate into the broader Swedish society. Kennedy Bakircioglu is an example of this integration. He began his career at Assyriska, before a move to Hammarby. He then expanded his career to Greece, the Netherlands and Spain. Sharbel Touma is another example. He began his career with Syrianska, moving to Djurgården, AIK, and Halmstad in Sweden before making the jump to the Netherlands, Germany and Greece.

These football clubs in Sweden have not only provided an avenue for cultural expression and assimilation, but they have also provided a pathway for young Assyrian-Swedes to begin a football career before moving onto the traditionally bigger Swedish clubs or abroad.

Afram Yakoub, Chairman of the Assyrian Federation of Sweden, speaking with me said: "I believe the football clubs help maintain Assyrian identity and make it a natural part of Swedish society. They are a source of pride for the community."

Opposite to these powerhouses of Assyrian football in Sweden is the Australian Assyrian Cup. It has been running since 1980 and is one of Australia's longest running football cup competitions. It attracts amateur and semi-professional clubs mostly from Sydney and Melbourne but has brought in the past teams from New Zealand and other cities in Australia.

It serves as a social gathering for the Assyrian community, where they can get together in a communal manner. These interactions during the tournament are the very element of keeping Assyrian identity, culture and language flourishing in Australia.

A spokesperson for Moreland United FC, an amateur Assyrian football club from Melbourne established in 1989, emphasised the importance of the Assyrian Cup: "The Melbourne Assyria Cup is a chance for the Assyrian community not just in Melbourne, but around Australia (in particular Sydney) and on occasion New Zealand to come together and play football. Beyond that, it is an opportunity for Assyrians and even non-Assyrians to mingle and get to know each other better, in the hopes of building a stronger understanding amongst each other and increase relations and friendship."

As with the examples seen in Sweden and Australia, these football clubs play a pivotal role in the community. This is replicated across the world where Assyrian communities live, in New Zealand, Denmark, England, Canada and the United States.

So although the Assyrian people and their history are threatened to the point of extinction in Iraq, in the diaspora there is security. This cannot be seen better than through the football clubs established by Assyrian immigrants, which has helped forge the career of professional Assyrian footballers, served as a meeting point to the community where they can demonstrate their culture, language and identity, and also serve as a conduit to Assyrian political and religious expressions.

Funeral Held for 13 Assyrians, Zalin (Qamishly) Killed in Restaurant Bombings in Syria



Qamishli, Syria (AINA) -- A funeral service was held today in Qamishli for the 13 Assyrians who were killed yesterday in the bombing of three restaurants

The attacks were carried out by ISIS, who have claimed responsibility. At least one of the attacks was by a suicide bomber. All of the restaurants are owned by Assyrians and are located in the Assyrian quarter of the city.

The Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch issued the following statement:

Damascus, December 31, 2015

Once again, terrorism strikes in Syria and this time in our beloved Qamishly. Dozens of martyrs and many others were injured on December 31, 2015, in three suicide bombs in the city. The old people weep, the young are losing hope and the children's joy is wiped away. This injustice is inflicted on the people of Qamishly, of all confessions and religions, only because they are good citizens, known for their love and loyalty to their country and land. The enemy of humanity is spreading its power everywhere in our beloved Middle East, seeking to destroy

the homes of the children of God and to lead them astray. What god do these suicide bombers worship? What religion do they follow? They use blood, slaughter, and killing as a way to please their god. Where are the people of good conscience to act against these attacks? Is it not time to wake up from their deep sleep and to do all that is possible to protect the remaining people in this region, whose sole concern is to live in peace in their homeland? Is it not the fit time to unite and collectively fight all forms of terrorism and extremism?

To our Syriac faithful in Qamishly, we say: You have paid a high price for keeping your faith and remaining in your homeland. You have offered and continue to offer lessons of citizenship and of the love of your country. This is not strange to you, grandchildren of the martyrs of the Syriac Genocide Sayfo that took place 100 years ago. You refused humiliation and submission and you did not accept a substitute for your land. We believe that these terrorist attacks will not separate you from your land; these explosions, however violent and bloody they may be, will not uproot you from your country.

We condemn these criminal acts and demand immediate intervention to protect the people of this region from terrorism and suicide bombings.

We also demand for an investigation to know who is behind these crimes, that they may receive the punishment they deserve.

We pray for the repose of the souls of the martyrs. May their names be written in heaven. We ask the Lord to comfort the hearts of their families, relatives and all those saddened by their departure and pray for the healing and speedy recovery of the wounded.

May God have mercy of the martyrs of Qamishly and Syria.

The following are the names of 13 of the Assyrians who were killed:

1. Ramy Tarzi Bashi
2. Aboud Hagiki
3. Robert Krio
4. Eli Kaspo
5. Issa Hanna
6. Anton Joseph
7. Eliamo Malke
8. Nedal Abdo
9. Marwan Shamoun
10. Danny Hanna
11. Shabo Malke
12. Jack Tuma
13. Robert Hegame



The following photos of 10 of the Assyrians who were killed:



Aras Ahmad (L, Kurd)



Jack Tuma



Issa Hanna (L)



Ramy Tarzi Bashi



Danny Hanna (L)



Aboud Hagiki



Eliamo Malke (L)



Jack Tuma



Shabo Malke (L)



Robert Krio



Nedal Abdo (L)



Salah Karmo (L)

Educator who taught in Evanston,

Oak Park dies at age 94
Florence Sargis Ganja

Bob Goldsborough
April 26, 2016

Florence Sargis Ganja taught elementary school in Oak Park and Evanston for more than 40 years, spending more than two decades in the team-teaching environment at what is now Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Literary and Fine Arts School in Evanston.

Ganja attended the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools and she embraced the lab school movement, employing innovative teaching methods in her classroom.

"She cherished children," said Barbara Holloway, a retired teacher at King. "Kids who loved to learn loved her. They would sit around her chair and just listen to what she had to say to them because they so loved what she had to say."



Ganja, 94, died of natural causes March 2 at her home at the Arden Courts Memory Care community in Glen Ellyn, said her nephew, Mark Sargis. A longtime Skokie resident before moving to Arden Courts, Ganja had been suffering from dementia, Sargis said.

Born Florence Sargis in Chicago, Ganja was the daughter of Christian Assyrian parents who had fled religious persecution and genocide in what is now northwest Iran. Growing up in Lakeview, Ganja attended LeMoyné Elementary School and then earned a full scholarship to U. of C.'s Laboratory Schools for high school.

Ganja attended U. of C. on a full scholarship. After graduating, she took a job teaching in Oak Park Elementary School District 97. She then began teaching in Evanston/Skokie School District 65, first at Dawes Elementary School. While at Dawes, Ganja earned a master's degree in education from Northwestern University in 1965.

Shortly after the King Literary and Fine Arts School opened in 1967, Ganja transferred to that school and began teaching fifth- and sixth-grade students. She later was on a team of teachers instructing third-, fourth- and fifth-graders.

In the latter part of her career, Ganja taught on a team instructing kindergartners and first- and second-graders.

"She always was a woman who taught you about respect, and kids usually responded to that," Holloway said. "She taught kids how to respect other people. They didn't necessarily have to agree with them, but they had to respect them."

Bette Mitchell, a retired King fifth- and sixth-grade teacher, called Ganja a "wonderful teacher, particularly with gifted children," and recalled how Ganja had a large rocking chair in her classroom.

"It was like something out of a Jane Austen book. She looked lovely there in her chair, imparting wisdom," Mitchell said. "She was a wonderful teammate who was smart and funny with good ideas. She was a wonderful woman to work with."

Ganja enjoyed sharing some of her teaching methods with others, presenting a curriculum on China in the post-Vietnam era at a 1973 conference on Asian affairs that was held at Michigan State University, Sargis said. She also presented a team-teaching workshop for teachers at a Glenview school in 1973 and served on the board of the Illinois Council for the Gifted in 1976.

Ganja retired from King in 1988. Outside of work, Ganja loved to travel and enjoyed trips to Scotland, Sweden, China, India, Tahiti, the Galapagos, the Shaker country of Kentucky and southern Indiana, and Sea Island off the coast of Georgia.

Ganja was an avid enthusiast of Assyrian-American history, working with the Assyrian Universal Alliance Foundation to develop a college scholarship program for Assyrian-Americans. Also a life member of the Art Institute of Chicago since 1951, Ganja loved attending galleries, lectures and concerts and was in three monthly book groups in her 80s.

Ganja's husband of 56 years, Arthur, died in 2004. She is survived by a brother, Robert; and several nieces and nephews.

Lily Bit-shamoon Weber

Lily was born on September 15, 1920 in Urmia, Iran to the late Rabi Benjamin Bitshamoon (from the Village of Digala) and Hanna Pera (from the village of Mar Nokha).



Lily was an achiever from the beginning. While at High school, she joined the Volleyball team and became the captain of her team. She took tailoring classes and became master seamstress. After graduating high school, she became a teacher at shah-dokht school in Urmi.

Later, the family moved to Tehran and she became Vice Principal at Shah-naz school. She joined girl scouts and became leader of her troop. In one of her troop's trip she met her future husband, a German named Ottmar Joe Webber. He was manager of American Officer's Club in Tehran. They married in 1962. They moved to Germany for a few years, but the love for her family and friends brought them back to Iran. Their marriage lasted until Joe's death, in Germany, in 1976. She then moved to Modesto, CA, later that year. She had many interests to keep herself busy. She loved to travel & was on a bowling team for many years. She was also a very accomplished cook.

She spoke several languages, including Assyrian, Turkish, Farsi, English, German, and sign language. While married to Joe, they were invited to a masquerade ball at the American Officers Club and her costume as Queen Shamiram won the best costume of the ball. One of the thrills of her life, was when she met the Queen of Iran, Farah Pahlavi, her son, the Crown Prince, and the Shah's brother. She was very close to God and read her Bible every morning. She was an achiever! Strong, energetic, and full of life. She was in love with her family and friends and was

in contact with all of them constantly. She passed away, peacefully, on August 23rd in Modesto, CA. She was 95.

Lily is preceded in passing by her parents, her husband Joe Webber, her brother Milis Bit-Shamoon and her brother in law John Yohannan.

She is survived by her brother Calo and his wife Lily and their children Sharokina and her husband Peter and their children and Atour, her sister Nellie Yohannan and her son Jason and his wife Denise and their children, Her sister Helen and her husband Brian and their children Antony and Andrew and his wife Christi and their children, Her cousins Joann, Paula, Feodor, Johnny, and Donald, Friends and family.

God rest her soul.

On foreign ground

My name is Milena Davudyan (Yukhanaeva) and although I have an Armenian name I consider myself a hundred percent Assyrian.

. I don't know how much you know about us Assyrians, who lives in Armenia. Today's Assyrian population in Armenia are mostly descendants of settlers, who came starting in the early nineteenth century, during the Russo-Persian War in 1826-28, when thousands of refugees fled their homeland in the areas around Urmia and Russia. The second wave of the Assyrians came to Armenia during Assyrian Genocide in 1914 from Urmia-Iran. We were around six thousand Assyrian living in Armenia before the desolation Soviet Union, many of them left to Russia and Georgia because of the economic difficulties. According to the 2012 census, there are about 3000 Assyrians living in Armenia.

Here Assyrians founded three villages: Arzni, Koylasar (Dimitrov) and Verin Dvin. They are big Assyrian communities in the region of Verin Dvin of the Ararat Marz, and Arzni of the Kotayk Marz. In 2003 the community established the "Assyrian Center-BetNahrain", a club that promotes the studying our language, culture, history and of course traditions to the general public. I am living in Verin Dvin. The traditional of the Assyrians of Dvin is agriculture. In general, the Assyrians are very hardworking, every family has a land, but people don't see the result of their work, they hardly earn their bread, but despite of this every second family has a child who learn at the university or college. Here is also public school, which have about 300 students. In 1995 the school opened a children's and youth ensemble -"ARBELLA" who performs the songs and dances of three nations. Ensemble has diplomas and certificates as well as it taking part in all the festivals of national minorities living in Armenia.



The Assyrians have managed to both Integrate with Armenian society. Today Assyrian mostly belong to Assyrian Church of the East, but there is a small community belonging to the Catholic Church as well. However the Assyrian Catholic Church are in full communion and have brotherly relations. And at the end I want to thank the Assyrian Foundation of America, that gave me this opportunity to tell you about us Assyrians in Armenia.

MILENA DAVUDYAN
Assyrian in Armenia

Minority killings by IS 'should be recognized as Genocide'

The killing of minorities by so-called Islamic State should be recognized as genocide, more than 60 parliamentarians have said in a letter to the PM.

They urge David Cameron to use his influence to reach an agreement with the UN that the term genocide be used. This would send the message that those responsible would be caught, tried and punished, the letter adds. IS has been systematically killing minority groups including Iraqi and Syrian Christians and Yazidis, it said. The UN has cited the Yazidis' treatment by IS as evidence that **IS may have committed genocide** and war crimes in Iraq. The jihadist group has also been trying to eradicate minority groups from large parts of the country, **human rights organizations have warned.**

'Not semantics'

The letter, written by MP Rob Flello and Lord Alton, said there was clear evidence of IS assassinations of church leaders, mass murders, torture, kidnapping for ransom in the Christian communities of Iraq and Syria and "the sexual enslavement and systematic rape of Christian girls and women" It also said the group was carrying out "forcible conversions to Islam", the destruction of churches, monasteries, cemeteries, and Christian artifacts, and theft of lands and wealth from Christian clergy.

The letter said: "This is not simply a matter of semantics.

UN definition of genocide:

Article II of the 1948 U.N. Genocide Convention says: "Genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such Killing members of the group; Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."



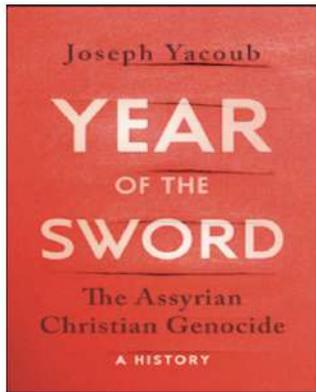
Earlier this year, a report by the human rights organization Minority Rights Group detailed summary executions, forced conversions, rape and other abuses suffered by minorities in Iraq.

"There would be two main benefits from the acceptance by the UN that genocide is being perpetrated.

"First, it would send a very clear message to those organising and undertaking this slaughter that at some point in the future they will be held accountable by the international community for their actions; they will be caught, tried and punished.

"Second, it would encourage the 127 nations that are signatories to the Convention to face up to their duty to take the necessary action to 'prevent and punish' the perpetrators of these evil acts."

IS first emerged in Syria, fighting President Bashar al-Assad during the ongoing civil war there. In June 2014, the group formally declared the establishment of a "caliphate" - a state governed in accordance with Islamic law, or Sharia, by God's deputy on Earth, or caliph. IS members are jihadists who adhere to an extreme interpretation of Sunni Islam and consider themselves the only true believers. They hold that the rest of the world is made up of unbelievers who seek to destroy Islam, justifying attacks against other Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Beheadings, crucifixions and mass shootings have been used to terrorize their enemies. IS members have justified such atrocities by citing the Koran and Hadith, but Muslims have denounced them.



Year of the Sword

The Assyrian Christian Genocide, A History

Joseph Yacoub

Hardback / November 2016 / 288pp / £25.00

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'This important and revelatory book tells of the biblical race which has suffered genocide twice within a century: over half were destroyed by the Ottoman atrocities of 1915, and now their descendants in Mosul and elsewhere are being put to the sword by ISIS. The Assyrians today deserve more than our pity – they need our protection.' — Geoffrey Robertson QC, human rights barrister, Doughty Street Chambers, and author of *An Inconvenient Genocide*

ܐܘܪܝܝܢܐ ܒܝܒܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܚܐ

ASSYRIAN BABY NAMES

ABGAR	BARYAMO	ILONA	NESHRO	RABI	SHLOMO
ADAD	BASIM	ILSINA	NIMRUD	RABIL	SHUSHAN
ADAY	BASIMA	INANNA	NINEVEH	RAMA	SIMELE
AFREM	BERULA	ISHTAR	NINIB	RAMIL	SINHARIB
AHIKAR	BILADER	IZLA	NINORTA	RAMSEEN	SIMA
AKKAD	BRITA	KASHIR	NINYAS	RAMTHA	SINA
AKKADIA	DAYSAN	KENORA	NINOS	RENYO	SINO
AMIRTA	DELMON	KIMA	NISHA	ROMO	SOMAR
ANKIDO	DOSHNA	LARSA	NISHO	ROMRAMA	TALITA
ARBELA	DARA	LEBO	NISON	SABRO	TEGLAT
ARBELINA	DEQLATH	LEBARYO	NSIBIN	SAHRIN	TIAMAT
ARYO	DIALA	LELYA	NINSON	SARGON	TIBELIA
ASHUR	EMRA	MARGANITA	NOHADRA	SBARTHA	WARDA
ASSYRIA	ENLIL	MARIAM	NURBA	SEMIRAMIS	YABIL
ATHOUR	FAYO	MARTHA	ORAKA	SHAFIR	YADID
ATHRA	FAYA	MEDRA	ORKINA	SHAFIRA	YAMO
AYLA	FEEREL	NAHRIN	ORLOMA	SHAMASH	YAUNO
BABEL	FROTH	NARAMSIN	OROM	SHAMIRAM	ZALGA
BAHRA	GABRIEL	NARSAY	ORSHINA	SHARBEL	ZALIN
BARDAYSAN	GILGAMISH	NEMRO	QENNESHIRIN	SHAROKIN	ZMIRTA
BAHRO	HAMMURABI				
BANIBAL	HEDRA				
BARBARA	HEDRO				
BARSIN					

Shlomo habre rhime,

with great pleasure I am informing you about the publishing of my new book. Now, after eight years of research work and digitization of numerous works, the result is achieved. With my second book about our modern music I would like to document this heritage for future generations.

You can order the book now by choosing one of the packages I offer:

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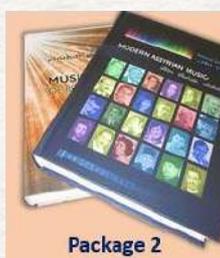
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DCCIEknziik>

For further information join my Group on Facebook (Modern Assyrian Music) or visit my website (www.musicpearls.net)

Package	Description	Price (incl.Shipment) outside Europe	Price (incl. Shipment) Europe
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Package 2	Book „Modern Assyrian Music – Musiqi Suryoyto Hdhato“(incl. CD) Book “Music Pearls of Bethnahrin”	90 USD	55,- Euro
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Package 4	Book „Modern Assyrian Music – Musiqi Suryoyto Hdhato“(incl. CD) Book “Music Pearls of Bethnahrin” Book slipcase	100 USD	65,- Euro



Package 1



Package 2



Package 3



Package 4



This book covers the history of modern Assyrian music (also as Syriacs or Chaldeans). The basis of this work is my first book (Music Pearls of Bethnahrin) from 2007. After publication of the first volume the need for an update was recognized, because many aspects of modern history were not sufficiently known and also the lack of many east-Assyrian music albums in the album part. Some well-known and deserving persons are introduced by their biography.

The research on the modern Assyrian history in general and the music history in particular is always a challenge.

Due to the ongoing persecution and oppression in their home countries, a sustainable cultural scent couldn't be developed. The last 100 years have been characterized by genocide (Seyfo), displacement and emigration. And in the diaspora there are no institutions guaranteeing the cultural coherence (here: archiving). Therefore, the research for this book was conducted in many countries and in several languages.

I hope to have contributed my part with this work for the preservation of this culture and heritage.

Tawdi Sagi for your support
Abboud Zeitoune

The Monument Project 2016 for the Erection a Bronze Bust to the Monument of the Late Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV

Catholicos Patrierch of the Assyrian Church of the East



Pictured here is a Project Advisory Committee (from left to right): Vasili Shoumanov, Hormizd Hasse, Dankha Zamaya, Sam Oshana, His Grace Mar Paulus Benjamin, Rev. Archdeacon William Toma, Edward Hasso, Rev. Antwan Lachin, Raymond Oshana.



The Bronze bust project was proposed & sponsored by Sam Oshana, & sculpted by artist Dankha Zomaya, Chicago, IL

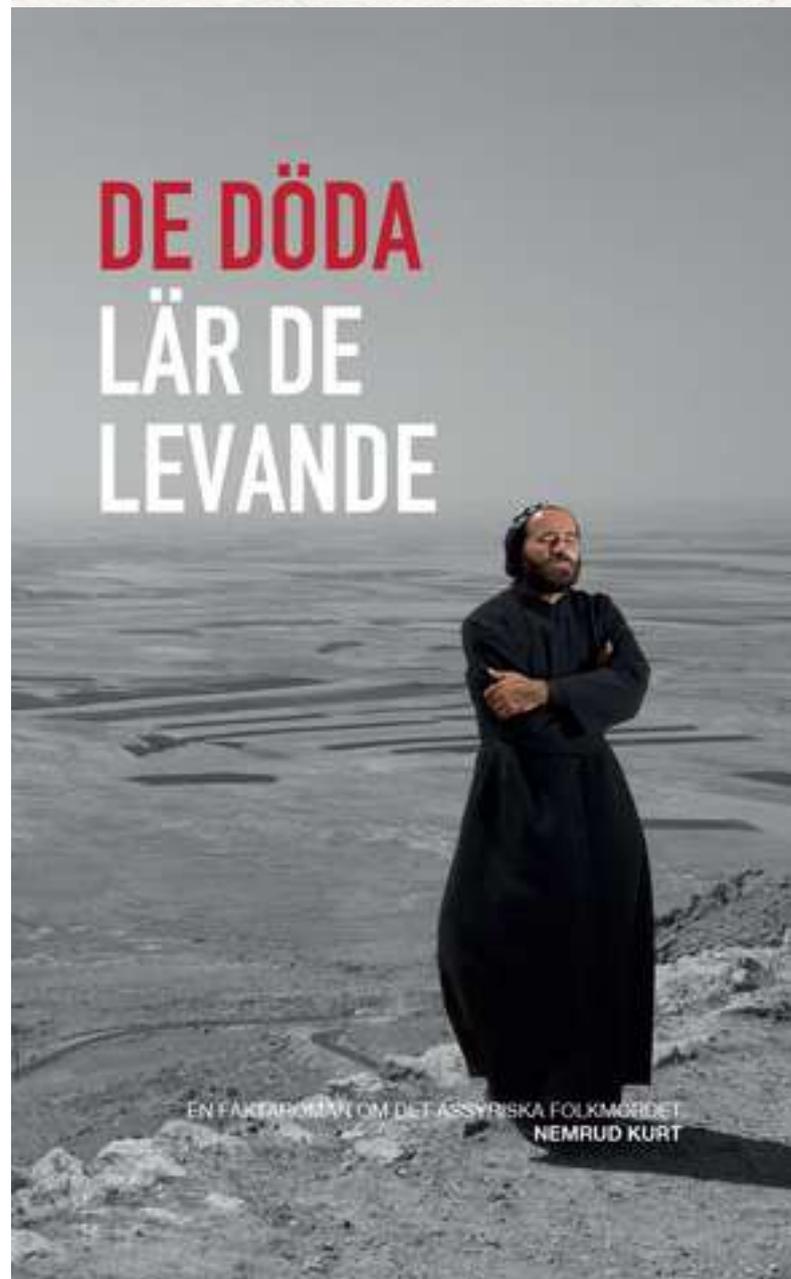


Book about genocide honors victims

Centenary of the genocide in the then Ottoman Empire still lives on in the people in Södertälje, Sweden. Just recently released book "The dead teach the living" on the right genocides. Assyrians and Syriacs call genocide of Seyfo.

Nemrud Kurt Haninke has just released a factual novel on the Sodertälje-based publisher Tigris Press. The publishing houses of the Assyrian National Association premises.

Two parallel stories - Every chapter is from the present, where a young Swedish Assyrian go down to what once was Assyria. Every two chapters from the past, where we follow a young Assyrians whose sister is kidnapped, says Kurt Nemrud Haninke. The book was written to honor the victims, but to get a shot of reality of today, I took a flight to southeast Turkey, and began a search of my roots.



Tales That My Mother Told Me

By Solomon (Sawa) Solomon

While in Sayen Qala, my mother saw Agha Patrus standing on a small hill in front of a red flag, wearing two revolvers, and watching the columns of Assyrians marching south to Hamadan. While my mother and her family were living in Armenia as refugees during the Great War, she said that Tzarist authorities gave them supplies and six ruples per person per month.

While living in Dohuk during the Simele Massacres, mother observed levy trucks arriving from Ser-Amadia on their way to Mosul; the locals were very nervous at the sight of the levies. In 1918, while moving through Kona-Shahar, somebody pointed to the place where Patriarch Mar Binyamin was killed.

While living in Aqra, Iraq, in 1921, Mother observed hundreds of Barzan tribesmen coming to town to visit the British governor, while Assyrian levies had taken positions on the surrounding hills. While staying in Qulasar, Armenia, during the Great War,

Mother recalls that future Rab-Tremma Suske of Habbania was their neighbor; at the time he was an officer in the Russian Tzarist Army. That Jawdet Beg, while a child, had become ill one summer, and was nursed to health in the house of her grandfather, Malik Youkhanna of Timar. In 1915, the same Jawdet Beg, now governor of Van, orchestrated the great holocaust that left a million Armenians and Assyrians dead; he was the son of Tahir Pasha.

In March, 1918, while the Timar Assyrians were crossing into Salamas from Sara, they were ambushed by the Brigand Simco. Mother said that bullets were coming down on them like rain.

While leaving the Zooma in August, 1914, my mother said that her grandmother Khanna took one last look and said that they will not see the Zooma again; she was right. Two years later she was to be buried in Armenia. My mother, Susember, the granddaughter of Malik Youkhanna of Timar, died in 1985 at the age of eighty and was buried in Indiana. May she rest in peace.



Susember Solomon 1905-1985
(mother of Solomon S. Solomon).

The Exodus

From an Assyrian Village in Syria

By Malte Henk and Henning Susebach

www.zeit.de

Tel Goran before the war: A father with his children in the Kefarkis family garden. At the end, which could also be a beginning, everything goes very fast. As the Tunisair plane gains altitude and the fasten-safety-belts sign goes out over the Mediterranean, TU Flight 744 pivots to a northerly heading. When breakfast comes, an island passes by below. And as the flight attendant's trolley swallows up empty trays and Ismail Ismail, whose first and last names are the same, looks out the window, he sees land between wisps of clouds and wonders whether that is already Europe.

Ismail is sitting in Seat 12 F. His brother George sits next to him, his brother Joseph in the aisle seat. The three mustachioed men are all around 50 years old, wearing shirts of muted colors and plain polyester pants, as if they'd agreed to dress as inconspicuously as possible. In the row in front of them, three tourists from Stuttgart wearing T-shirts and beach tans are playing cards. Behind them, a woman in business attire is saying to her seatmate: "I fly this route countless times a year."

Ismail and his brothers don't say anything. They don't read. They don't sleep. They silently stare ahead.

In the midst of the routine of a scheduled flight, no one can tell that they are fleeing, just like all the Syrians and Afghans on boats at sea 36,000 feet below. Should one say the three have been lucky? A breakfast in economy class, a cup of coffee and the Mediterranean already behind them? But how much good luck does it take to make up for the bad luck of belonging to the wrong people, of practicing the wrong religion, of living in the wrong country at the wrong time? Ismail Ismail's village: overrun. His house: plundered. He himself: escaped from captivity by the "Islamic State." And now he is safe among people who fly over borders instead of merely crossing



them. Among people to whom traveling is a mundane thing rather than a matter of fate. Among people who might also flee once in a while, but only from bad weather. Among people like us, in other words, the readers and reporters of DIE ZEIT.

The fate of Ismail and his brothers, his wife, his children, his friends, his neighbors -- it would have almost remained untold. On February 23, 2015, this newsflash slid through the world's awareness only very briefly in the swift stream of war reports, refugee photos and border debates: IS fighters in Syria had attacked ancient Christian communities, 35 villages along the banks of a river named Khabur, which flows into the Euphrates. The Islamists took 253 people hostage, including Ismail and his brothers.



Ismail Ismail was flown to Germany -- without his wife (photo: Sven Paustian).

It was still night when, months after their release, the three men boarded the airplane in Beirut.

During a stopover in Tunis, we showed them a photo printed from the Internet, a satellite image from Google Maps. A puzzle out of earthy colors. Fields, paths, a winding river. At the end of a narrow road, the outlines of a village. With a bit of imagination, one could make out in this silhouette a leaf, like one that has fallen from a tree.

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Joseph and George rotated the photo in their hands, puzzled. They'd never seen the setting of their previous life through the eyes of a satellite.

But Ismail figured it out immediately: This was Tel Goran, his village. With his index finger, he tapped on a house in the top left of the printout. He brought the image up to his lips and kissed it. His eyes filled with tears.

In a thousand small, inconspicuous scenes like the one on board TU Flight 744, an exodus of Christians is taking place -- not the first, but perhaps the final one. Among the religious groups in flight are ones almost as old as Christianity itself. Copts are abandoning the Middle East. Chaldeans, Maronites. Ismail, Joseph and George are Assyrians. Three members of another Christian people that -- as if caught up in a whirlwind of world affairs -- is being strewn across the globe. Three brothers blown away from their old home, the area between two rivers known as Mesopotamia, where there are more layers of history than anywhere else, where there are more peoples than states, where everything is a matter of dispute, including power, land, oil and proximity to God.



TU Flight 744 lands at Frankfurt Airport. Buzzing, pinging, ringing, cellphones awoken from their comas.

It remains silent in seats 12 D to 12 F. Shortly thereafter, Ismail and his brothers are pulled forward through a long

Aerial view of Tel Goran, an Assyrian village in Syria, showing the homes of the persons profiled in this article.

It remains silent in seats 12 D to 12 F. Shortly thereafter, Ismail and his brothers are pulled forward through a long corridor by the torrent of other travelers.

The stream of people halts once. George and Joseph hesitate before stepping onto an escalator for the first time in their lives. The vacationers surrounding them might think: What kind of hicks are these guys?

No one suspects that these men come from the center of global affairs. Their hometown lies on the fronts of the Syrian war, where Kurds armed with German weapons are battling IS, where American, French and soon also German fighter jets are making their rounds, where Sunnis are shooting at Shiites and Syrian rebels are shooting at soldiers of the Syrian regime. Entire stretches of land have been depopulated. Chinese researchers have calculated that the night sky over Syria is 83 percent darker today than it once was. In the Christian village of Tel Goran, not a single light is burning anymore.

What happens when an entire village just picks up and leaves?

In the summer, we had started writing to Assyrian associations around the world, compiling lists of the identities of the hostages and looking for scattered individuals like Ismail. From satellite views online, we zoomed closer and closer in on the Khabur River -- and then Tel Goran was there. The aerial image of this village was the beginning. We learned that 160 people reportedly lived there in better days. Today, the village is empty. The two churches, the school, the houses, the barns. Hulls of an earlier life, like empty seashells on a beach.

Where are the 160 now? What happens when an entire village, representing a people and a religion, just picks up and leaves? Is a new Tel Goran coming into

Ismail's name was the first one we wrote on our photo next to a tiny rooftop. This is how the search began. It would lead us to four continents. House for house, name for name. According to everything we know, none of the village's inhabitants has died. But every single one of them has lost their life. Germany: The Potato Peeler

While TU Flight 744 is being awaited in Frankfurt, a man is on his way to work 200 kilometers away in the southwestern German state of Saarland. He doesn't have far to go, just three minutes through the pedestrian zone of Saarlouis. There, where Sonnenstrasse intersects with Bierstrasse, he heads for an old townhouse. Gray stone and paned-glass windows, like in an old movie.

In gold letters next to the door, there is the word "KARTOFFELHAUS" ("potato house"). The man enters the restaurant more casually than a guest ever would, opens a door marked "private" and descends into a bare cellar. Standing there is something like a metal barrel with tubes attached. It's a peeling machine. This is Basem Adam's first task six days a week: He peels potatoes for Germans.

Basem dumps them in by the bucketful and adds water. Then the machine rumbles and roars away as if it were about to take off.

Later in the day, the restaurant's patrons will flip through the menu, with three pages of "Potatoes and More": potato fritters, potato pizza, grilled potatoes, roasted potatoes, potato lasagna. Young people speaking in the soft Saarland dialect will write down orders and balance huge plates through the restaurant.

Basem Adam, 32 years old, grew up in Tel Goran and doesn't speak the local dialect. He can't even speak proper German. His vocabulary could come from a dictionary for kitchen assistants: salad dressing, schnitzel plate, side dish, sink.

Basem left Tel Goran in peaceful times. Young people were drawn to big cities in Syria, too. Basem, the son of the seamstress from Tel Goran, went to Damascus to work as a fashion designer in the capital city. On his computer, he designed T-shirts, dresses and women's tops revealing a lot of midriff. For a while, he hoped to be able to live one day like the digital bohemians in Berlin, London and New York. But things turned out differently. The war arrived. Six of his friends died in bomb attacks.

Basem Adam is a round-faced man who laughs a lot when he tells his story -- out of politeness, helplessness and shyness.

But usually out of fatalism. After fleeing Syria over land and sea, he got stranded in Saarlouis because there were already some other Assyrians here. He started a language course but stopped going because of his work schedule. A young man who had been a fashion designer had adapted his life to the shift rhythm of a restaurant.

When asked how he feels about that, Basem shrugs his shoulders. That's just how it is, he adds. On our satellite image, Basem had marked a house diagonally across from Ismail Ismail's property on a narrow road right on the river. Basem, the child, and Ismail, the adult, saw each other every day. When those who have fled Tel Goran think back on the years when the village wasn't empty yet, instead of picturing a sand-colored satellite image, they see a small cosmos full of life, where their house doors were never locked, where teenagers tried their hands on their fathers' tractors, where Basem learned to swim in the shallow tributaries of the river, where they fished for carp and grilled them in the evening with his mother, Suheila, an early widow.

Some fathers commuted to the cities, as tile layers, bus drivers, engineers. On weekends, everyone worked in their fields. Each family raised chickens, goats and sometimes a cow; they farmed the land on which they grew wheat, cotton, tomatoes and grapevines. Today, frozen in smartphone photos, an idyllic village can be seen: houses made of light stone, gardens defiantly defended against the heat, shaded by cedars and cypresses. A modest life in a close-knit community that usually played out in the open air.

There was Ismail, at whose house everyone would sit together in the evening in a vine-covered gazebo. There was Samer, who always wanted to be a superstar in the soccer matches.

There was Isha's Shop, "Jesus' Store," where one could buy rice, detergent and sweets. There was the festival area in front of the church, where they celebrated weddings and baptisms and sometimes danced through the night. And there, on the southern edge of the village, were four brothers, Muslims, who worked as day laborers in the fields of the Christians.

The Adams and the Ismails in this tiny village: Their ancestors once established a global empire, and later they were converted to Christianity by Saint Thomas, one of the Twelve Apostles. Martyrs and missionaries bore their faith along the Silk Road all the way to Beijing. Whoever attends the religious services of the Assyrian Church of the East today travels 2,000 years back in time. Holy Masses are held in Old Aramaic, which is very close to the language Jesus spoke. They call God "Alaha," a word older than Islam.



Basem Adam operates a potato-peeling machine in a potato restaurant in Saarland (photo: Sven Paustian).

In the spring, the residents of Tel Goran used to celebrate eda gora, "the big festival," or what we call Easter. In the winter, they celebrated eda sora, "the small festival," or Christmas. At these times, one could buy Christmas trees in the nearest town.

Back at the turn of the millennium, the men in the village had started building a new church next to their old one, with three cupolas and three crosses visible from afar. The community was too small to have its own priest, so they had to wait for Father Moshe, or Moses, who went downriver from village to village on Christmas and arrived in Tel Goran shortly before midnight. After the Mass, Father Moshe led them in a boat across the river to its northern bank, where he lived.

Back then, major political affairs seemed like they were happening on another planet. The only hint of external realities were two portraits hanging in the celebration hall of the new church: one of the old Assad, and one of the young one.

"Everyone was equal in the village. That's over."

When the civil war began in 2011, Tel Goran initially lay far from the major fighting. But idylls are deceptive in wartime. Soon there were police officers running through the streets carrying draft notices in their hands. Assad's army took Toni, Ismail's oldest son, and sent him into the battle around Damascus. Toni's friend Bassil stood guard at a checkpoint on the highway between Homs and Hama, in constant fear of cars full of explosives. Zaia, the mayor's son, had to join the house-to-house fighting in Aleppo.

Basem has already been in Saarlouis for two years when, in February 2015, the Assyrians there start formulating appeals and drafting petitions. Basem hears that acquaintances are telling others about the storming of Tel Goran and that they are asking German politicians for help. They do this until the government of Saarland announces that it will grant sanctuary to some of the village's residents -- but only to those who stayed the longest, stood up to the Islamic State, were taken hostage and got away. Among them are Ismail and his brothers.

In Saarland, politicians speak about a "humanitarian gesture." It is a gesture that makes distinctions. The fact that Ismail suffered more undergoes a miraculous transformation and turns into a privilege: a flight in a plane instead of a long march on foot, a pledge of acceptance instead of an asylum process. For the time being, the former hostages had to leave their wives and children behind, whether in Syria, Beirut or remote refugee camps.

When Ismail and his brothers land in Frankfurt, many of those who had spent weeks writing petitions are waiting for them. Basem Adam, Ismail's former neighbor, stays in Saarlouis. "Everyone was equal in the village," he says. "That's over."

On a gray fall day, Basem goes home during his lunch break. He is still wearing his T-shirt with "KARTOFFELHAUS" written on it when he sits in an armchair and puts his iPad on the table. With practiced fingers, he swipes the display and selects a program named Viber, which can be used to make video calls to anywhere in the world. Basem presses the telephone key. He takes a deep breath. And he knows that, at that very instant, in the Swedish city of Södertälje, on a street named Karlslundsgatan, in a high-rise building, a cellphone is vibrating.

Sweden: The Mother

As her cellphone buzzes, she frantically searches for her reading glasses, hurries over to a black faux-leather sofa and reaches for the phone.

- **Basem? My dear! How are you?**
- **Good mom. But turn your phone's camera on.**
- **Oh, yeah. How are you?**
- **You just asked that. How's Sweden?**
- **I've filled out a lot of forms. Now I'm waiting.**
- **Yeah?**
- **Yeah.**
- **Good.**
- **Yeah.**

On the 13th floor, a woman is silently looking out the window as if trying to decipher a strange painting showing children with colorful caps and ice-hockey sticks waiting at a bus stop.



There is so much to talk about, but excitement robs Suheila of words. She cradles the telephone with both hands, like a cup of tea. There's an awkward silence between mother and son. They are two pixelated faces separated by 1,300 kilometers. They take audible breaths, they seek refuge in inquiries about the weather and food, and they might also feel bothered by having strangers listen in on their conversation.

After two long minutes, the mother asks: "When will we see each other again?"

**– I don't know, mom,- the son responds.
– I'll have to see.**

Throat-clearing, blown kisses, and then two index fingers hover over the symbol of a telephone receiver, one in Sweden and one in Germany. It is Basem who breaks off the connection and sinks into the blackness of Suheila's display. Her face is reflected in the glass: 56 years old, brown eyes, blond-dyed hair, the same round face as her son.

Suheila had let smugglers bring her to Sweden eight days ago. This is what she recounts to an interpreter, who is sitting next to her on the couch, asking her questions and listening to her while hurriedly taking notes because so many names of relatives and places are pouring forth. Suheila, the mother, has lost all four of her children in recent years, one could have a long debate about whether to war or to peace. There isn't just Basem in Saarlouis. There's also a daughter in Beirut, seriously ill. Two other daughters have married Assyrians in America.

Suheila Abdelahad, Basem's mother, lives in a high-rise in Sweden (photo: Henning Susebach).

So why Sweden?

Suheila says a few sentences, softly.

– She didn't want to be a burden on her children,- the translator says.

Suheila kneads her handkerchief.

– A mother's thoughtfulness, the translator whispers.

Suheila had a routine at the sowing machine in Tel Goran, like a worker at a conveyer belt. But who can say they have a routine as a refugee? Suheila knew she wouldn't make it to America. And Basem in Germany? He told her about his tiny apartment and about how much he was working. He had saved up \$5,125 for her smuggling fees. And now Basem keeps on peeling potatoes, now for his sister in Beirut. Which mother wouldn't feel ashamed about that?

Suheila followed one of her sisters, who had come to Sweden a few weeks before her, into this apartment on Karlslundsgaten, into this temporary arrangement in which Suheila is becoming aware of her decision's consequences. Every day, she tries to reach her children, time zone after time zone. Having sons and daughters across the world isn't just a privilege of the global upper class; it's also the lot of the global under class.

If you add up all the distances between Suheila and her four children on three continents, you get 18,000 kilometers. Tel Goran is 300 meters at its widest point.

The interpreter says that Suheila finds it hard to bear that two reporters are jumping from life to life in her family, from country to country, as if it were something easy to do. She hasn't seen her daughters in Chicago for years: one daughter is divorced; and Basem peels and peels and peels. And what about her, the mother? It isn't just strange in Sweden. She has also become a stranger to herself, so dependent on a few calls from her children, as they once were on her bedtime stories. In retrospect, one can see the catastrophe coming, like a storm. At the time, when viewed from the worm's-eye perspective, from which everyone looks into the world, most Assyrians didn't see that a limited uprising would turn into a war, a war that would also make its way into their villages. As the residents remember it, it was 2013 when the first armed men came through Tel Goran, rebels with the Free Syrian Army at first, and then men who were fighting not only against Assad, but also for Allah, and who called themselves Al-Nusra. All of a sudden, roadblocks were everywhere. Bearded men asked: "Where are you headed? Are you a soldier of Assad? Do you believe in Allah?" The sons of Tel Goran fighting the war somewhere else no longer dared to come home while on leave from the front. Their fathers removed the rosaries from the rearview mirrors of their cars. Their mothers put on headscarves.

Tel Goran's idyllic location on a fertile plain had become a trap. The Islamic State deployed in the mountains to the south, discernable in the haze on the horizon. To the north, on the other side of the Khabur River, Kurdish militias were fighting for control.



Digital memories of Tel Goran saved on the cellphones of former residents. They show an unscathed world: tradition; community; a peaceful, rural existence. Samer Kefarkis, the deacon, is on the right; his parents in the middle. His father suffers from Alzheimer's.

The Assyrians did everything they could to preserve their neutrality. For a long time, they tried to appease both sides. There were talks with Kurdish commanders, hasty telephone calls, risky drives into the mountains to the IS commanders. There, they sometimes saw old acquaintances, such as a cousin of the four Muslims. And they thought: So, he's one of them, too. Above them, American jet fighters droned; beneath them, the earth shook from the impacts of the bombs. And there, in the middle, they stood, a few unarmed Christians, and announced they'd be happy to pay protection money.

Their ancestors had already used these survival strategies. Whenever they felt helpless, instead of fighting back, they would turn first the right and then the left cheek and buy their safety.

There's a word for this in Arabic, which always gets used a lot whenever times are archaic: jizya, the head tax on certain non-Muslims.

Assyrians in Chicago sit around on their smartphones, these interfaces between Web and reality

For a few months, those on the Khabur dreamt about being something like a Switzerland surrounded by chaos. But then, on a dreary day in January 2015, Kurdish fighters came into the Assyrian villages -- and fired on the IS positions from them. For the Islamic State, it must have looked like the Assyrians had decided whose side to take. Within hours, the carefully woven web of alliances collapsed. No one from IS answered the phone anymore.

At this point, 60 people were still living in Tel Goran. The other 100 had abandoned the village: the sick, who could no longer be helped because all the doctors' offices were closed; young men, who didn't want to wait until the war came to snatch them away; engineers, who'd lost their jobs without being fired.

The remaining 60 gathered in front of the church and made a decision: They would take all the women and children to the Kurds. All of the men brave enough to do so would defend the village against IS. The aged Mersa Mersa, who was said to have been born in 1920, proclaimed that he would not yield. Ismail Ismail dug out his rusty hunting rifle. Miryana, a 6-year-old, refused to leave her father, Abdo, behind. In addition to her, 20 elderly people remained in Tel Goran. Twenty stubborn people and a little girl, the village's final contingent.

One last religious service? Didn't happen. The priest had already taken off.

The United States: The Praying

Ten thousand kilometers and eight time zones away from the war, it's very easy to call for peace. Kissing your own hands and embracing the hands of your neighbor, who in turn kisses his own hand and embraces the hands of his neighbor, this is how the desire for peace migrates from person to person, like a beneficial virus. It goes through a hall full of black suits and shiny sequin dresses, because an Assyrian is supposed to look smart when encountering Aha. Outside, it snowed all night, the first storm of this winter. Now, at 9 o'clock on Sunday morning, the sky is cold and blue, and every walkway is icy. But people are backed up at the entrance, and more and more are pushing their way in, into Saint Andrew's Church, 901 North Milwaukee Avenue, Glenview, a suburb of Chicago.

Two women in a choir loft are starting to sing. The song floods the hall from behind, a dark, plaintive hymn, which the congregation picks up and strengthens. Voices of Assyrians from countless villages and umpteen countries are melding with three, four, five, six voices from Tel Goran. There, sitting in the last row of pews, is Ramya Adam, a Walmart employee, sister of Basem, the potato peeler, daughter of Suheila, the woman living in Sweden. Next to her sits her 5-year-old daughter, who has been allowed to put on lipstick to mark the occasion.

There, standing at the entrance, is Ebrahim Mersa, the former farmer who is now head of a small plumbing business in Chicago. On Saturdays, he is a host at the radio station WCGO 1590 AM, announcing weddings and going over how things are progressing on the front. Sitting in the third row are two brothers; diagonally behind them is a man who rents cars at the airport. Yet more names for our satellite image.

The Mass is being celebrated by the most supreme of all the faithful: Gewargis III, patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, who has flown in from northern Iraq. In his black vestment, surrounded by incense, he turns his back to the hall. He only attends to the altar, which is oriented toward the east. The Redeemer is supposed to return from this direction.

Gewargis III recites the Our Father: "Bshema d, Baba o Brona o Ruokha d Kudsha ..." As a European, one is lost in this Mass, with its undulating hymns and ancient incantations. But two words have made it through the millennia to today: amen and hallelujah.

A patriarch in a suburb of Chicago. A religious service in a new building next to Glenview's Best Car Wash.

A church of the East that reveals its splendor in the Midwest of the United States. Singing and praying in the pews are the survivors of a migration that has already been going on for a century. Like the Kurds and the Yazidis, the Assyrians are a people without a state. The great-grandparents of the residents of Tel Goran once lived in a mountainous province of what is now Turkey, in a region where even the valleys are 1,700 meters up. Then came World War I; then came the collapse of the old multiethnic empires. The genocide of the Armenians, much discussed these days. The genocide of the Assyrians, long forgotten. Most of the survivors fled to Iraq; some of them made it to the United States. That was the first expulsion from Paradise.

The next massacre, the second expulsion, was in Iraq in 1933. In the world's capitals, diplomats bent over maps of the world. France proposed a settlement in Timbuktu, England offered British Guiana, Brazil the bank of the Rã-o Paranãj. In the end, it was the Khabur in Syria. The Ismaïls and the Adams founded their Tel Goran and believed it would last forever.

Today, during the third expulsion, more than half of all the 3.5 million Assyrians live outside the Middle East for the first time. After every war and every crisis, a few more have vanished, boarded ships or planes, followed brothers, fathers, cousins. Their flight has taken place according to the law of gravitation: the largest mass exerts the strongest pull. That's how Chicago has come to be the global capital of the Assyrians.

The community has about 100,000 members. It has Assyrian churches, Assyrian schools, an Assyrian American Chamber of Commerce, Assyrian charitable organizations, the Assyrian National Council of Illinois, an Assyrian news agency.

Chicago is their Rome. No. Chicago was their Rome, as the law of gravitation has been suspended. Since the beginning of the civil war, the United States has only allowed 2,234 refugees from Syria into the country -- or as many as sometimes arrive in the southeastern German city of Passau in a single day. Assyrians intent on getting into the US really only have one last way to do so: They have to marry someone with an American passport. Whether this is done out of love or as a last resort often remains unspoken. Sometimes there will be hasty weddings, sometimes quick divorces. The path into the diaspora can also lead into spurious wedding beds.

After the religious service in Saint Andrew's Church, everyone sat together for a bit longer before climbing into their cars, driving to Dunkin' Donuts or McDonald's and then eventually to their homes, where they disappear into WLAN worlds via their smartphones. On Facebook, they see old friends slipping wedding rings on unfamiliar women. They come across Basem Adam in Saarlouis, who is online friends with 23 contemporaries from the village. However, these are friendships that one can log out of. A mere semblance of Tel Goran. Things shared in common grow fewer, and photos of baptisms in Chicago make the rounds with reports about attacks using explosives in their old homeland. Some put their private good luck on display; others images of defiled graves. Some formulate proclamations with titles such as "Why the Assyrians Should Leave the Middle East"; others post online maps of a future Assyrian nation, a triangle in Mesopotamia. On the Internet, borders are quickly drawn, flags effortlessly hoisted, appeals easily penned.

This is how the Assyrians in Chicago sit around on their smartphones, on these interfaces between Web and reality. They live in peace and are ashamed of their affluence. Are they doing too little? Are they donating enough? Should they go back and fight for an Assyrian state? Or preserve their language and culture in the US, like a protected animal species in the zoo? Are they strong or weak, saved or lost in their churches on North Milwaukee Avenue?

The more the war escalates, the bigger the dilemma gets. For the Assyrians in Chicago, it's like being vacationers on an island in the Pacific who find out about an awful accident back home.

"With the next expulsion, we'll have to go to the moon."

When the Islamic State attacked Tel Goran, though not unexpected, it was still surprising. In the very early hours of February 23, 2015, Ismail Ismail woke up with a start. Hersho, his watchdog, was baying. Ismail looked at the clock, 4:30. They had been outside until three, staring out into the darkness before giving in to their fatigue. Ismail lay on his bed, wearing work pants and two heavy jackets. He reached for his hunting rifle and hurried outside.

He didn't get very far. He wanted to make it to the church, but he was promptly halted by three men with Kalashnikovs. Beards, long hair, Arabic with an unfamiliar accent.

Maybe Tunisians, Ismail thought. Hersho barked. The foreigners shot him dead. In the village, screams, shots, boot kicks. Did the residents of Tel Goran really think that their wannabe militia could hold its own against IS, against hundreds of fighters with grenade launchers and assault rifles, who were advancing along a broad front against the Assyrian villages, over streets and fields, like in a long shot of a war film?

Before long, the organ in the church had been smashed, and the last 21 residents of Tel Goran were sitting in pickups. They were not granted one last look at their village. Squatting, they had to stare at the ground. The next seven days: captivity. Changing locations. Sleeping while sitting. An IS doctor whom everyone called "the German." Miryana, the 6-year-old girl, cried and could only be calmed down with the lie that it was all just a game. Finally, an order: Come! And a thought that no one expressed but everyone had: Now we will be decapitated. The defenders of Tel Goran are led into a room with white walls. Neon lamps throw a harsh light on a young man with a beard and glasses: the Shariah judge.

The court is in session for 90 minutes. The judge's questions: Have you fought against IS? Why don't you convert to Islam? Do you know about Paradise, about the virgins waiting there? Then the verdict, recorded by the cameras of the IS propaganda apparatus: acquittal. Coupled with the condition to never return to Tel Goran. Should an Assyrian show up in the village, he will be beheaded, and the women enslaved. End of the proceedings. No war follows rigid laws. Chance always makes an appearance, the split-second decision of some soldier, the weather, the whims of a commander. The Kurds had not fired on IS from Tel Goran, but from the neighboring villages. This saved the 21 people.

After being released, the residents of Tel Goran got into a small bus. Only the girl Miryana had to stay behind, as human collateral. Her father delivered a document to the Assyrians' bishop in which IS demanded \$50,000 in ransom money for each of the more than 200 hostages from the other Christian villages. When the letter was delivered, Miryana was also set free. The 21 people wanted to go abroad, to just get away, quickly, first into Lebanon, to Beirut. But many other Assyrians are still IS hostages. Three of them have been shot dead. All over the world, Christians from the Khabur saw the video of the execution: men in orange outfits, former neighbors, dead in the desert.

Australia: The Deacon



Samer Kefarkis, the deacon of Tel Goran, sleeps on his brother's couch in Australia (Henning Susebach).

100, 200, 300, 400 ... two hands sort brightly colored banknotes on a flat coffee table almost as quickly as a bird flaps its wings ...

500, 600, 650 ... fingertips like black sickles, filthy from construction-site dust ... 700, 750, 770 ... the denominations get smaller ... 790, 810, 820 ... Samer Kefarkis continues to count his pay ... 830, 840, 850. Samer is rather stocky; his beard is dark and sharp-edged, as if painted on; and he has a voice with enough bass to fill a church nave. And that he did once, too.

Since Ismail and his brothers landed in Frankfurt, more and more of the people expelled from Tel Goran have dictated more new names and numbers into our notepads. In our documents and on the satellite image, we reconstructed a network that no longer exists. We made calls to an endless series of dead numbers with the area codes +963 for Syria and +961 for Lebanon.

**Then, all of a sudden,
this deep "Hello?"**

Speaking on the other end of the line is Samer Kefarkis, who used to be the superstar of the village soccer matches. But, more than anything, he was Tel Goran's deacon, the priest's assistant. He says he kept his old number so he could receive news about his former life every now and then. He lives in Australia now.

The Assyrians in America might feel lost like vacationers on a remote island, but 35-year-old Samer Kefarkis has actually ended up on one. His grandfather was born when there was still an Ottoman Empire, his father in Iraq, he himself in Syria. Now he works in construction in Australia. He is counting his pay in an apartment block on Horsley Drive in Fairfield, where the cosmopolitan city of Sydney trails off into a suburb. Instead of snow, like in Chicago, the wind is rolling summer thunderstorms over the country.

"You can't get farther away than this," Samer says. "With the next expulsion, we'll have to go to the moon."

In Tel Goran, Samer lived in a house in the middle of the village, which must have generally corresponded with his importance. As deacon, he safeguarded the key to the church, bought incense and candles, assisted the priest during religious ceremonies, kept the registers of baptisms and deaths. During the week, he worked as an anesthetist at a hospital in a nearby city; in the village, he comforted the children with Band-Aids. Then the IS fighters came to Tel Goran, still as visitors, with their wounded and forced him at gunpoint to treat their injuries.

In the summer of 2014, Samer left Tel Goran. On a July morning, he transmitted a request to the Kurds north of the Khabur to not shoot if a light-blue Hyundai should rumble through a ford in the riverbed. He kissed the wall of his house, got into the car and crossed the river in the Kurds' line of fire. Following in a second vehicle were his brother Nissan with his wife, daughter and son. Samer's mother cried in the backseat of the car he was driving. Sitting next to her silently was his father, who was ill with Alzheimer's and understood nothing of what was happening.

In Beirut, Samer applied for a spot in a group of refugees that Australia had agreed to accept after negotiations with the United Nations. His older brother, George, had emigrated there 16 years earlier, and Samer was the first member of the family to follow him there. Now he works on construction sites and, every Sunday, he has his brother drive him to a faraway Assyrian church, where he jockeys with five other deacons who have fled other Assyrian villages for a place at the altar next to the priest. An image that reveals all the rage and all the rivalry in a diaspora.

**Questions about the depth
of each individual's faith
seep like poison.**

The war, which initially divided Christians and Muslims, has also been driving a wedge between individual parties to the conflict for some time.

Questions about former associations, questions about steadfastness, about the depth of each individual's faith, seep like poison. On Horsley Drive in Fairfield, too. There, Samer sleeps on the couch in his brother's apartment and can't understand how his 15-year-old niece, Clodia, would prefer to spend her Sundays earning pocket money in a supermarket instead of coming to church with him. That she wants to watch Friends on television whenever he's watching the news from Syria. That she hangs out with girls from Turkish families. With Muslims.

Clodia was born in Australia, goes to high school, takes karate classes and wants to study art. Now there is Samer, whose deep voice is too overpowering for this living room to Clodia's ears. Sitting there now are two people who weeks ago only knew each other from photographs, who are having debates that are superficially about the TV remote control, but are beneath it all about the future. About the footing that religion can provide. About the hatred that it can engender. About the loss that arises from assimilation. And about the freedom that one can gain from conforming.

Samer sees a person who disdains much of what he risked his life for.

Clodia sees a person who has been made into a fundamentalist by fundamentalists, who is thankful for each rocket that Russian jets fire on rebels, who believes that Arabs are incapable of living in a democracy and need a dictator. And who predicts that Germany will "sink into civil war in 20 years" because of the millions of Muslims there.

Clodia's silence is pregnant. Her uncle must seem like a character out of the past to her, from a world she only associates with misery. And whenever Samer sees his niece, he sees a sobering future.

"Different values," he says.

On days like these, he takes the money he has earned, 1,000 Australian dollars, leaves the apartment, hurries down Horsley Drive, goes into a shopping center where, between Woolworths, Best & Less and Ivan's Cafe & Grill, he has to look for the small branch of Western Union from which he transfers money to Lebanon so that his parents and his brother Nissan can follow him into precisely the future that is so foreign to him.

Lebanon: Those Left Behind

Nissan Kefarkis doesn't have to look for the Western Union branch, as it's one of the last fixed points in his life. Up Al-Rawda Street, past the cellphone store "Keep In Touch" and the Internet café "Connect," he makes his way through Middle Eastern bustle, past craftsmen, taxi drivers and street vendors.

Then, at Western Union, Nissan gets the money from Australia, converted into Lebanese pounds. He has the same stout body as his brother Samer, the deacon, but he seems more weathered. His three-day stubble isn't a fashion statement, and he has dark rings around his eyes. Nissan often drifts through the neighborhood. Other Assyrians are sitting on balconies, in cafés. Neatly dressed do-nothings, bankrolled by wealthy relatives in the West. They recognize each other even if they don't know each other. They nod to each other in passing. We journalists are always looking for scenes, movement, action. Granted, the word "flight" carries connotations of urgency and haste. That's why news programs around the world always show people running when they talk about flight. But, in reality, it is much more about waiting, about persevering. Waiting for money, waiting for work, waiting for a future. In front of border fences, in strange cities, at way stations, where movements become frozen and the flight comes to a halt.

These, then, are still images from an apartment on Al-Rawda Street. Two bedrooms, a kitchen, a bathroom, a huge living room, empty like a railway station hall: plastic table, plastic chairs. Scattered toys, all damaged in some way -- a car without wheels, a doll with an amputated leg. The 5-year-old Mariam and the 2-year-old Zaia, who romp around all day long. The occasional shout of their father: "Stop it! Or you can't go to Australia!"

In the kitchen is Nissan's wife. She is pregnant. First have the baby, the man at the Australian Embassy had said, and then we'll talk about a visa.

Nissan's father has been living on his own island for a long time, far away from Beirut, Sydney, Tel Goran. In this place, one wears pajamas and silently slumps in a plastic chair. Regarding the village that was home to his life, the demented old man says: "Never been there." Since fleeing from Tel Goran, the empire of forgetfulness has grown powerful. On rare occasions, the father stands up, shuffles through the living room and studies the floor tiles. He recognizes something in their black-and-white pattern: "We need to plant trees, to sow the crops! It's time!" Then he tries to dig plant holes in the black tiles. Wiry hands grasping an invisible shovel. Last memories of the dark dampness of the soil of Tel Goran.

"Yes, father, we'll plant soon," Nissan whispers while gently guiding the old man back to his chair. Then he goes out on the balcony.

There is a type of suffering that cannot be measured in terms of how hungry one is or how much one's life is threatened. It is the suffering of forlornness. Those left behind are waiting in Beirut. All the others, too, whether in Saarlouis, Chicago or Sodertälje, sit, talk, smoke, telephone and email. For them, the entire world has become a transit zone in which America is no different from Saarland. They are like cutout figures pasted onto new background images. That's what they share in common, despite all the differences.

“The Assyrians of Syria: History and Prospects”

by Mardean Isaac

This article will explore the situation of Assyrians in Syria.

1. The first section deals with the origins of Assyrians in Syria, the Assyrian identity, and the condition of Assyrians under the Assad regime.
2. The second section deals with the impact of the Syrian uprising and civil war on Assyrians, Assyrian security forces, and the politics of Assyrians under the Kurdish self-administration in Hassakah.



Origins of Assyrians in Syria

There was a strong ancient Assyrian presence across Syria, and the most significant historical churches to which Assyrians belong today – especially the Syriac Orthodox Church [1], but also the Assyrian Church of the East [2] and later the Chaldean Catholic Church [3] – navigated a presence across Syria under the various empires that ruled over the region. However, while the deep ethnic origin of Syrian Christians (and all Syrians) is comprised of pre-Arab layers, including Assyrian, these contemporary communities [4] do not today possess a distinct ethnic identity, unlike the Assyrian populations that will form the focus of this article.

Contemporary Assyrian populations are defined by a set of distinct cultural and linguistic traits. They speak the modern Assyrian language, which has two major dialects, as well as retaining usage of classical Syriac – the ecclesiastical lingua franca of the Syriac churches – of which they are the progenitors and stewards. In modern Assyrian, a language partly rooted in Akkadian and Aramaic, but much of whose

morphology and lexical features have been self-generated over the centuries, Assyrians refer to themselves largely by the emic terms 'Suraya/Sur(y)' [5], a variant of the term for ancient Assyrians, 'Ashuraya/Asoraya.' The term 'Athoroyo/Atoraya' is also deployed.

The major modern Assyrian presence in Syria dates back to the aftermath of the **Assyrian Genocide** (1914-23). This was a Genocide distinct to that of the Armenians, although the perpetrators – Turkish nationalists and their Kurdish conscripts – extirpated both peoples in the same period and for the same reason: to rid the emergent Republic of Turkey of its Christian populations. A portion of the fleeing Armenian population also settled in Syria.

Western Assyrians[6] fleeing massacres in the historic Assyrian strongholds of Mardin, Diyarbakir, Midyat, Tur Abdin, and elsewhere, ended up in the province of Jazira, where they established the city of Qamishli (then known as Beth Zalin, 'the house of reed' in Assyrian) as well as villages such as those in Qabre Hewore (Al-Qahtaniyah).

Eastern Assyrians took a more winding route to Syria.

Having fled massacres in their ancestral territories in south-east Turkey, mainly in the Hakkari region, they became dispersed across the region. A decade of itinerant uncertainty regarding their fate ended with the **Simele Massacre** of 1933 – the foundational event of the nascent state of Iraq – after which thousands of remaining Assyrians fled into Jazira and founded villages along the Khabur river. The Khabur villages remained a kind of living museum of Hakkari life. The villages were settled by **tribe**, and their names continue to colloquially bare the titles of the Assyrian tribes that inhabit them in parallel to their official Arab titles.

Assyrians continued to call these settlements “camps” even after they were developed into villages. The recent deracination of Khabur has tragically shown that they were prudent to carry a sense of their transience in their own mouths.

Both western and eastern Assyrian populations retain cultural traits – including festivals, dances, and other folk phenomena – distinct to them.

With the establishment of the Syrian state, some Assyrians also moved to Aleppo (which also hosted some Assyrians fleeing the genocide) and Damascus, as well as more obscure areas such as **al-Thawrah**.

Assyrians under the Assad regime

One has to first submit questions regarding the Assyrian relationship with the Syrian Government and Assad regime into the general understanding that, in times of peace – even enforced by tyranny – most people are not motivated by political ideology or agenda, but rather respond to their economic, familial, and communal needs. Assyrians in Syria were no exception. It is necessary to assert this platitude since many reports have depicted Assyrians as ‘pro-regime’.



tapping into political fault-lines that are observed by analysts more than ordinary people.

Many Assyrians do not perceive the Ba'ath party or the Assad family as synonymous with the Syrian state, despite the stranglehold over political affairs in Syria that the regime possessed until the uprising and subsequent events. This reflected a fundamental attachment to the unitary Syrian state and its institutions which transcended their occupancy by the Ba'ath party and the Assad family. (However, the regime was certainly perceived [7] as a safeguard against the two fundamental fears that Assyrians possess: Islamism and Kurdish nationalism.)

This ethos could be described as characteristic of Assyrian populations in all the modern states in which they have resided. The broad tendency of Arab Christian political involvement, whether with the Ba'ath, SSNP, PLO or otherwise, has been 'greaterist', whereas Assyrian nationalism is essentially autonomist or separatist in its orientation. However, the armed Assyrian struggle ended with the Assyrian Genocide, the **Simele** massacre (1933), and only resumed in a lower level form in the resistance to Saddam, entering another decline in the early 90s. In the absence of a viable plan for Assyrian separatism, Assyrian social and political organisation has focused on maintaining the Assyrian presence and, at their most radical political margin (and at considerable cost) reforming the Iraqi and Syrian states, both in general terms and with a specific view to the Assyrian ethnicity and the place of Assyrians in the state. [8]

In the case of Syria, these efforts were largely led by the Assyrian Democratic Organisation (ADO). Established in 1957, mainly by western Assyrians, the party sought democratic reform of the Syrian state as well as to secure recognition of the Assyrian identity and a more meaningful place for Assyrians within the country. ADO members who spoke out against the regime were harassed, arrested or tortured, for example, in response to publicly raising concerns over state neglect of Khabur. Gabriel Moushe, the leader of the political branch of the ADO, was **arrested** on December 19th, 2013, and remains in regime detention. In the final sections of this piece I will discuss the current place of the ADO in Syria.

The Assyrian Democratic Party, a small party that splintered from the ADO, was established in 1978 by Adam Homeh. In the 1990s, the ADP attempted to provide a pro-regime alternative to the ADO by, for example supporting rival Assyrian candidates for the Syrian parliament that were less oppositional to the government. It was also overtly sectarian, electing eastern Assyrians as the only 'true' Assyrians, and exhibiting suspicion of the dominance of the ADO by western Assyrians.

The Dawronoye were established in the mid 1990s, and will be discussed in greater detail in the final sections of this article.

The Assyrian identity and the Syrian state

The Assyrian identity is not recognised by the Syrian government.[9] Despite this, the celebration of Akitu – the ancient Assyrian new year – went ahead largely unhindered by government interference, beyond the inevitable presence of Assad family iconography and mukhabarat. Originally an event held in private, the ADO spearheaded the expansion of Akitu into the public sphere. This process was accelerated by the emboldening of the party after the release of its leadership from government imprisonment in the mid 80s. The event gained in participation and prestige over time. These spectacular and vivid **images** of Akitu in Hassakah from 2002 show how meaningful the celebration is to Assyrians. A mass wedding here accompanies the festival.

Assyrian cultural and linguistic matters in Syria

An hour of instruction a week in the Assyrian language was permitted by the government, but only in

Churches. The Assyrian Church of the East favors the spoken Assyrian language, a position that reflects the independent and autocephalous nature of the Church. Their championing of modern Assyrian also has its roots in the transmission of 19th century European Protestant principles, which drew an association between ecclesiastical independence and using vernacular language as a means of bringing the church closer to its adherents. The Syriac Orthodox Church teaches in Classical Syriac [10], exhibiting indifference and even hostility to spoken Assyrian. Small magazines reporting on church affairs in Syriac were permitted to circulate.

The curriculum appended 'Arab' to the names of ancient empires of the Middle East ('Arab Assyrian', 'Arab Babylonian'), claiming that the populations of these civilizations originated in the Gulf, and that after the Islamic invasion, the region became homogeneously Arab. Merely challenging this dogma was an act of intellectual and, by extension, political rebellion. The one reference to Assyrians in the curriculum, which was removed under Bashar, addressed the Simele Massacre of Iraq – but negatively so, implying the Assyrians were fifth columns and traitors to the Arab state of Iraq and that their massacre was justified and necessary. The only specific government mention of the Assyrian name, therefore, was pejorative: Assyrians were acknowledged insofar as their declared ethnic separatism was associated with troublesome and treacherous behaviour which threatened the unity of the Arab state.

A small newsletter in Assyrian (and bearing the identity) was briefly distributed in the late 80s and early 90s. It was tolerated since it belonged to Assyrian parties in northern Iraq who were in opposition to the regime of Saddam Hussein, a nemesis mutual to the Syrian government. Beyond that, magazines by the Assyrian opposition were distributed secretly: handwritten or photocopied in small numbers.

Origins of locally derived Assyrian security in Syria

The Syrian Arab Army began to withdraw from the remoter areas of Hassakah province in 2012 in order to buttress areas already under their control in western Syria, confining their military and security presence in Jazira to the cities of Hassakah and Qamishli. This began to expose Assyrians to the possibility of Islamist incursion, vindicated by some early incidents, as well as opening lines of fissure between Arab and Kurdish elements in the region. In late 2012 and early 2013, Assyrian men from Khabur began to quietly meet with a view to organising a local defence force to patrol and protect the villages. Their desire was to remain independent of all political parties, as well as to declare a stance of neutrality in relation to the regime, the YPG and even Islamist forces.

These planners witnessed an original flurry of registration by young men, which reached into the hundreds. They also hoped that enlistment in local security forces would help stem the rising tide of unemployment as well as Assyrian emigration out of Syria. But across 2013, emigration continued unabated, depleting the potential ranks of the guard force ("Nattoreh").

There were always discussions among the Assyrians of Hassakah as to whether stockpiling arms was a good idea. A consensus was never reached that it was.

Once state security unravelled, the lack of readiness among Assyrians to direct their own fate was sorely exposed. Kurds, on the other hand, have been preparing for the collapse of Arab states since before the inception of those states.

The security situation in Khabur and the future of the Khabur villages

On February 23rd, in the early hours of the morning, ISIS attacked the villages along the Khabur. The whole population of the villages, which by then had dwindled to around 3000, fled to Qamishli and Hassakah. In the course of the incursion, ISIS captured 253 villagers, mainly from Tel Shamiran, Tel Hirmiz and Tel Jazira villages, and in many cases, entire families. 130 Assyrians **remain** in captivity. ISIS has released the other 123 captives, mainly elderly and infirm individuals, in **batches across several months**. It is unclear whether their release is the product of ransom payments, negotiations, or both – or whether for ISIS, elderly and sick captives are simply not worth the trouble of maintaining in captivity. Three male Assyrian captives were **executed** on the morning of September 23rd, on the festival day of eid al-Adha, and footage of the execution was released two weeks later.

The causes and dynamics behind the attack continue to haunt Assyrians contemplating their fate in Syria. Some villagers blame the YPG, and the MFS (Syriac Military Council), an Assyrian militia allied with the Kurdish force, for inciting ISIS through their position of open hostility towards the group – a step that Khabur Assyrians felt would unnecessarily imperil them. There is of course no way of knowing what the consequences of accepting YPG

protection along the Khabur River – moving the frontier of the control of Kurdish self-administration along and beyond the villages – would have been. Nor of how committed, and at what cost to the Assyrian population, the YPG's protection would have been. Accommodations had been made for 'co-existence' with ISIS in the weeks prior to the invasion, including **taking down** crosses from churches. Some MFS soldiers, emboldened by the strength of the YPG, had brashly and publicly restored the crosses on some churches in Khabur, alongside other belligerent gestures such as **the kidnapping of ISIS militants**.



It is, however, impossible to imagine that any sustainable arrangement could have prevented ISIS from entering the villages, as they did, unprovoked by any Assyrian conduct, in the Nineveh Plains of Iraq in August 2014. There is something in the psychology of the desire for neutrality in the midst of war that reflects the deep-seated sense of paralysis among the Khabur community, whose parochialism was sustained by state auspices and then badly exposed by their withdrawal.

Blame is also apportioned by some Assyrians to the ADO and other political parties for refusing to facilitate the arming of the Khabur Guards. The ADO does not support the contribution of Assyrians to the armed opposition – let alone in implicit defense of the regime or the PYD project to which they are explicitly opposed and critical, respectively. This position does not square with the stated desire of the Khabur Guards to remain independent of politics; it should be understood as a feeling of betrayal by fellow Assyrians who, as one interviewee put it to me, "used to talk a good game about the tyranny of the regime and democracy, but abandoned us and left Syria as soon as things got difficult."



The Khabur villages are now free of ISIS, yet exist in a state of ruination and are still heavily mined and booby-trapped.

Following the expulsion of ISIS, several bodies belonging to the overwhelmed Assyrian military resistance to the incursion were discovered. There have been a few incidents of Khabur Guardsmen dying or incurring injury while patrolling the mined wasteland of the River.

ISIS, as well as the YPG and the MFS, have extensively looted the Khabur villages.

Assassination of David Jindo

On the evening of Tuesday, April 21st, David Jindo[12] and Elias Nasser, two leaders of the Khabur guards, were abducted from their homes, blindfolded, beaten and tortured, shot at, and left for dead.[13] As their assailants fled the scene, somewhere close to the village of Jumayla, Elias Nasser crawled to a main road where he was picked up by a passing car and taken to hospital in Qamishli.

Over the coming days, two pro-ISIS Twitter feeds claimed the attack.

I spoke to a PYD supporter who perceived the hand of the regime at work, dividing Assyrians and Kurds in Hassakah to stop what he saw as a joint project of ethnic renewal after decades of Ba'ath homogeneity. "The regime wants Assyrians to remain slaves to the church and forget their nationality," he wrote. "The YPG trusted Jindo because he seemed like a man of his word. Why don't people see that the PKK sacrificed a lot for Assyrians?"

As he lay in hospital in Qamishli, Elias was unable to speak owing to bullet wounds in his face and chest. But as friends went to visit him, he wrote down information conveying his certainty that his assailants were members of the YPG.



That YPG fighters were responsible for the attack came as a surprise to casual observers in the Assyrian Diaspora, who assumed, with the emergence of ISIS, that lines of combat in Syria had become morally delineated. But it was no surprise to the Khabur Guards. In the weeks prior to the assassination, a few of their leading members had been called to a meeting with YPG fighters. They customarily all left their guns and phones at the entrance. Their host brandished an AK-47 once they were seated, making it clear their options were to accept the existence of and fight for Rojava (western Kurdistan), leave Syria, or face death.

Like all the peoples of the Middle East, Assyrians have very long memories. The murder of David Jindo resonates deeply in the Assyrian imagination. There is a long and iconic list of Assyrian leaders murdered by Kurdish nationalists: Patriarch Mar Shimun, Franso Hariri, Margaret George (one of the first female Peshmerga), **Francis Shabo**, and so on. That many of these figures were killed in spite of their attempts to engage with, or even work under, Kurds only enhances the deeply embedded popular perception among Assyrians of an inexorable Kurdish tendency towards treachery. The trial of the killers of David Jindo will be discussed in subsequent sections.

Assyrian security and politics under the Kurdish self-administration

The Dawronoye ("revolutionaries") movement is arguably the most quixotic and amorphous of Assyrian political groups. The group **was established** as a network bridging the Assyrian Diaspora and communities in southern Turkey. Inspired by the PKK's resilience in the face of Turkish state oppression, they operated under the auspices of the Kurdish militants, settling into a minor role as a military force in northern Iraq in the late 1990s.

In 2005, the group established the Syriac Union Party, which began to organize in Syria. With the regime-sanctioned rise of the PYD and the declaration of the autonomous Cantons in November 2013, including 'Rojava' in Hassakah, the Dawronoye movement finally found a true foothold in the region. The SUP called upon an expanding network of patronage and advocacy in Europe, a television channel based in Sweden, Suroyo TV, along with a branch in **Lebanon**, and **civil society** organizations in Syria under PYD auspices to attempt to entrench and expand their activities. In January 2013, the group announced the creation of the MFS (Syriac Military Council), their military wing in Gozarto[14]. More recently, the MFS established a female division, **the Bethnahrain[15] Women Protection Forces**, a clear parallel to the YPJ.

In their unveiling ceremonies, both the **MFS** and the HSNB lashed out against the Assad regime. The MFS noted the 'murder machine' of the regime killing 'the Syrian people', endorsed the 'legitimacy of the Syrian people's revolution' in its desire to 'bring down the Ba'ath regime', but also emphasised a broader desire to oppose anyone who wished to further marginalise the Syriac people. The HSNB decried the dictatorship and chauvinism of the Assad regime. In a **recent article** on the group, HSNB fighters – again echoing the ethos of the PKK – said that their taking up of arms would help dispel "the idea that the Syriac woman is good for nothing except housekeeping and make-up." The SUP has been persecuted by the regime. Several members have been detained: most notably their Vice President Sait Cosar, who was arrested in 2013, and whose fate remains unknown. (His son, Johan Cosar, later **relocated** to Syria from Switzerland to train the MFS.) The SUP, however, is not part of the opposition, and neither the MFS nor the HSNB have fought regime forces. This is unsurprising given that the regime partly facilitated the rise of the PYD in Hassakah and has not entered into open conflict with the YPG. In exchange for a degree of autonomy and the license to control the direction of it, the PYD put down revolts by Arabs and Kurds[16] seeking to overthrow Bashar and used the YPG as an outsource point for security aligned with regime interests: fighting opposition forces and acting as a thorn in the side of Turkey.

Many ordinary MFS soldiers are motivated by an apolitical sense that they are protecting their own in a time of flux, and have been empowered instinctively by the ethnic and communal solidarity that the MFS offers as opposed to the SAA or the YPG proper. This situation itself finds a parallel with the YPG itself, many of whose rank and file soldiers do not share the lofty and complex ideological principles espoused by the PYD's leadership, but rather see themselves as **fighting for an independent and ultimately unified Kurdistan**, in contradiction to the PYD's proclaimed distance from ethnic separatism, belief in a unified Syria, and even disavowal of belief the nation-state per se. However, Assyrians have no greater political and land aim in Syria, unlike Kurds.

The feeling of fundamental repression, especially to the extent of wanting to overthrow the regime, is rare among Assyrians, and is commoner among Kurds, who were largely denied even rights of citizenship and title and marriage deed under Ba'athism. In that sense, it is clear that the PYD – regime alliance is a political one rather than one made durable by a shared belief in Syrian unity or ideology. The anti-regime ideological stance preferred by the MFS leadership is another incarnation of the Dawronoye attempt to ground and direct their vaguely revolutionary and anti-authoritarian ethos. But their direct motivation in openly declaring this stance is less explicit. It is prospectively useful for garnering international support for their armed struggle and the ambitions of the SUP, and certainly provides a globally understandable frame of legitimacy for their endeavour, in light of the unpopularity of the regime on the world stage.

Local tensions exist between the Khabur Guards and the MFS. However, even Elias Nasser, in his **first interview** following the attempt on his life, made it clear that he did not want these tensions to blossom into full ethnic 'fitna' between Assyrians and Kurds. Intriguingly, Dawronoye attempts to provide stewardship of the Assyrian community entire extends to commemoration of David Jindo – killed by their YPG allies – as a martyr, alongside MFS fighters who died fighting Islamists, as can be seen in this MFS martyr monument in Qamishli.

The original ruling of the killers of David Jindo saw two men receive two years each, with no punishment handed to the two other individuals involved.

This is clearly part of an attempt by the pro-PYD MFS to try to encompass the concerns of the entire Assyrian community.



A re-trial in July saw the sentences extended to 20 years for two of the killers, and four years and one year respectively for the other two men. Suroyo TV broadcasted **footage of the trial**. In the news clip, the Kurdish judge, wearing traditional clothing and presiding over a court room with a photo of Abdullah Ocalan above its entrance, speaks of the dynamics of the ruling. He points to “open meetings” that took place with Assyrian, Arab and Kurdish representatives in which the opinions of individuals and “left wing” parties were noted, and claims that these discussions led to the revised decision regarding the sentence. He asserts that the sentence will help guarantee the brotherhood and unity of all the peoples of Rojava. There is no discussion of the actual procedures and principles of the ruling: the processing of evidence, establishment of proof, and so on.

In their **press release** in response to the first ruling, the Bethnahrain National Council (MUB), the overseeing political body of the Dawronoye, decried the murder of David Jindo as an “unpardonable act, not only against our people, but also against Kurds and all oppressed peoples.” The statement also emphasised that the involvement of “some elements in the Kurdish Freedom Movement in the incident saddened and disappointed [the MUB] deeply, as well as our people.” (The final two clauses constitute another interesting attempt to shade their political solidarity with the Kurdish movement across the whole community of Assyrians.) The SUP claimed credit for influencing the subsequent expansion of the sentence, hinting at the political nature of the decision. Issues of security receive disproportionate coverage in the international press and hold a powerful symbolic, imagistic, and political value.

The Assyrian Diaspora imbues security forces in Iraq and Syria with the hopes of their entire destiny, which is deeply unrealistic given their small size. Similarly, the PYD has made very skillful usage of the MFS in their propaganda, frequently mentioning their Christian allies to show that the YPG is not the only force fighting for Rojava. The Russian intervention, backed by the PYD, stepped up the need for American intervention in some form in response. This was seized upon by the PYD, who put together the ‘Syrian Democratic Forces’, an entity thoroughly dominated by the YPG but also containing small numbers of Arab fighters as well as the MFS. Their flag bears writing in Arabic, Kurdish and Assyrian, and the map of Syria emblazoned on it – in a mischievous gesture of antagonism towards Turkey – contains Hatay Province. The YPG, therefore, has not only gained from Russian bombing of opposition targets, but has attracted American support (including specialised training) in the form of the SDF.

The current status of Assyrian security forces independent of the YPG. In May, a security force dubbed the Gozarto Protection Forces (GPF) was established. Notably, the GPF **bears** the same **logo** as the Nineveh Plains Protection Units (NPU), an Assyrian security force in northern Iraq, despite the lack of common political party patronage. The GPF and the Sootoro[17], its local security unit division, immediately took part in the **defence of Hassakah** in May and June. The NPU seeks sanction under the Hashd al-Shabi (Popular Mobilization Law), attempting to utilize the broad anti-ISIS mandate to assist in the liberation and subsequent defence of in the Nineveh Plains following the Peshmerga withdrawal and subsequent ISIS incursion into the region in the summer of 2014.

Despite the discrepancies between the overall state of Iraq and Syria, there are parallels between the NPU and GPF. Both forces seek to operate independently from Kurdish nationalist control seek sanction and support from central governments. In November, the GPF was **flown by Russian planes** to assist in the defence of Sadad, a Syriac Orthodox Town north-east of Damascus that was overrun by Jabhat al-Nusra in October, 2013. The deployment of the **GPF**, originally a local force, to assist the SAA close to its heartland, shows signs of a potentially broader engagement with the regime, as well as reflecting the manpower problem in the SAA. The GPF received a **raucous reception** upon their return to Qamishli from Sadad.

The local security forces of the Guardians of Khabur and the Guardians of Tel-Tamar recently **announced** their **merger**.

Assyrians under the Kurdish self-administration: Beyond security and military matters

Social relations between Kurds and Assyrians in Hassakah have always been poor. I have never spoken to an Assyrian who has told me that their family had an intimate bond with a Kurdish (or an Arab) family, even to the extent that they would have had dinner at one another’s homes, for example. Even though Kurdish and Assyrian political parties exchanged delegations during Akitu and Nowruz celebrations, popular interest by one ethnic group in the other’s celebrations were almost non-existent.

Inter-marriage is utterly taboo: both communities are endogamous. The elopement of Assyrian women with Kurdish men has often ended up with the murder of the woman by her Assyrian siblings, and occasionally both the woman and the man. Assyrian men who have attempted to marry Kurdish women have faced a similar fate at the hands of the Kurdish family, especially if they do not convert to Islam. The state treated incidents where only the 'offending party' was murdered as an honor crime, usually sentenced to six months, whereas if the other party was also killed it was treated as murder per se and sentenced appropriately.

Beyond questions of security, there are a series of issues that have arisen regarding the relationship of the Kurdish self-administration to Assyrians.

— Assyrian property, including the villages of the Khabur, was threatened by a law proposed in September in the self-administration parliament of Amuda on Emigrant Properties which stated that all abandoned properties – many of which were emptied due to the flight of Assyrians following the unrest in Hassakah generally and the emergence of ISIS specifically – were liable to confiscation. Following overwhelming objections by Assyrians and others, the law was overturned. The issue of land is deeply significant to Assyrians as well as Kurds in relation to the regime. Land ownership rights were a key cause of the security Assyrians broadly 'enjoyed' under the Syrian state, especially in light of the persecutions that robbed them of their previous homeland. They perceived their extensive and legally enshrined ownership of property and the state stability concomitant to it as a guarantor against external or partisan encroachments. The lack of land rights was a profound cause of anger and mistrust by Kurds towards the Syrian state, one dimension of the 'de-naturalisation' policies and broader ideological and racial humiliation, antagonism and repression of Kurds by the Ba'ath party.

With the consolidation of PYD authority over Assyrian territories and communities, these divergent positions between Assyrians and Kurds in relation to land have clashed and come to the fore, and are compounded and inflected by questions over the direction of Kurdish nationalist interests. Assyrians in Syria are aware of the extraordinary scale of Kurdish confiscation and forced annexation of Assyrian land in northern Iraq, as well as carrying memories of the same phenomenon in Turkey

— Ongoing anxieties over the issue of conscription and military service have led to the emigration of Assyrians from Hassakah. Proven completion of SAA service will not necessarily act as a safeguard against conscription into the YPG (either proper or in the form of the MFS) or into six-month terms of duty in the HXP (Self-Defense Units). A report compiled in May by three Assyrians – Sawa Oshanne Ide, Erkin Metin, and Simon Poli, a member of the HDP – quotes members of the ADO describing harassment and arrest of Assyrians in Derik to this effect.

— The educational policies of the PYD led self-administration in the Jazira region have raised alarm among Assyrian and other Christian organizations. The ideological orientation of the curriculum has shifted from a broadly more palatable – to the broadly temperamentally and culturally conservative Assyrian community of Hassakah – combination of church-led and Ba'ath pedagogy to one perceived as being steeped in radical PKK/PYD ideology, especially in the subjects of History and Sociology. Many public schools in Qamishli have closed in response to these developments. Hundreds of Kurdish children, whose families sought to avoid enrolling their children in schools that would teach the PYD curriculum, were turned away from private Syriac schools.

Sixteen Assyrian organisations – largely ecclesiastical in orientation but also including the ADO – signed a statement on November 1st decrying various PYD policies, including the enforcement of new curricula. Negotiations are ongoing regarding the implementation of the new curriculum between the education administration of Rojava, the regime, and private schools.

More fundamentally, it is very rare indeed to come across an Assyrian, aside from those who are direct participants in Rojava, who is comfortable with Kurdish rule, or one who perceives Rojava as anything other than a project of ethnocracy and ethno-national partition. Mistrust of Kurdish nationalism is very deep in the community, expressed in Assyrian proverbs such as "do not put a Kurd in your pocket, he will not turn to gold," and "have dinner with the Kurd, but sleep at the Arab's house." Any encroachment is liable to trigger fear and mistrust. The changes taking place in Gozarto, taking place against a backdrop of far more alien and ghoulish transformations across the country, have overwhelmed the Assyrian community. It is not uncommon to encounter more detailed and up to date knowledge of developments among analysts in Diaspora than Assyrians on the ground. The stability of the Syrian state, which insulated the Assyrian community while allowing it to be overseen by an entity whose perceived order, legitimacy and continuity afforded Assyrians a sense – however tempered by authoritarianism – of civic identity and national belonging, is gone. "We can never trust them," an Assyrian man who fled Khabur last year told me. "Arabs can be bought off, but nothing will satisfy a Kurd except a country."

The future of Assyrians in Syria

Assyrian migration out of the Middle East is constant. A 2003 population of around one million Assyrians in Iraq has dwindled to around 400,000 today. There were 150,000 Assyrians in Iran on the eve of the Islamic Revolution in 1979; today, only a few thousand remain. The Assyrian population of Turkey is around 20,000. Assyrians have been leaving Syria steadily from the 1980s, and the uprising and the emergence of ISIS have only accelerated this process. Around 50,000 Assyrians remain in Gozarto. Small numbers of Assyrians also remain in Damascus and Aleppo.

As conditions in the Middle East have become more unstable and extreme, the reality and experience of the Assyrian Diaspora and homeland populations diverges further. Fewer Assyrians return to visit their families and communities. Even though the capacity of Diaspora Assyrians to engage with and support Assyrians in the homeland populations in an organized manner is increasing, the possibility for viable independent Assyrian projects declines constantly along with demographics.

I have observed a transformation in the attitudes and memories of Assyrians who grew up in an atmosphere of opposition to the regime and who now live abroad. Even more fundamentally than a shift in political stance in favour of the regime, which is relatively rare, the extent of the carnage that has befallen Syria has eroded recollections of what it was they had a problem with in relation to the government in the first place. It was almost as if the stability of the regime served as a pivot or fulcrum for their opposition stances – which usually revolved around a disdain for nepotism and corruption, a desire to promote the Assyrian ethnic identity and culture more officially, a yearning for freedom of speech and a freer media, and anger at government neglect of Assyrian areas in favour of Arab ones – which now appear remote and quaint in light of the collapse of the state and the country. Their eyes glaze over in baffled fear when contemplating the future of Syria.

The intellectual and moral stability provided by the ADO has also arguably entered into decline.

The party has no firm place in Syrian political affairs today. Having thrown its lot in with the opposition, which has since transformed unrecognisably, the ADO – a member of the Syrian National Council – continues to refuse the legitimacy of the regime without being able to claim a meaningful position among the forces seeking its demise. The psychological effect of the Khabur kidnappings, especially since so many remain captive, has been devastating. Some trepid return has taken place to the Khabur villages, which is more than can be said for the Nineveh Plains. The recent ISIS suicide bomb attack in the once majority Assyrian city of Tel Tamar, in which four Assyrians died, is a reminder of the constant threat of terrorism, against which Assyrians have no reliable recourse.

Today's events in the Middle East echo those of a century ago. The overarching structures of political and social organisation – now of the Arab state, then of the Ottoman Empire – are giving way to turmoil, ethnic cleansing, and uncertainty. After the dividing and redrawing of borders was complete, the polities that emerged attempted to yoke together various ethnicities and sects, and Assyrians secured a diminished place within them. There is little reason to believe that the forms of organization that will emerge from the chaos in the region today will feature even the aim of co-existence, let alone the attainment thereof. In the absence of a plan for an independent Assyrian national endeavour, the Assyrian people face an existential threat in their ancestral homelands.

Hundreds of thousands of Assyrians died in the process of dissolving the Ottoman Empire and creating new states from it.

The sheer scale of murder, along with the abysmal humanitarian conditions that ensued, is at least being largely spared the Assyrians of today. Also novel, however, is the phenomenon of emigration to western countries, which now contain far more Assyrians than exist in the Middle East. There is mercy here, at least for those privileged Assyrians who manage to find a secure path abroad. Along with their departure will go the Assyrian culture, language, and entire living heritage, permanently confining the Assyrian people to the annals of history. *Mardean Isaac is a writer of fiction, journalism and essays. He has written and spoken widely on the Middle East & holds an MA in English Literature from Cambridge University and an MSt in Syriac Studies from Oxford University.

Religious Minorities

React to Islamic

State Genocide Declaration by EDWIN MORA 20 Mar 2016

Representatives from the religious minority community in the Middle East strongly support the Obama administration's decision to finally concede that the Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL) is committing genocide against their people.



Breitbart News spoke with two Christians, two Yezidis, and a Shiite Turkmen about the recent **declaration by the U.S. State Department** that the atrocities committed by ISIS against members of their community constitutes genocide and humanity crimes.

"The **Turkmen Rescue Foundation (TRF)** stands in solidarity with the Assyrian Christians and Yezidis and considers this declaration an important step to relieve the suffering of all oppressed communities in Iraq and Syria." Dr. Ali Akram Al Bayati, a Shiite Turkmen and TRF chief, told Breitbart News. "We also support a resolution from the United Nations for the same purpose."

He noted that the TRF appreciates Kerry's determination. Fr. Behnam Benoka, a **Syriac Catholic priest from Iraq**, welcomed the Obama administration's genocide declaration as "good news."

"Finally, we see a light shining for our future. From this historical moment we can see hope for our the upcoming days," the priest from the Catholic church, which is in full communion with **the Holy See of Rome**, told Breitbart News via e-mail. "May this important declaration be followed by an official declaration from U.S. and U.N. to stop the acts of brutality, specially against undefended religious minorities in Iraq and Syria."

Fr. Benoka added that he hopes to "see further actions following this declaration":

- The liberation of Iraq's Nineveh Plain.
- Securing peace in that area by an international force (not Arabs or Muslims)
- Ensuring that the rights and human dignity of the religious minorities (especially Christians and Yezidis) are cemented in the Iraqi and Syrian constitutions.

Omar Haider and Khalid Sulaiman Haider, two Yezidi activists originally from the Iraqi border town of Sinjar who now live in the U.S. because of threats against them, also reacted to Kerry's genocide declaration.

They noted that the atrocities committed by ISIS are unprecedented and blamed the Iraqi government and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) for allowing the genocide to carry on.

Breitbart News learned that Omar lost 36 family members in 2014 when ISIS attacked the Iraqi town of Sinjar, located in Nineveh province, which is also home to many members of northern Iraq's Christian community.

Both activists served as translators for the U.S. government in Iraq.

Although both Omar and Khalid share the same common Yezidi tribal last name, they are not related. "Yezidis need the ability to protect ourselves so this will not happen again. Yezidis and Assyrian Christians are the indigenous people and we want to return to our homeland and remain there in peace," Omar told Breitbart News. "We look forward to the liberation of the remaining Yezidi areas under ISIS control... We need safe havens and no-fly zones in Iraq and Syria."

Rep. Jeff Fortenberry (R-NE)

Rep. Anna Eshoo (D-CA)

Introducing a non-binding resolution earlier this week, condemning ISIS atrocities as genocide.

"Throughout the history of Middle East there had been military genocide campaigns against the indigenous ones, but it's never reached to what it's like today," added Khalid, in a statement to Breitbart News.

"What happened to the Yezidis, Christians and other minorities in both Iraq and Syria is nothing but the result of gross negligence from some governments in Iraq and other regional governments."

Retired Lt. Col. Sargis Sangari, who was deployed to Iraq during his 20-year career in the U.S. Army, said the declaration is a step in the right direction. He serves as an advisor for the Assyrian Army, known as Dwekh Nawsha (self-sacrifice), in Iraq. Col. Sangari, who heads the Near East Center for Strategic Engagement, identifies as an Assyrian Christian.

"The statement by Secretary of State Kerry was surprising," he told Breitbart News. "Although it is a start toward addressing the security issues in the region, it falls short just as the House resolution, designating the Islamic State's violence against Christians and other ethnic and religious minorities as genocide, fell short." He added:

The Islamic State will now target the Assyrian and Yezidis in Assyria, Nineveh Plain more actively as a way of replying to Secretary Kerry's statement and to the Congressional failure to recognize the Assyrians as an ethnicity... Both the State Department and Congress have failed to recognize the genocide against the Assyrian ethnicity by lumping the Assyrians into a Christian denominational category only. Although the Assyrians are Christians, their ethnicity is being eradicated: they are Assyrian Christians.

Why be assyrian?

Courtesy of David Mando
philosproject.org/why-be-assyrian/

If someone were to ask why am I an Assyrian (other than the obvious reason of my being born one) or why they should be proud to be Assyrian, there are many things I could say.

The Assyrian nation has been around for nearly 7,000 years. Throughout its time on this earth, it has seen anything a nation could, from the conquering of the known world to the most brutal of genocides. I consider it an honor to have been born with the Assyrian title. The Assyrians have made large contributions to the world, which was forced to take note of our advances during our extensive history. But not many people today realize nor appreciate such contributions. Those all around the world who have been dispersed have a duty to the wellbeing of our nation and our people.

In today's society, students learn that the preservation of indigenous animals' land is important. Although it is easy to assume that human life would be valued at least as much as an animal's, what efforts do we – the Assyrian people – see today's society putting forth to insure that our land really is and will stay ours? No one else will step in for us and take up the responsibility of caring for our nation, especially if we do not first care for it ourselves.

Being an Assyrian can be a burden, in the sense that many do not know about our culture and must be further informed; however, it is more of an honor in that we belong to a group of people whose history stems back more than six millennia.

For thousands of years, our people have called Assyria home. Now we are dispersed across the globe. We Assyrian-Americans cannot just sit in the luxury of our homes and not acknowledge the same history that our Assyrian forefathers paid for with their own lives to insure its preservation. Those who fully understand the efforts and sacrifices that have been made for the Assyrian-Americans to be where they are today would have to be heartless to not acknowledge themselves as Assyrian, simply because they would be letting the martyrdom and long-time misery of their forefathers go in vain.

If modern-day Assyrian-Americans refuse to take pride in their nationality because they believe that their forefathers were violent, cruel people – while they simultaneously take pride in being American – they are being utterly hypocritical. The Assyrians did kill many, but Americans also have a bloody past. In the 1960s, the United States declared war on North Vietnam. Hundreds of thousands died – and many were innocent civilians.

The Assyrians lived in a time where the motto of living was



"conquer or be conquered."

The only way of survival was through the brutality a people group inflicted on its rivals. No empire during this time period rose to power with peace. In the American Vietnam War, the United States wanted to keep South Vietnam liberated and as far away from North Vietnam's communist way of life as possible. Both Assyria and America had justification for violence.

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A second benefit came from war: advancements in technology. The Assyrians were talented fighters; they established the first professional military and had technology in their possession that was thought to be impossible. Historian D. Brendan Nagle wrote, of the Assyrian nation, "Its engineers developed siege engines, built bridges, dug tunnels and perfected supply and communication systems. Its widespread use of iron weaponry enabled it to put large numbers of soldiers into the field." We as Assyrians should take pride in being descendants of such an advanced civilization and we, too, can carry on our forefathers' reputation.

In the same way that we pledge allegiance to America, we Assyrians should also pledge our allegiance to the wellbeing of Assyria. While we may not believe that we need Assyria, Assyria lives in each of our hearts. Today, a huge number of Assyrians in the Middle East are in need of help. Assyria needs us, now more than ever. Decades of genocides have left a scar on our nation that will forever be remembered in our history. If nothing is done about it, it will be our ultimate defeat. If an Assyrian-American asks why he or she should focus on Assyria when America is all they will ever need, the simple answer is: It is within America's ideological obligation to help Assyrians because the American military is supposed to defend against all enemies, both foreign and domestic. This has to do with the current problem Assyrians and Americans are facing right now: the Islamic State. This terrorist organization has threatened the safety of these United States on multiple occasions. It would be beneficial to both nations to eliminate the threat of ISIS.

Assyrian-Americans should not consider their heritage as a burden, but as an honor. President John F. Kennedy said, "My fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country." If every Assyrian were to adopt the mentality that Kennedy introduced to the American public and apply it to Assyria, nothing could stop us from one day having more than just a safe haven, but a country.

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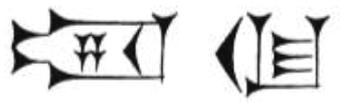
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