

Prevent persecution of Assyrians in Iraq to save their history

By Gabriel Danial

Michael Holtz, The Beijing Bureau Chief for The Christian Science Monitor and writer with The Chicago Tribune and The Associated Press, informs that the Assyrians, also known as [Syriac, Nestorian, or Chaldean Christians] are traced back 6,500 years to ancient Mesopotamia, predating the Abrahamic religions (Holtz). For 1,800 years, the Assyrian empire dominated the region, establishing one of the most advanced civilizations in the ancient world. However, the Assyrian empire collapsed in 612 B.C. during the rise of the Persians. Nevertheless, the Assyrians continued to further advance as a collective community for thousands of years, until the Assyrian genocide deemed Seyfo (sword) occurred in 1915, dismantling their religion, culture, and identity. David Gaunt, a historian and professor at Södertörn University's Centre for Baltic and East European Studies and Member of Academia Europaea, articulates that in Mardin, 86% of Assyrians had disappeared; the 1919 Paris Peace Conference stating that, 250,000 Assyrian had been killed in Anatolia and Ottoman-occupied Iran during the war, and by the end, 50% of the population was killed (Gaunt). Gaunt's data reveals that this genocide was not just a humanitarian catastrophe; it dismantled the foundation of the Assyrian community setting back millenniums of development. However, Seyfo was not the end, due to Assyrians being Catholics in the predominantly Muslim Iraq, persecution of the Assyrian population has not quelled. The never-ending persecution has resulted in detrimental effects to their community, cultural identity, history, and endangered Aramaic, the language of Jesus Christ exacerbating the issues resulting from Seyfo. Benjamen Alda, a Faculty Fellow in the Department of History at the University of California Berkeley, and Assistant Professor of Modern Middle Eastern History at the University of Dayton, revealed that the Islamic State

(IS) erased the memories of revered communities and religious sites; a tragedy especially troubling for the Assyrians because numerous traditions were passed down orally by men and women (Alda). Scholars repeatedly argue that intervention is keen as the aim of IS is to erase not only these communities themselves, but also the forms of inter-communal coexistence that characterized northern Iraq historically. This proves harmful to Assyrian history as it is mainly transmitted orally. Thus, without reliable measures in place to preserve the Assyrians' endangered history, it is at risk of extinction.

Due to the repeated targeting of Assyrian identity and history through the destruction of oral traditions and sacred sites the question arises: To what extent can the benefits of oral history narration and traditions be leveraged to preserve the history, culture, and identity of the Assyrian community from continuous persecution in Iraq? When examining the Islamic State's destruction of archaeological sites, museums, historical monuments, and shrines, it becomes apparent that the place-based violence aims to annihilate the local sense of belonging and the collective sense of memory among the Assyrian population to whom the heritage belongs to, as according to Ömür Harmansah, the Director of the School of Art & Art History at the University of Illinois-Chicago, researching Architectural History of the Middle East (Harmansah). Thus, the systematic erasure of Assyrian Christians by IS reflects a broader campaign of cultural genocide, one that threatens not only lives, but the memory, identity, and future of Assyrians through the destruction of oral traditions, heritage sites, and intangible heritage rooted through prayers, songs, and historic narratives. While oral history remains one of the most vital tools for preserving Assyrian's identity, its effectiveness is undermined by its displacement,

persecution, and lack of documentation. To effectively preserve the Assyrian culture for future generations, urgent intervention is paramount. Therefore, formal recordings of oral traditions and the establishment of political and cultural autonomy in their historic homelands prove vital to the preservation and longevity of their heritage.

The Assyrian genocide of 1915 did not merely decimate the Assyrian population, it set in motion a historical pattern of systemic persecution that continues to this day, leaving Assyrians without security, cultural continuity, or a homeland. Richard R. Pera, a Country Director for Japan and Syria, illustrates that the genocide in the Middle East between 1915 and 1920 was intended to “eradicate Christianity from the region,” as it left more than 500,000 Assyrians dead (Pera). Pera’s findings prove that this genocide was driven heavily by religion leading to a detrimental decline to their Population. Furthermore, Hannibal Travis, a Professor of Law at Florida International University, and graduate of Washington University and Harvard Law School in Human Rights and Genocide Studies indicates that in 1915 during Seyfo, militants were “deliberately targeting [Assyrian] neighborhoods, firing at least fifteen mortar rounds, per day, into them by late 2013.” A charity supported by the Vatican reported in 2015 that “we have had reports of ... all evidence of Christian culture destroyed: [churches, chapels, and crosses]” as well as widespread persecution, the objective being to “clear the place of Christians” (Travis). The essence of Travis’s argument is that the 1915 genocide was not limited to killing people, the Ottomans eradicated any signs of Assyrians. The results of Pera’s death toll paired with Travis’s findings of the destruction of religious institutions highlight the detrimental setback placed upon Assyrians during Seyfo which also exacerbated their sufferings in the present. Furthermore,

Jane Arraf, the Baghdad Bureau Chief of The New York Times and Christian Science Monitor, writes, "the IS has deprived Assyrians of their culture, their history, and their heritage, and that is why it goes hand in hand with genocide. Along with the physical persecution, The Islamic State wants to eliminate - to delete - the memory of these different cultures" (Arraf). Collectively, this evidence underscores the enduring consequences of Seyfo, positioning it as both a physical and cultural genocide with effects that are everlasting.

However, Otmar Oehring, who held the Africa/Middle East Desk and head of the Human Rights Office with a Ph.D. from the Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich, states that scholars in this field persist in denying the Assyrian genocide (Oehring). Gaunt refutes those beliefs by finding that in 2007 the International Association of Genocide Scholars issued a Consensus resolution stating that what happened to the Assyrians during the Ottoman Empires World War 1, was genocide. (Gaunt). Despite these differentiating beliefs, countless factors make it evident that these events are in fact genocide. The demographic collapse which hindered the population's ability to recover, leaving survivors fragmented, displaced, and without the mass needed to sustain their cultural, linguistic, or societal continuity are all hallmarks of this atrocities. Thus, Seyfo did not merely result in death, it destabilized the Assyrians' ability to preserve their identity and secure a homeland, a loss that continues to present itself through the modern Assyrian community.

The targeted destruction of Assyrian heritage sites and religious institutions for centuries demonstrates an attempt to sever the Assyrians' connection to their historical and spiritual roots, simultaneously displacing them. Benjamen Alda indicates that Nineveh

and surrounding areas such as Nimrud and Al-qosh (ancient Assyrian communities) have important artifacts, monasteries, and church complexes which date to Christianity's earliest periods. These areas were once part of Mesopotamia, and contain a rich legacy of medieval literature, preserved in valuable manuscripts dating as far back as the fifth century (Alda). With Assyrians being one of the earliest converts after St. Thomas preached to their community, they developed their own churches: The Assyrian Church of the East, The Chaldean Catholic Church, and The Syriac Orthodox Church, all of which established their religious prominence. Thus, some of the earliest developments of religions resulted from the Assyrians. Despite this fact, Jane Arraf elucidates that there is evidence for the first time of new damage at the Assyrian site of Nimrud - the biblical city of Kalhu - with dramatic bas reliefs of part of the palace defaced (Arraf). The destruction of these once vivid carvings, rich with historical and symbolic meaning, make it evident how identity is dismantled not only through violence, but through the destruction of what they leave behind. Notably, Hannibal Travis cites the German Humanitarian Johannes Lepsius's survey of Christian areas in Turkey (1896) which asserted that 1,100 churches and monasteries had been damaged or leveled in the violence, and that 546,000 people had been driven into poverty by the destruction of their homes, villages, and livelihoods (Travis). This survey proves that Assyrian heritage is never able to fully develop, amid its continuous destruction, leaving them forever displaced. Consistent with Travis's findings, Benjamin Alda highlights that Arab nationalist governments such as the Ba'ath, with power during 1968 to 2003, and later IS, destroyed the villages, churches, shrines, cultural institutions and ancient heritage of Assyrians, including the city of Nimrod, forcing their displacement

to large urban majority centers in Iraq and expelling 200,000 Assyrians of this region between 2014-2017 (Alda). Together, Travis and Alda illustrate the systemic dismantling of Assyrians stripping them of their homes and physical markers of their history and identity. Furthermore, Mariano Castillo, Texas A&M Professor of Practice in Journalism with a master's degree in international Affairs from Columbia University informs that IS has taken over some 35 Assyrian villages, forcing thousands of families to flee (Castillo). Although this occurred in 2015, this research underscores that the destruction will not stop, resulting in greater displacement. Ultimately, these attacks do more than remove physical structures, they erase the communal spaces that hold Assyrian oral rituals, songs, and religious memory, making cultural transmission nearly impossible. This results from the cultural cleansing by IS across centuries, further dismantling religious landmarks which has not only displaced Assyrians physically, but disrupted the chain of oral memory that anchors their identity.

In order to better preserve the Assyrians and their legacy, they must be given an autonomous safe space in Iraq, one similar to the Kurdish Region of Iraq (KRI). Keith Roshangar, professor of Required Religion Course at Harvard reports that the Assyrians' new plan is to push for self-government in the Nineveh Plains and western part of Dohuk, their ancestral homeland, where other threatened Iraqi minorities like the Shabaks, Yazidis, and Turkmen would be welcomed (Roshangar). If successful, this province ensures the continued existence of the Assyrians while also assisting other minorities. Despite this fact, Angus McDowall, The North Africa Bureau Chief, Deputy Bureau Chief and Senior Correspondent of Saudi Arabia informs that following the Ottoman massacres of 1915-

1920, Assyrian delegations made a case for independence at a myriad of conferences -- the Paris Peace Conference, Treaty of Sevres, Treaty of Lausanne, Constantinople Conference, and at the United Nations -- none of which resulted in any form of action (McDowall). The evidence indicates that this is not the first time Assyrians have called for autonomy, despite their efforts, no assistance was provided, leaving the Assyrians to suffer profusely. If history repeats, which has been seen through the persecution, then this effort may be thwarted. However, McDowall further points out that the Iraqi government met to approve a plan that would make the Nineveh Plains composed of nearly 50% Assyrians, a province. Protests were arranged by UN offices in Erbil in support of international protection while the U.S. House Representatives Fortenberry, Eshoo, Wolf, and Van Halen spearheaded a resolution (H.Con.Res.110) to protect Assyrians in the Nineveh Plains (McDowall). With joint effort from the US, this plan has higher potential than past efforts. Furthermore, Ramsen Shamon, Deputy Opinion Editor at Newsweek with a master's in journalism from Northwestern/Medill School of Journalism reports that Pre-2003, the Assyrians in Iraq numbered 1.5 million, that number is now estimated between 100,000-200,000 (Shamon). With these staggering numbers, it becomes impossible to ignore, the Assyrians must be awarded this safe space. Although destruction and persecution resulted in displacement of Assyrians around the Middle East and other countries, this province enables the re-uniting of the population, sparking a revival of their history and culture.

The systemic persecution and destruction of Assyrians' oral history and cultural heritage for centuries has now endangered preserving the little history they have left. Arianne

Ishaya, a retired professor in the Anthropology department at De Anza College with a Ph.D. dissertation at UCLA, conducted research with California State University Stanislaus Special Collections. In doing so, she was able to document numerous oral history stories, creating a collection called The Assyrian Oral History Collection at CSUS, to be used as sources for scholarly research (Ishaya). This collection marks a crucial turning point in preserving the Assyrian narrative, one that relies on lived experiences, oral transmission, and generational memory. This initiative stands as a model for how lived memory can be transformed into cultural permanence by bridging the past and future through recordings. This model could inspire other scholars to create oral collections of endangered histories, ensuring historical preservation. Through efforts like this, Assyrians can reclaim control over their cultural identity history, and community to resist erasure that has long threatened their existence. The preservation of oral history is not just a tool of remembrance; it is a method to overcome the never-ending persecution that has haunted them.

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