



Input to the Special Rapporteur on minority issues

Contribution country visit to Iraq:

The Assyrians

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By

UNREPRESENTED PEOPLES AND NATIONS ORGANISATION
THE ASSYRIAN ALLIANCE (AUA)

Submitting organizations:



The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization (UNPO) is an international membership-based organization established to empower the voices of unrepresented peoples worldwide and to protect their fundamental human rights. The peoples represented within the UNPO membership are all united by one shared condition: they are denied equal representation in the institutions of national or international governance. As a consequence, their opportunity to participate on the national or international stage is limited, and they struggle to fully realize their rights to civil and political participation and to control their economic, social, and cultural development. In many cases, they are subject to the worst forms of violence and repression.

The UNPO Secretariat has been advocating for the rights of the Assyrian people as a whole since 1991, engaging with various civil society organizations, groups and representatives from the Assyrian community. <https://unpo.org/>

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The Assyrian Universal Alliance (AUA) is a representative body of Assyrians from around the world. The AUA was established in Pau, France, on April 13, 1968 to serve as a powerful voice for the Assyrian nation, committing itself to spreading, upholding and enhancing the Assyrian voice around the world, and working to secure the sacred human and national rights of the Assyrian people in the homeland and in the Diaspora. The AUA diligently advocates the Assyrian cause and promotes the aspirations of the Assyrian nation internationally. It urges democratic governments and international bodies to defend the rights of the

Assyrian people in their ancestral homeland to preserve their national identity, culture, heritage, language and religion.

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Introduction: The Assyrians

In light of the upcoming country visit to Iraq by the UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues, taking place from 15 June to 23 July 2025, and his call for input, this submission will provide information on the current situation of the Assyrian minority living in Iraq. It will discuss current challenges for the Assyrians in Iraq and highlight several possible pathways for improvements.

The Assyrians are an indigenous ethnic group from ancient Mesopotamia (now the area comprising modern-day Iraq, southeastern Turkey, northwestern Iran, and northeastern Syria). The Assyrians are considered a distinct people due to their unique linguistic, cultural, and historical identity, dating back millennia to their once-powerful empire that spanned across modern-day Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran. After the fall of their empire in the 7th century BCE, Assyrians endured centuries of persecution, displacement, and forced assimilation under successive empires and states. The 20th century brought severe challenges, including the Assyrian genocide during World War I, which resulted in massive loss of life and further displacement. Today, Assyrians continue to face discrimination and political marginalization, with their cultural identity and heritage under constant threat. For the sake of this submission only the situation of Assyrians in Iraq will be assessed.

General Situation

In Iraq, the Assyrian community continues to face severe challenges that undermine their rights, identity, and safety. Despite their long history in the region, Assyrians remain excluded from political processes, with systemic discrimination affecting their cultural and territorial integrity.

Geography

In Iraq the majority of the Assyrian minority is living in the Nineveh Plain situated in the North of Iraq. The Nineveh Plain, which is considered to be the birthplace of the Assyrian people, has been serving as a conflict zone between the Iraqi Militia and the Kurdistan region (KRI) since 2003, with great consequences for the Assyrian communities living there. The



Assyrians believe that the Nineveh Plain should stay under the control of the Iraqi Government.

Moreover, in the Kurdistan Region (KRI) the conflict between the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and the Republic of Türkiye has resulted in the displacement of Assyrians, making the Assyrian minority a victim of a regional conflict which has nothing to do with them.

A visit to these northern regions during the special rapporteur's country visit to Iraq would be beneficial to acquire a complete image of the status of minority and indigenous rights in Iraq.

Legal provisions and policies

Besides the consequences of conflict in the region, the Assyrians have been facing systematic marginalization, exclusion from political processes, and are subjected to discrimination and underrepresentation for decades.

First of all, the Assyrian people are not formally acknowledged as indigenous people of Iraq within the country's constitution. This legal void denies the community specific protections and undermines their political and cultural legitimacy within the Iraqi state. Even though the Iraqi Constitution is progressive in some areas, it lacks protection measures for indigenous and minority rights and contains vague and conflicting articles to the rights of marginalized communities like the Assyrians.

Where article 125 of the Iraqi constitution guarantees administrative, political, cultural and educational rights to various nationalities, in the Nineveh Plain and surrounding areas its implementation remains flawed.

Furthermore, current Iraqi civil and election law allows non-Assyrians to vote to elect the Assyrian representatives in the Iraqi parliament which undermines genuine representation. Besides legal provisions, historical policies like Arabization, Kurdification and nationality correction have further contributed to the displacement and disenfranchisement of Assyrians. Moreover, the long-postponed creation of a dedicated Assyrian Affairs Office further contributes to the lack of institutional representation, limiting avenues for effective advocacy and policy making at the federal level.

Discrimination, assimilation and land grabbing

Religious discrimination and misqualification

Assyrians, who are predominantly Christian, have faced systemic discrimination, forced displacement, and violence from extremist groups and political factions. There have been concerns about religious classification in Iraq, particularly regarding children born to mixed marriages. In some cases, when an Assyrian Christian marries a Muslim, the central government will automatically register all children—including those from a previous marriage—as Muslim. This practice has raised concerns among Assyrian communities, as it

can impact their religious identity and legal status. The issue is tied to broader challenges Assyrians face in Iraq, including religious discrimination and bureaucratic obstacles.

Furthermore, there have been reports of systematic abuse at checkpoints in KRI, where Indigenous Assyrians are referred to solely as "Christians." This practice effectively reduces their identity to a religious minority, rather than recognizing them as the Indigenous Assyrian People of Iraq. This misclassification has serious implications, as it can limit political representation, land rights, and access to cultural protections. Assyrians have historically faced discrimination, forced displacement, and marginalization, and this form of identity suppression further erodes their status as an ethnic and indigenous group rather than just a religious community.

Financial barriers

Lastly, Assyrian farmers in KRI face multiple financial barriers when delivering their produce to the Iraqi market. They are required to pay export fees to the KRI in order to transport their fruits to areas controlled by the Iraqi central government. Additionally, once inside Iraq-controlled areas, they must pay additional fees to militias that control the roads, creating an unfair double taxation system. These economic obstacles disproportionately affect Assyrian farmers, limiting their ability to compete in the market and sustain their agricultural livelihoods.

Land grabbing

Moreover, illegal land confiscations continue to push Assyrians out of their ancestral homes, forcing many into permanent exile. Since establishment of a no-fly zone in Northern Iraq in 1991 and following the fall of the Iraqi government in March 2003, Indigenous Assyrians have faced widespread land grabs, with many cases being ignored or remaining unresolved. Assyrians have taken their claims to courts in the Kurdistan Region Government (KRI), where rulings have been issued to return confiscated lands. However, these court orders are often not enforced, either due to legal limitations or deliberate inaction by authorities.

Reports indicate that over 70 Assyrian villages and towns have been affected by land confiscation, with some cases dating back to 1933. Despite legal victories, Assyrians continue to struggle with forced displacement and lack of government intervention.

In recent weeks, Assyrian residents in Ankawa, a historically Christian town in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), have raised concerns over the increase in bars, nightclubs, and restaurants. Many believe that the KRI government has selectively permitted the expansion of such businesses in Ankawa, leading to safety concerns and disruptions for families. Residents argue that this environment has contributed to a rise in prostitution involving Arab, Kurdish, and Iranian individuals, further eroding the town's cultural integrity. Some Assyrians suspect that these developments are part of a deliberate effort to push them out of Ankawa.

Additionally, reports indicate that high-ranking KRI officials have been involved in confiscating Assyrian lands in Ankawa to expand the airport, which later led to the construction of commercial and residential buildings

For the past eight years, none of the Indigenous Assyrian land-grabbing cases have been heard in KRI court. Judges routinely assign court dates, only to postpone hearings repeatedly. Many Indigenous Assyrians believe these delays are intentional—designed to erode their faith in the legal system and their future. Others suspect the postponements stem from deep-rooted systemic corruption.

The right to political participation and access to public services

Political participation

Assyrians struggle with political disenfranchisement, as Kurdish and Iraqi manipulate Assyrian political seats, limiting Assyrian ability to advocate for their rights. Existing election laws allow non-Assyrian Iraqi and KRI political parties to vote on the five seats designated for the Assyrian minority in the Iraqi Parliament and the three seats in the Kurdistan Region Iraq Parliament. As a result, Assyrian representatives are elected with minimal participation from the indigenous Assyrian population and thus excludes Assyrians from decision-making processes and undermines genuine representation, effectively silencing a community that has historically contributed to the region's cultural fabric.

Since the establishment of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) parliament, Assyrians were allocated five designated seats, along with one seat for Armenians. However, amid the recent power struggle between the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) leading up to the October 2024 parliamentary elections, the KRI authorities controversially reduced Assyrian representation to just three seats—one for Nohadra/Dohuk, one for Erbil, and one for Sulaymaniyah.

By allowing non-Assyrians to vote for Assyrian representatives, the KDP and PUK effectively took control of the election process, appointing candidates who, according to critics, lack genuine commitment to protecting the rights of Indigenous Assyrians. In response, Assyrian communities have demanded electoral reforms in both Iraq and KRI to ensure that only Assyrians can vote for their own representatives in parliament.

Assyrian organizations in Iraq have filed lawsuits in the Iraqi Federal Court, but due to a lack of political support, these cases have either been dismissed or ignored. In some instances, courts have even denied Assyrian organizations the opportunity to present their demands. Despite these setbacks, Assyrian political organizations are preparing to file another lawsuit in the Iraqi Federal Court in the coming weeks.

Access to public services

Besides obstructions to the enjoyment of the right to political participation Assyrian communities in Iraq face additional difficulties in accessing public services like adequate healthcare due to political instability and systemic discrimination.

Moreover, due to land confiscation and forced displacement, Assyrian communities struggle to secure stable housing.

The judicial system in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) operates under significant political influence, particularly from dominant Kurdish parties such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Reports indicate that judicial appointments and rulings are often shaped by political interests, limiting the independence of the courts.

The overbuilding in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has led to significant strain on natural resources, particularly water, electricity, and sewage infrastructure. Rapid urban expansion, often driven by political and economic interests rather than sustainable planning, has resulted in resource shortages and financial stress for many residents.

For Assyrians, this issue is compounded by economic discrimination, as infrastructure projects often neglect minority communities. Reports indicate that unequal distribution of public resources has left Assyrian villages with poor access to electricity, water, and essential services. Additionally, the privatization of utilities has led to higher costs, disproportionately affecting economically vulnerable groups.

The lack of proper sewage systems and water management has further exacerbated living conditions, contributing to health risks and environmental degradation. Assyrian communities have raised concerns about systematic neglect, arguing that these infrastructural failures are part of a broader pattern of political marginalization. Education and linguistic rights.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has long faced criticism for its government appointment practices, which are often based on political loyalty rather than qualifications or expertise. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) dominate the political landscape, and reports indicate that government positions at all levels are frequently filled by individuals with strong party affiliations rather than relevant experience.

This system has led to administrative inefficiencies, governance challenges, and public dissatisfaction. Many officials lack the necessary education or expertise for their roles, resulting in poor decision-making and ineffective policy implementation. Additionally, the politicization of appointments has contributed to corruption, nepotism, and a lack of accountability, further eroding trust in government institutions.

The absence of merit-based hiring has also hindered economic development, as key sectors—such as infrastructure, healthcare, and education—struggle under leadership that prioritizes party interests over public welfare. Calls for judicial and electoral reforms have grown, but political divisions between KDP and PUK continue to obstruct meaningful change.

The Assyrians have historically struggled with limited access to quality education, and their curriculum is often marginalized or banned in certain regions. Many Assyrian schools have been forcibly shut down or defunded, and their history is often misrepresented in official curricula. An example would be that in some cases, people responsible for Assyrian Genocide before WWI are promoted as Kurdish Leaders.

Hate crime and hate speech

Assyrians in Iraq have faced political and extremist threats that limit their freedom of expression. Historical and ongoing discrimination, including anti-Assyrian sentiment, has manifested in various forms, such as land confiscations, forced assimilation, and violence.

The most recent example of these threats happened on Nisan/April 1, 2025, when an extremist attacked the Assyrian New Year Parade in Duhok, Iraqi, injuring two Assyrians and a security officer. The attacker, reportedly shouting Islamic State slogans, ran toward the crowd and struck two Assyrians with an axe before being subdued by participants. The victims included a 17-year-old boy and a 75-year-old woman, both of whom suffered skull fractures. Despite the attack, Assyrians continued their celebrations, holding their flags high—even one stained with blood—as a symbol of resilience.

The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) condemned the attack, and Assyrian leaders called for stronger measures against extremism.

Besides extremist violence, following the passing of Pope Francis on April 21, 2025, there was a noticeable surge in anti-Christian rhetoric on Iraqi Arab and Kurdish social media platforms. Some users posted derogatory remarks about the late Pope, while others used the occasion to spread anti-Christian sentiment. This reaction highlights the ongoing challenges faced by Iraq's Christian community, which has historically endured discrimination, forced displacement, and violence. Despite these attacks, many Christian leaders and advocates have called for peaceful dialogue and mutual respect in response to the negativity.

Furthermore, during a visit by Assyrian students from the diaspora to the Assyrian village of Simile, Iraq, in April 2025, a group of Kurdish children reportedly used Islamic slogans, including "Allah Akbar," in an attempt to intimidate the Assyrian students. This incident has been cited as evidence of deep-seated hostility toward Assyrians, with concerns that such attitudes are passed down from parents to children.

Many Assyrians argue that the hostile attitude towards the Assyrian People reflects a broader issue of historical land disputes, as the majority of the Kurdish population in Duhok province arrived after 1991. Assyrians believe that their ancestral lands have been gradually taken over, leading to demographic shifts and cultural erasure.

The rise in hate speech and discrimination in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) can be attributed to several factors:

For years, local Imams, Sheikhs, and Mullahs in KRI have used Friday sermons to spread accusations and promote hate speech against Christians. While the KRI government presents the region as one of the safest in Iraq—often as part of lobbying efforts to gain Western support—evidence suggests that Islamic parties have gained influence within KRI's political system, controlling parts of the regional parliament. Additionally, reports indicate that thousands of Kurds from Iraq joined ISIS, raising concerns about ideological extremism within the region.

The military failure of KRI forces in protecting Assyrians in the Nineveh Plain further exacerbated the crisis. On the morning of August 7, 2014, KRI forces withdrew from the Nineveh Plain, allowing ISIS to enter the area. This withdrawal led to the forced displacement of nearly 200,000 Indigenous Assyrians. Whether this retreat was due to a lack of military capability or a deliberate withdrawal remains a point of contention.

Moreover, the KRI education system, from elementary school to high school, has been criticized for promoting Kurdish nationalism while marginalizing Assyrians, Arabs, and Turkmens. Textbooks often distort historical facts and portray Assyrians as adversaries, fostering division and resentment among students. This systematic approach to education contributes to long-term discrimination and reinforces negative stereotypes against minority communities.

Recommendations

Because of the situation discussed above the UNPO and the AUA would like to ask the UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues to consider the following recommendations to improve the situation of the Assyrian people in Iraq during his country visit:

1. To visit the **Kurdistan region (KRI)** and the **Nineveh Plain** in the Northern part of Iraq are indispensable for acquiring a complete picture of minority rights in Iraq.
2. To meet with **Assyrian representatives** on the ground would be highly recommended in order to adequately assess the Assyrian minority's situation.
3. Urge the Iraqi government **to amend election law** to ensure that only people with the Assyrian identity can vote for the five seats designated to the Assyrian community in the Iraqi Parliament and the Kurdistan Region Iraqi Parliament, to ensure genuine representation.
4. Urge the Iraqi government to **counter religious classification practices** that harm Assyrians religious rights.
5. **Condemn land grabbing practices** and urge the Iraqi government to oversee cases of land disputes in regional courts.
6. Highlight the importance of **combatting hate speech and crime** by resolving ancient land disputes. Overseeing land dispute cases at regional courts, adequate representation of history in education and emphasizing remembrance could be beneficial to this aim.
7. Consider a joint allegation letter or a press release with the Special Rapporteur on Indigenous peoples to Urge the Iraqi government to officially and constitutionally recognize the Assyrians as a indigenous peoples rather than solely a religious group.

Official recognition of Assyrians as indigenous people of Iraq would protect their historical and cultural rights, ensuring equal political and legal standing.