

An Assyrian genocide monument in Phoenix, AZ?

Results of a comprehensive survey.

A Seyfo Center Publication

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Introduction

The Assyrians, including but not limited to all who identify themselves as Assyrian, Chaldean, and/or Syriac, are an ethnic group whose origins trace back to the ancient Assyrian Empire. The heartland of the Assyrian Empire today consists of northern Iraq, southeastern Turkey, along with parts of Syria, and Iran. The Assyrians are people who have inhabited the Middle East since ancient times and are the indigenous people of Mesopotamia, better known as “the cradle of civilization”.

The Assyrian people have been victim to countless persecutions and genocidal acts and as such, many have sought refuge here in the United States as well as various countries around the world. One of the most devastating genocides was under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, from 1914 to 1923, when hundreds and thousands of innocent and unarmed Assyrians faced targeted killings, rape, abuse, crucifixion, destruction of homes and villages as well as the razing of churches at the hands of the Ottoman Turks and their Kurdish allies. It was estimated that approximately 250,000 Assyrians were murdered during the genocide (Travis, 2010). According to Yacoub (2016), 1915 came to be remembered as the Year of the Sword.

Archives show that the government of the Young Turks exterminated its Christian subjects in the form of massacres, death marches, and mass deportations. These brutal policies resulted in the death of two million Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks. In 2007, the world’s foremost group of genocide scholars, the International Association of Genocide Scholars (IAGS), formally

recognized both the Assyrian and Greek genocides, announcing that: “It is the conviction of the International Association of Genocide Scholars that the Ottoman campaign against Christian minorities of the Empire between 1914 and 1923 constituted genocide against Armenians, Assyrians, and Pontian and Anatolian Greeks” (*See Appendix 2*). The IAGS called "upon the government of Turkey to acknowledge the genocides against these populations, to issue a formal apology, and to take prompt and meaningful steps toward restitution" (*See Appendix 2*).

Consequently, another horrendous act of genocide was committed by the government of Iraq and its Kurdish irregulars, remembered as the *Simele Massacre of 1933*, during which the Iraqi army targeted Assyrians living in the city of Simele and its surrounding villages. According to Donabed (2016), eyewitnesses poured out their hearts as they shared the horrible acts of slaughter affecting men, women, and children. Adding to these inhumane acts, women had their bellies slashed and for amusement their body parts were put into their lifeless hands. The media gave much attention to General Bakr Sidqi for the horrific slaughter of thousands of Assyrians and named him a military hero (Assyrian Policy Institute, 2018). For many years, not much attention has been given to these types of ethnic cleansings due to lack of government acknowledgements.

However, there is a rise in awareness among scholars in recent years regarding the Ottoman Empire’s World War I genocides and ethnic cleansing that not only included the Armenians but also other Christian autonomous groups such as the Assyrians (Gaunt, 2015). Due to advocacy efforts across many countries by the Assyrian people, it is becoming more apparent that recognition is slowly being granted. Nevertheless, in commemoration of the genocides, many countries have already acknowledged the plight endured by the Assyrians. Therefore, to date, fifteen countries have erected monuments in recognition of the Assyrian genocide including Germany, Sweden, Syria, Australia, Ukraine, Switzerland, Belgium, Greece, Turkey, Armenia, France, Iraq, Russia, United Kingdom, and the United States, including Chicago, IL, Los Angeles, CA, and Grafton, MA. (AINA, 2013). The monument in Baquba Assyrian Refugee Camp, Iraq that was erected in 1919 is no longer standing.

Assyrian Community in Phoenix, Arizona

According to Jahn Khidan, who arrived in Phoenix in 1993, the gradual migration of Assyrians to Arizona had begun in the 1970’s. In 1996, there were approximately forty families residing in Phoenix and the first Assyrian Church of the East was built to cater to the needs of that community. St. Peter Assyrian Church of the East, built in Glendale, AZ now has over 980 families in membership, averaging around five people per family.

Later, St. George Ancient Church of the East was built in Glendale with a current membership of over 280 families. More recently, St. Joseph Assyrian Church of the East in Gilbert, AZ was

consecrated in 2019 and its membership has reached over 120 families. Again, each family ranges in size from one to ten people, an average of five (*See Acknowledgements*).

As the community continued to grow, in 2016, the Assyrian American Cultural Organization of Arizona petitioned to erect an Assyrian genocide monument in Wesley Bolin Plaza, Phoenix. Governor Doug Ducey vetoed these efforts. (*See Appendix 3*) However, on March 3, 2020, through work done by Seyfo Center, Arizona chapter and its grassroots efforts, the Arizona House of Representatives, through a proclamation, recognized the 1915 genocide by Ottoman Turkey, and declared August 7th as the Assyrian Genocide Remembrance Day (HCR2006). This was a historical achievement for the Assyrians residing in Arizona (*See Appendix 4*).

In the recent years there has been a great influx of Assyrians into Arizona from neighboring states. Yet, others have come, and continue to come, escaping their homelands seeking relief from Islamic oppressive countries. Since 1915 the Assyrians have continued to experience horrific genocides. The disparities of these killings continue to this day, consequently, the number of Assyrian lives lost during the 2014 genocide at the hands of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is ever increasing. The Assyrians continue to live under oppressive fear including death threats while being given options to renounce their faith and forfeit their homes and possessions in exchange for their lives (Amnesty International, 2014). As they find peace and resettle in safety, they continue to remember the many families who suffered the atrocities of the past. Therefore, the reality of building a monument in commemoration of the genocides of the Assyrians who lost their lives will provide a memorable solace to their community in Arizona.

Methods

In September 2018, Seyfo Center, Arizona chapter created a pilot survey that was administered at the 89th annual convention of the Assyrian American National Federation in Chandler, AZ. This convention, with its comprehensive program held over the Labor Day weekend, attracts attendees from across the United States and abroad. Eighty-nine collected responses demonstrated an extraordinarily strong desire for a genocide monument in Phoenix.

Shortly after, the survey questions were revised and expanded, and an online version was launched via mass email and social media, primarily Facebook, to the Assyrian community in Arizona on January 13, 2019. Simultaneously, paper surveys were sequentially administered to the members of the following churches: St. Peter Assyrian Church of the East in Glendale, St. George Ancient Church of the East in Glendale, and St. Joseph Assyrian Church of the East in Gilbert. The Seyfo Center, Arizona chapter distributed these surveys every Sunday for two months at each church. Members of the youth committees assisted with this process and with translating the survey when necessary. Survey takers were encouraged to complete the survey in

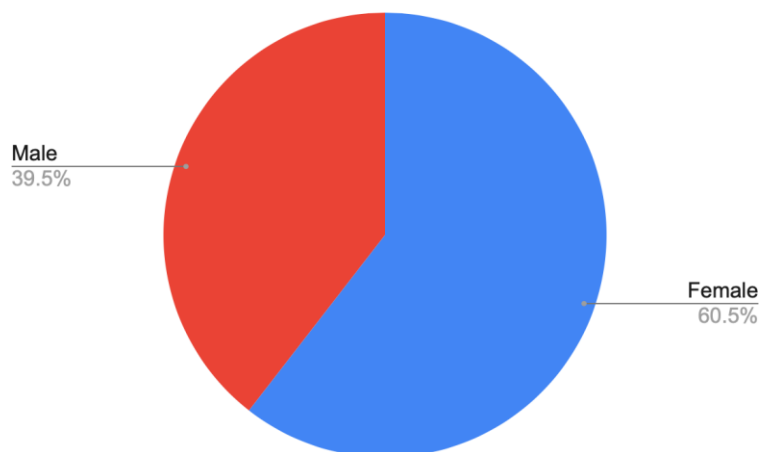
its entirety; however, they were permitted to skip questions they did not feel comfortable answering. Survey collection was completed in December 2019; approximately 500 surveys were collected and analyzed (*See Appendix 1*).

Results

Section A: Demographics

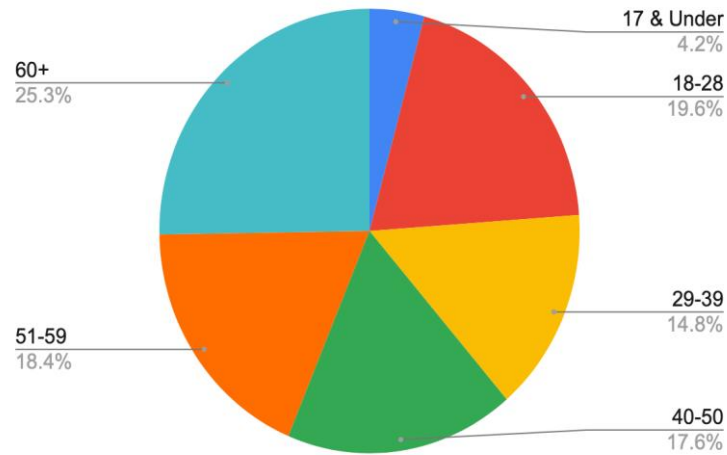
What is your gender? (499 responses)

- Female - 302 (60.5%)
- Male - 197 (39.5%)



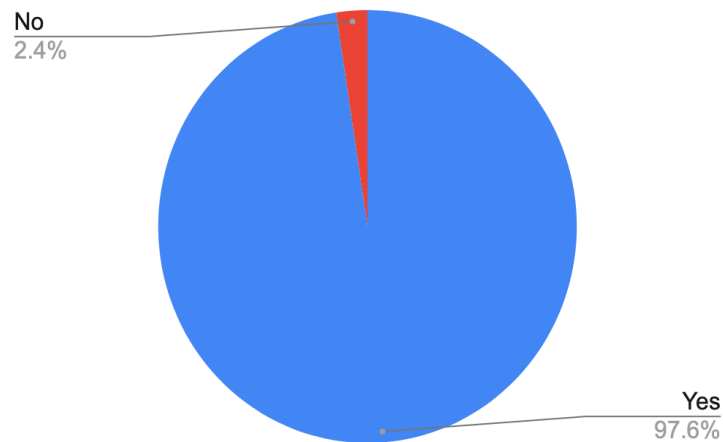
What is your age group? (499 responses)

- 17 & under -21 (4.2%)
- (18-28) - 98 (19.6%)
- (29-39) -74 (14.8%)
- (40-50) - 88 (17.6%)
- (51-59) - 92 (18.4%)
- (60+) - 126 (25.3%)



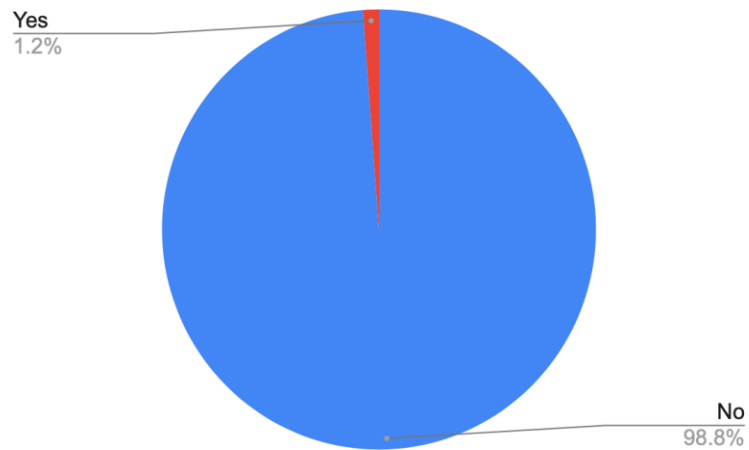
Are you ethnically Assyrian? (500 responses)

- Yes - 488 (97.6%)
- No - 12 (2.4%)



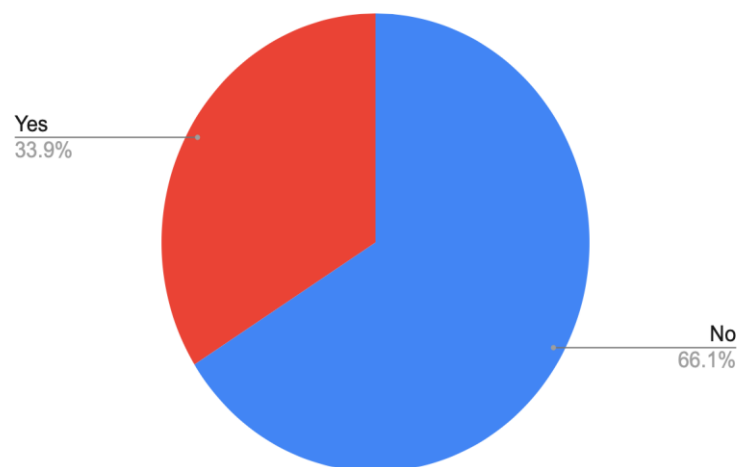
Are you a genocide survivor? (500 responses)

- No - 494 (98.8%)
- Yes - 6 (1.2%)



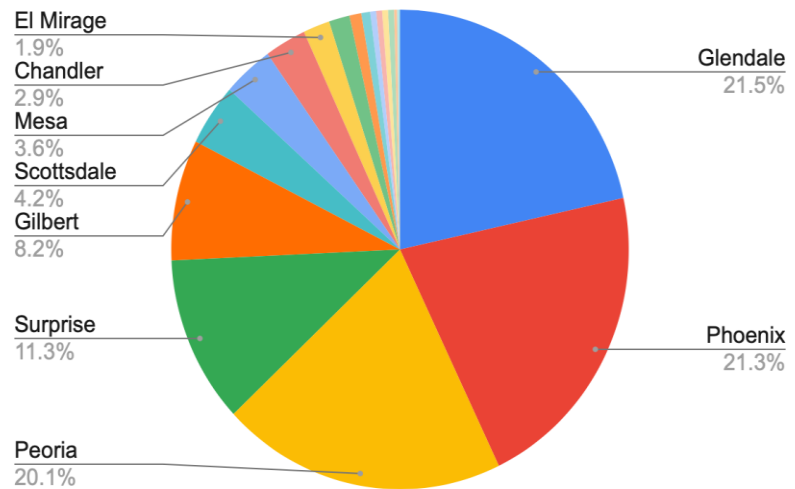
Are you a descendant of a genocide survivor? (492 responses)

- No - 325 (66.1%)
- Yes - 167 (33.9%)



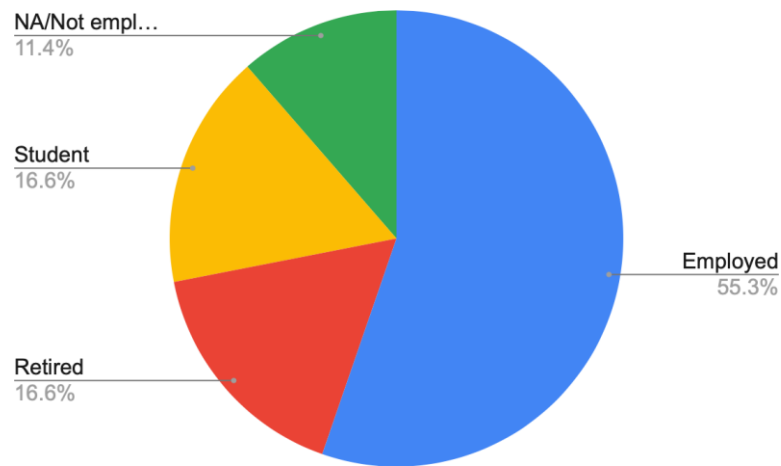
Please provide us with your city of residence. (478 responses)

- Glendale - 103 (21.5%)
- Phoenix - 102 (21.3%)
- Peoria - 96 (20.1%)
- Surprise - 54 (11.3%)
- Gilbert - 39 (8.2%)
- Scottsdale - 20 (4.2%)
- Mesa - 17 (3.6%)
- Chandler - 14 (2.9%)
- El Mirage - 9 (1.9%)
- Avondale - 7 (1.5%)
- Sun City - 4 (.8%)
- Queen Creek - 3 (.6%)
- Paradise Valley - 2 (.4%)
- Youngtown - 2 (.4%)
- Cave Creek - 2 (.4%)
- Goodyear - 2 (.4%)
- Tempe - 1 (.2%)
- Tucson - 1 (.2%)



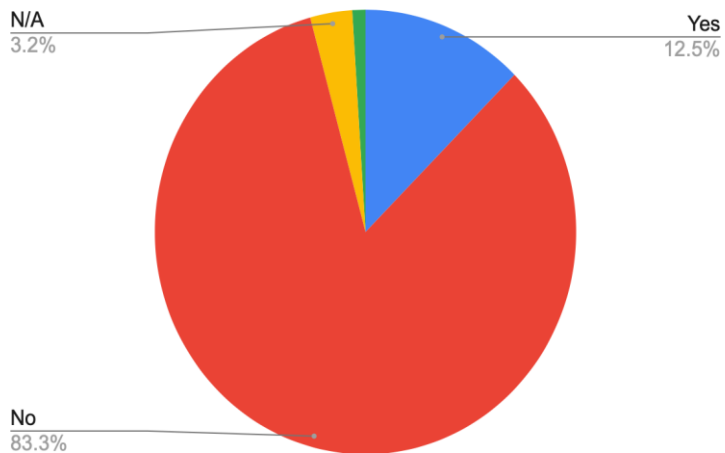
What is your profession/job title (employment status)? (499 responses)

- Employed - 276 (55.3%)
- Retired - 83 (16.6%)
- Student - 83 (16.6%)
- N/A or unemployed - 57 (11.4%)



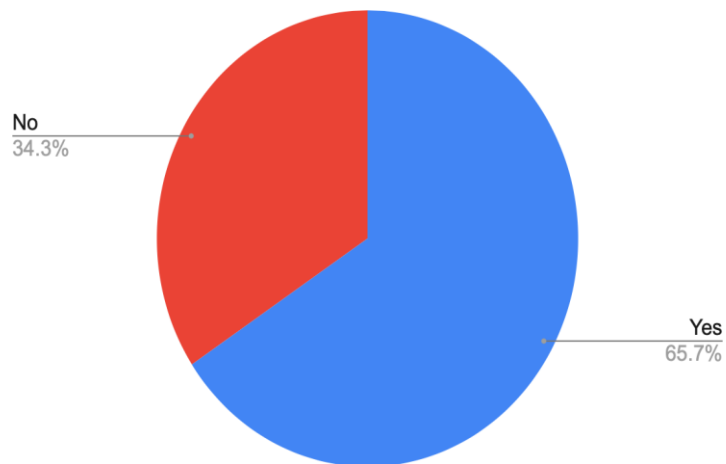
Do you own a business? (496 responses)

- No - 413 (83.3%)
- Yes - 62 (12.5%)
- N/A - 16 (3.2%)
- Other answer - 5 (1.0%)



Are you a registered voter in Arizona? (478 responses)

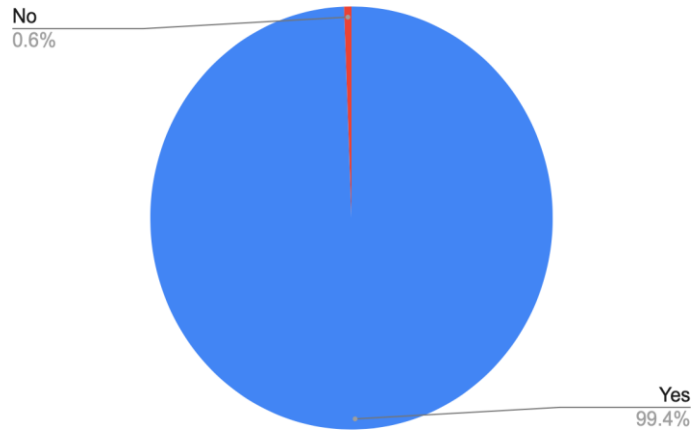
- Yes - 314 (65.7%)
- No - 164 (34.3%)



Section B: Assyrian Genocide Monument

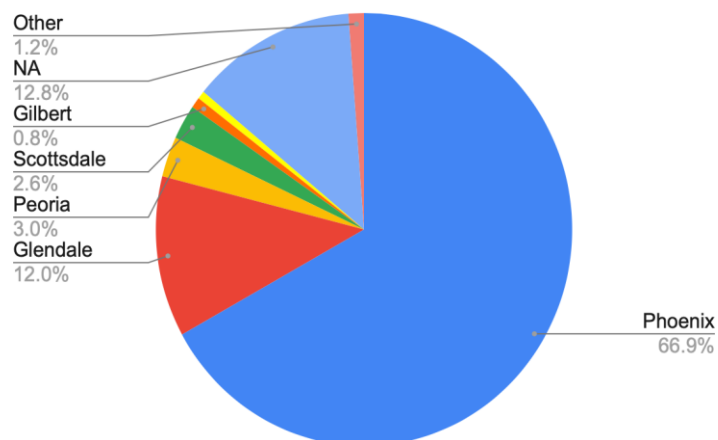
Would you like to see an Assyrian genocide monument in Phoenix? (500 responses)

- Yes - 497 (99.4%)
- No - 3 (.6%)



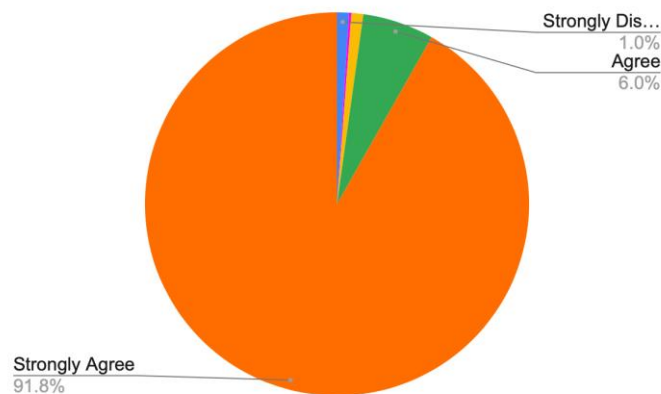
If you answered “Yes” to the previous question, in what suburb should the monument be located? (if you answered “No” to the previous question please type “NA”) (499 responses)

- Phoenix - 334 (66.9%)
- Glendale - 60 (12%)
- Peoria - 15 (3%)
- Scottsdale - 13 (2.6%)
- Gilbert - 4 (.8%)
- Surprise - 3 (.6%)
- N/A - 64 (12.8%)
- Other answer - 6 (1.2%)



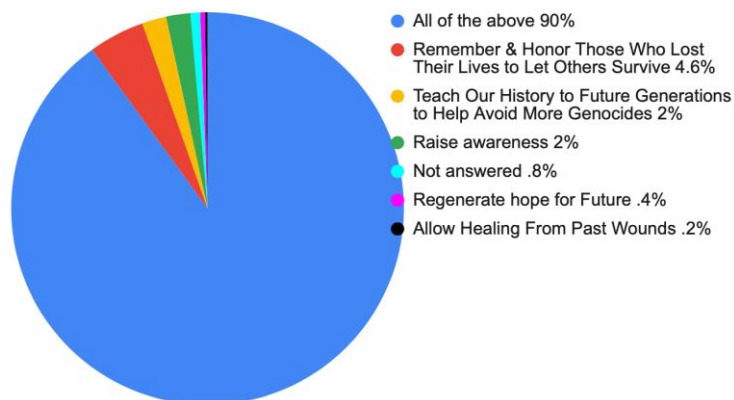
Tell us how strongly you feel about the need for an Assyrian genocide monument in Phoenix:
(500 responses)

- Strongly Disagree - 5 (1%)
- Disagree - 1 (.2%)
- Neutral - 5 (1%)
- Agree - 30 (6%)
- Strongly Agree - 459 (91.8%)



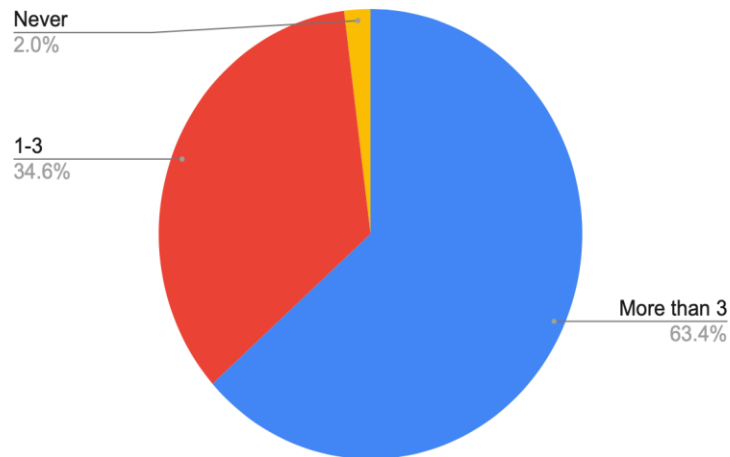
What are your main reasons for visiting a genocide monument? (500 responses)

- Remember and honor those who lost their lives to let others survive-23 (4.6%)
- Teach our history to future generations to help avoid more genocides -10 (2%)
- Raise awareness-10 (2%)
- Regenerate hope for the future-2 (.4%)
- Allow healing from past wounds-1 (.2%)
- All of the above-450 (90%)
- Not answered-4 (.8%)



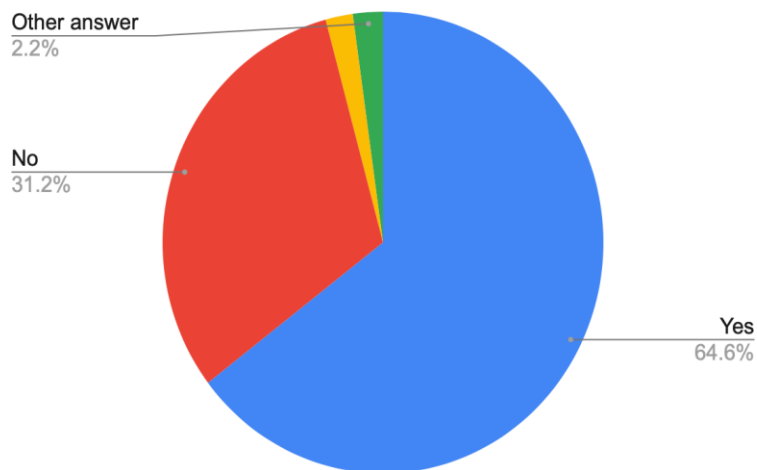
How often and for what occasions would you visit a genocide/Assyrian monument? (500 responses)

- Greater than 3 times per year - 317 (63.4%)
- 1-3 times per year - 173 (34.6%)
- Never - 10 (2%)



Will you be willing/able to help sponsor the construction of an Assyrian genocide monument in Phoenix, AZ? (500 responses)

- Yes - 323 (64.6%)
- No - 156 (31.2%)
- Not answered - 10 (2%)
- Other answers - 11 (2.2%)



Discussion

In this survey we found that just over 60% of survey takers were women. Although a majority of the population were not directly affected by genocide, $\frac{1}{3}$ of the survey takers were direct descendants of genocide survivors. The majority of the community reside along the Loop 101 freeway. This population is roughly distributed in Glendale (20%), North Phoenix (20%), Peoria (20%), Surprise (11%), Gilbert (8%), and Scottsdale (4%). Approximately $\frac{2}{3}$ (66%) of the population are registered voters, $\frac{1}{3}$ (34%) being unregistered. 4.2% of survey takers were not yet eligible to register due to being seventeen-years-old or younger. Our research shows that of the 7,278,717 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019) people residing in Arizona, 4,281,152 (Arizona Registered Voters, 2020) are registered voters, which translates to 58.82% of the population. Therefore, by inference, the percentage of registered Assyrian Arizonans seems to exceed the percentage of non-Assyrian registered voters.

Over 99% of survey takers answered “yes” when posed with the question as to whether they would like to see an Assyrian genocide monument in Phoenix. Approximately 92% of survey takers expressed a strong desire for an Assyrian genocide monument in Phoenix. 90% of survey takers cited the following reasons for requesting an Assyrian genocide monument: 1) to remember and honor those who lost their lives to let others live, 2) to teach their history to future generations to help avoid more genocides, 3) to raise awareness, 4) to regenerate hope for the future, and 5) to allow healing from past (and current) wounds. Approximately $\frac{2}{3}$ of survey takers indicated that they would likely visit the monument more than three times per year and the remaining $\frac{1}{3}$ of survey takers stated that they would visit the monument one to three times per year. Approximately $\frac{2}{3}$ of survey takers expressed willingness and the ability to provide funding for the monument.

Approximately 67% of survey takers wish to see an Assyrian genocide monument built in downtown Phoenix. When we administered this survey, the volunteers asked for clarification and most cited the Wesley Bolin Plaza, at the Capitol Mall. However, on May 18, 2016, Governor Doug Ducey had recommended that the Arizona Department of Administration work with the Governmental Mall Commission to review the current monuments and develop a plan for the future of the Wesley Bolin Plaza. (*See Appendix 3*)

Limitations

This survey excludes a few key points that could not be addressed due to lack of updated Census data. Census 2020 data will provide an approximate number of Assyrians residing in Phoenix, or Arizona, as this remains unknown to date. A reasonable inference can be made using the data in this article that was provided by the Assyrian churches in Phoenix. For instance, if we assume

that each church “family membership” has an average of five people per family, then approximately 6,940 Assyrians are members of these churches.

Due to time and manpower constraints, Seyfo Center, Arizona chapter was unable to survey Assyrians that attend and/or are members of the following churches in Phoenix: Mar Abraham Chaldean Catholic Church in Scottsdale, Holy Family Chaldean Catholic Church in Phoenix, St. Mary Syriac Orthodox Church in Phoenix and several non-Assyrian churches throughout the valley such as Catholic and various evangelical churches. Thus, it may be reasonable to assume that there may be more than 13,000 Assyrians living in Phoenix and its surrounding cities alone. For similar reasons, an accurate estimate of the Assyrians living throughout Arizona is also unknown. There is a small known community in Tucson, and there are families living in Yuma, Flagstaff, Sedona and Payson. The total number may easily exceed 20,000 people within the state of Arizona. Census 2020 results may soon shed light on actual population numbers, however, the Assyrian community, like many other immigrant communities, has historically proven to be difficult to count for a multitude of reasons that are beyond a comprehensive analysis in this publication.

Conclusion

Generational shifts and the dwindling number of Assyrian genocide survivors and their memories are dependent on the foundations set today, to never forget the past. Memorials are reminders of the past which provide context for new responses in the future. Memorials and monuments act as psychopolitical and ethical reminders of past trauma that will encourage critical consciousness towards transformative practices in the future. Perhaps an important aspect of the culture of memory, guides the struggle for justice and human rights. Traumatic events such as mass exterminations, dictatorships and ethnic cleansings are still happening across the globe today making it evermore imperative for the embodiment of a memorial space.

Monuments are objects or buildings that have been created to honor an important person or a historic event that has occurred. People have built monuments for thousands of years. Through this survey, the growing Assyrian community of Arizona has not only made it abundantly clear that they have a strong desire, but also the support to erect a monument in honor of their genocide victims, preferably located in Wesley Bolin Plaza. Erecting a monument will empower Assyrians by commemorating and honoring their ancestors and draw strength from their ability to not only survive but also to thrive in their newly found home in Arizona and continue the healing process. Mr. Sabri Atman, the founder and director of the Seyfo Center said, “people who do not know or honor their history will not have a future”. It is the ultimate hope of the authors of this publication and the Assyrian community that this dialogue will progress in the right direction and a monument will be erected in Phoenix.

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Acknowledgements

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Assyrian American National Federation

Hannibal Travis, JD Professor of Law, Florida International University

Jahn Khidan

Saint George Ancient Church of the East (Glendale, AZ) and its youth committee

Saint Joseph Assyrian Church of the East (Gilbert, AZ) and its youth committee

Saint Peter Assyrian Church of the East (Glendale, AZ) and its youth committee

Appendix 1

Assyrian Genocide Survey By Seyfo Center, Arizona Chapter

Please answer each question the best you can. Thank you for your participation!

Section 1: Demographics

1-What is your first and last name?

2- What is your gender?

3- What is your age?

- 17 and Under
- 18 - 28
- 29 - 39
- 40 - 50
- 51 - 59
- 60 +

4- Are you ethnically Assyrian?

5-Are you a genocide survivor?

6-Please provide us with your city and zip code:

7-What is your profession/job title? (if you are a student please write “student”)

8-Do you own a business? If so, in what city?

9-If you reside in the U.S. are you a registered voter in Arizona?

Section 2: Assyrian Genocide Monument

10-Would you like to see an Assyrian genocide monument in Phoenix, AZ?

- Yes
- No

11-If you answered "Yes" to the question above, in what suburb should the monument be located? (if you answered "No" to the previous question please type "NA")

12-Tell us how strongly you feel about the need for an Assyrian genocide monument in Phoenix, AZ:

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5

13-When thinking about visiting a genocide monument, what are your main reasons for visiting?

- Remember & honor those who lost their lives to let others survive
- Raise awareness
- Allow healing from past wounds
- Teach our history to future generations to help avoid more genocides
- Regenerate hope for future
- All of the above

14-How often and for what occasions would you visit a genocide/Assyrian monument?

- Never
- 1 – 3 Times/year
- 3 Times/year

15-Will you be willing/able to help sponsor the construction of an Assyrian genocide monument in Phoenix, AZ?

- Yes
- No

16-Which artist or builder do you think should build this monument?

17-Are you interested in joining the Seyfo team?

- Yes
- No

18-Your email & cell phone number:

19-Further comments/suggestions:

Signature_____

Date_____

Resolution

International Association of Genocide Scholars (IAGS), 2007



WHEREAS the denial of genocide is widely recognized as the final stage of genocide, enshrining impunity for the perpetrators of genocide, and demonstrably paving the way for future genocides;

WHEREAS the Ottoman genocide against minority populations during and following the First World War is usually depicted as a genocide against Armenians alone, with little recognition of the qualitatively similar genocides against other Christian minorities of the Ottoman Empire;

BE IT RESOLVED that it is the conviction of the International Association of Genocide Scholars that the Ottoman campaign against Christian minorities of the Empire between 1914 and 1923 constituted a genocide against Armenians, Assyrians, and Pontian and Anatolian Greeks.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Association calls upon the government of Turkey to acknowledge the genocides against these populations, to issue a formal apology, and to take prompt and meaningful steps toward restitution.

Appendix 3



DOUGLAS A. DUCEY
GOVERNOR

STATE OF ARIZONA
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

EXECUTIVE OFFICE

May 18, 2016

The Honorable Andy Biggs
President of the Senate
Arizona State Senate
1700 West Washington
Phoenix, Arizona 85007

Re: Senate Bill 1367 (Assyrian genocide; monument; procedures)

Dear President Biggs:

Today, I vetoed Senate Bill 1367.

As Arizona progresses into its second century, it's important to both reflect on the past as well as plan for the future. With limited space remaining in Wesley Bolin Plaza, it's a good time to take a thorough look at the Capitol complex and plan ahead.

Before moving forward with any additional monuments on our Capitol mall, I would like the Arizona Department of Administration to work with the Governmental Mall Commission to review our current monuments and develop a plan for the future of Wesley Bolin Plaza.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Douglas A. Ducey".

Douglas A. Ducey
Governor
State of Arizona

cc: The Honorable David Gowan
The Honorable Nancy Barto
The Honorable Michele Reagan

1700 WEST WASHINGTON STREET, PHOENIX, ARIZONA 85007
602-542-4331 • www.azgovernor.gov

Appendix 4

PREFILED DEC 13, 2019

REFERENCE TITLE: **Assyrian Genocide; Remembrance Day**

State of Arizona
House of Representatives
Fifty-fourth Legislature
Second Regular Session
2020

HCR 2006

Introduced by
Representatives Barto: Carroll, Jermaine

A CONCURRENT RESOLUTION

HONORING THE VICTIMS OF THE ASSYRIAN GENOCIDE AND PROCLAIMING AUGUST 7, 2020 AS ASSYRIAN REMEMBRANCE DAY IN ARIZONA.

(TEXT OF BILL BEGINS ON NEXT PAGE)

HCR 2006

1 Whereas, Assyrians, an ethnic minority group, are the indigenous
2 people of Mesopotamia who have lived in the Middle East since ancient
3 times, including in what is today Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria; and
4 Whereas, Assyrians, also known as Chaldeans and Syriacs, today live
5 around the world, including more than 600,000 in the United States and
6 tens of thousands in Arizona; and
7 Whereas, between 1914 and 1923, the Assyrian Genocide occurred,
8 during which the Ottoman Empire murdered more than 300,000 Assyrian men,
9 women and children by methods that included mass executions, death
10 marches, torture and starvation; and
11 Whereas, during the Assyrian Genocide, also known as the Seyfo
12 Genocide, the Ottoman Turks and their Kurdish allies also systematically
13 raped and enslaved Assyrian women and girls, forced the Assyrians from
14 their ancestral lands and pillaged and destroyed their communities; and
15 Whereas, the massacre of more than two million Armenians, Assyrians,
16 Greeks and other Christian and religious minority populations represented
17 the final culmination of a series of violent persecutions dating back to
18 the late 1800s; and
19 Whereas, this year marks the 105th anniversary of the Armenian,
20 Assyrian and Greek genocides of 1915, which were part of the planned
21 eradication of those indigenous communities by the Ottoman Turkish Empire,
22 yet to this day Turkey has still not recognized these genocides; and
23 Whereas, the denial of genocide is widely recognized as the final
24 stage of genocide, maintaining impunity for the perpetrators of these
25 atrocities and demonstrably paving the way for future genocides; and
26 Whereas, the resilience and endurance of the Assyrian people is
27 commendable and praiseworthy, despite being victims of an ethnocide that
28 the Islamic State continues today; and
29 Whereas, the State of Arizona is a global leader of human rights,
30 including recognizing and repudiating crimes against humanity. It is
31 fitting that the people of this state honor the victims of the Assyrian
32 Genocide.
33 Therefore
34 Be it resolved by the House of Representatives of the State of Arizona,
35 the Senate concurring:
36 1. That the Members of the Legislature recognize the Assyrian
37 Genocide of 1915 as a genocide and reprehensible crime against humanity.
38 2. That the Members of the Legislature honor the memory of the
39 hundreds of thousands of Assyrians who were murdered during the Assyrian
40 Genocide of 1915.
41 3. That the Members of the Legislature proclaim August 7, 2020 as
42 Assyrian Remembrance Day in the State of Arizona.