

## Chapter 9

# Kurdistan: The Emergence of Nation State and Ethno-Religious Minorities

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In light of this sacred event, I reaffirm once again that either we die together in this country or we live in glory [...] Therefore we assure our Christian brothers and sisters that under these circumstances and with this culture of co-existence in Kurdistan they will be secured and their dignity and rights will be preserved.

—*President Masoud Barzani*<sup>1</sup>

When talking about the history and successful experience of coexisting of Kurdistan, we should not forget that despite all the violence, intolerance, extremism terror of darkness, terror acts and genocide against different religious and ethnic groups of the Kurdistan Region, especially against our Yazidis and Christians sisters and brothers, the peaceful coexistence in Kurdistan has remained intact.

—*Nechirvan Barzani*<sup>2</sup>

In the last 90 years of Iraq's history, three indigenous minorities: the Jews, Yezidis, and Christians have faced systematic persecution and expulsion from their native homeland, Mesopotamia. This process led to the uprooting of nearly 140,000 Iraqi Jewish people in a very short period of time. The Christian and Yezidi minority group is about to face the same fate. The Iraqi Jews and Christians, as Semitic people, shared a common homeland and history that dates back more than 2,500 years. The Jews were part of ancient Mesopotamia since Babylon was the capital of Chaldea, and Nineveh the capital of Assyria, and since their exile from the kingdoms of Judea, Israel, and the capital Jerusalem at the hands of the Assyrian and

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<sup>1</sup> President Masoud Barzani to Christians on Easter Sunday: Either we die together or live in glory. *Rudaw* 27/3/2016. <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/270320161>

<sup>2</sup> Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani speech at a conference on "Tolerance, Life: Terror Threats and Experience of Coexistence in the Kurdistan Region" 13 Dec, 2016 Erbil-Kurdistan. <http://www.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?s=010000&l=12&a=55205>

Chaldean kings between the years 721 and 586 B.C. Yet, the Jews who settled in Mesopotamia had a deeper and more religious relationship to this land of exile that became their homeland for the following 25 centuries; it was Abraham of Ur of Chaldea who the Jews, Christians, and Muslims consider their first ancestral father.

The cuneiform writings from ancient Assyrian and Babylonian mud tablets tell stories of cultural interactions between these peoples: the Hebrews, Chaldeans and Assyrians. A phrase in ancient Babylonian:<sup>3</sup>

*Um nukh libbi shabattum*

Literally translated, this phrase would be “Day of rest of the heart” or *shabattum*. At first sight, this would seem to indicate an organized day of rest, a term that certainly suggested the Hebrew Sabbath.<sup>4</sup> The Chaldo-Assyrians of today’s Iraq, reading the transcript mentioned above, would recognize its meaning as it differs only slightly from their language today. They would understand it as saying:

“The day of rest of my heart”

And in their present language they would write:

*Yoma d’niakha d’libbi*

While history, tradition and language provide the strongest evidence of belonging to a certain land, Iraqi Jews, Yezidis, and Christians—though they tried for many centuries to prove their identity as Mesopotamians—were and still are called and considered as “Others,” in official government documents and daily life. They are described as belonging to the category “other religions” and “other Iraqis.” Those who decided to ignore their religion and nationality deliberately, understood the historical link to Mesopotamian heritage of both nationalities and religions. They understood that this link would built cumulative rights to country and state which under the “law of the land” did not allow for others as equals in status. The identity of the “others” among the identity of the majority became shameful as much as a taboo.

This doctrine of obscurity towards ethno-religious minorities is not limited to a certain time frame or political circumstances in ancient or

<sup>3</sup> Rawlinson, PI. 32, Nr I, 16 = Cuneiform Texts from Babylonian Tablets, etc., in the British Museum, Part XVIII, PI. 23, 17 (K. 4397): In Morris Jastrow: Hebrew and Babylonian Traditions (1914).

<sup>4</sup> Morris Jastrow (1914) *Hebrew and Babylonian Traditions*. Scribner Pub., New York, 376p.

modern Iraq. In modern times and during the various Iraqi governments, monarchy, parliamentary, dictatorships, quasi-communists, conservative, ultra-nationalist Socialist-Baathist and finally “democratic” leaders, the essence of position and status of those minorities in government and society was invariable and unfortunately always a reflection of the old image of conditionally protected minorities under the religious-based laws of the majority.

The preamble of the Iraqi Constitution adopted in 2005 reflects this doctrine and maybe more dangerously, legalizes it towards the non-Muslim minorities. The abstention from mentioning the Christians as a religion or Chaldo-Assyrians, and Yezidis as ethno-religious peoples marked the coming policy of Iraq towards the Christians and Chaldo-Assyrians and Yezidis.

[...]invoking the pains of sectarian oppression inflicted by the autocratic clique and inspired by the tragedies of Iraq’s martyrs, Shiite and Sunni, Arabs and Kurds and Turkmen and from all other components of the people, and recollecting the darkness of the ravage of the holy cities and the South in the Sha’abaniyya uprising and burnt by the flames of grief of the mass graves, the marshes, Al-Dujail and others and articulating the sufferings of racial oppression in the massacres of Halabcha, Barzan, Anfal and the Fayli Kurds and inspired by the ordeals of the Turkmen in Bashir and the sufferings of the people of the western region, as is the case in the remaining areas of Iraq where the people suffered from the liquidation of their leaders, symbols, and Sheiks [...]

Although the Iraqi Christians, and specifically the ChaldoAssyrians, have endured periodical episodes of persecution,<sup>5</sup> and the Yezidis who were subjected to systematic massacres in recent history, they were only considered in the constitutional preamble as “Other components of the people.”

The preamble and articles 2, 3, 4, 125 in the New Iraqi Constitution of 2005, do not go beyond the Ottoman constitution of 1878 during the reign of Sultan Abdulhamit II. Considering the history and structure of the Ottoman Empire, the “the Kanun-i Esasi” constitution was more progressive in securing and protecting fundamental liberties of the Christian

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<sup>5</sup> In the periods 1895-1896, 1915-1918, 1933, 1963, 1968-1969, 1975, 1988-1989, 2003-2007.

and Jewish minorities<sup>6</sup> than the current Iraqi constitution, taking in consideration the 21<sup>st</sup> century human rights liberties dynamics where constitutional rights are enforced through a body of applicable laws. In fact, since the formation of the Iraqi state in 1921, Iraqi constitutions consisted of flawed protections of minority rights. The Iraqi state failed to provide for minorities since 2005 and up to the present, leading to the near-extinction of Christians and Yezidis from major cities such as Baghdad, Basra, Mosul, and Mosul Plain cities and villages. Kurdistan provided the much-needed shelter and protection for the terror-stricken Christians and Yezidis.

### Christians and Jews in Kurdistan

The Mesopotamian Christians consider themselves direct descendants of the ancient Assyria and Chaldea, a fact that is reflected in their Aramaic language, culture, and history. Already within the first century AC, Christianity was well established in Mesopotamia as the inhabitants of that ancient land gradually but steadily converted from paganism to the Christianity. In addition to the indigenous population of Chaldea and Assyria there was a large number of Jews, who had been brought by Assyrian kings from Judea, Israel and Jerusalem as war prisoners and adopted Mesopotamia as their new homeland. For 25 centuries, Mesopotamia was their homeland until they were uprooted from Iraq in the 1940s and 1950s. The historical ancestors of the Mesopotamian Christians and Jews have been present for thousands of years before the Arabs conquered their homeland in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century A.C.

Already in the first century A.C there were three Diocese in Mesopotamia: *Hidiab* in the north (Aramaic: Beith Arabai), *Babylon* in the center (Aramaic: Beith Karmai) and *Abwas* in the south (Aramaic: Beith Aramai).<sup>7</sup> The travelogues of European travelers and American missionaries during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries give detailed accounts of the Christians, Jews, Kurds, and Yezidis and their way of life, traditions, social fabric,

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<sup>6</sup> See e.g.: Devereux, Robert, (1963): *The First Ottoman Constitutional Period: A Study of the Midhat Constitution and Parliament*, The Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore; Ergun Özbudun (2015) *The Ottoman Constitution of 1876 Oxford Constitutions*, Oxford University Press; and Huseyin Korkut (2016) Critical analysis of the ottoman constitution (1876), *Journal of Transdisciplinary Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Scher, Addai (1993): *The History of Chaldea and Assyria*. Vol. 2. Michigan, The Chaldean Academy Publications. [Published 1912 by the Jesuit Catholic Press, Beirut]

rites, and rituals. Those travelogues represent a rich record on the demographic structure of Kurdistan and inter-communal relations.<sup>8</sup>

The first census-like record on the demographic composition of the Iraqi population was carried out by British mandate authorities in 1920.<sup>9</sup> It was followed by the first official census in 1947, which showed that the major centers of Christian population were in the then *Wilayat al Mosul*, which included the current Duhok province and its administrative boundaries in addition to the Mosul Plains. The Jews, according to the results of the 1947 census, numbered 118,000, or 2.6 percent of a population of nearly 4.65 Million.<sup>10</sup> After the forced exodus during 1950–1951, only 5,000 of them remained as recorded by the 1957 census.<sup>11</sup> By 1973, Iraq had practically lost its Jewish population. In Kurdish villages, there were hardly any Jews left after 1951. Mutzafi<sup>12</sup> gives an example of the Jewish village of *Betanure*, where the entire Jewish community disappeared. In Zakho city, the approximately fifteen thousand Jews still living there in 1945, fled into exile<sup>13</sup>. Thus, the history of the large and important Jewish community in Mesopotamia ended in the 20<sup>th</sup> century after nearly three thousand years of continuous existence.

While the Jewish persecution had its roots in the Arab ultranationalist fervor that appeared in Iraq after 1936 (starting with the first military Coup d'état led by Bakr Sidqi), strongly flamed by the events in Palestine between Arabs and Jews, culminated in 1941 with the Pogrom (Arabic: Farhud)<sup>14</sup> against the Jews in Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul. What followed was the government's systematic harassment and persecution that ended with the well-known denaturalization law which stripped Jews of their Iraqi citizenship. The Christian persecution after the establishment of the

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<sup>8</sup> See e.g.: Badger, George Percy (1852), *The Nestorians and their Rituals with the Narrative of a Mission to Mesopotamia and Kurdistan in 1842 to 1844, and of a Late Visit to those Countries in 1850*. 2 Bde. London, Joseph Masters; and, Sachau, Eduard (1883), *Reise in Syrien und Mesopotamien*. Leipzig, F.A. Brockhaus.

<sup>9</sup> Shibliak, Abbas (2005): *Iraqi Jews: A History*. Saqi Books. 180p.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20120227040146/http://www.capiraq.org/Maps/Data1/1957/Iraq1957.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Mutzafi (2008): *The Jewish Neo-Aramaic dialect of Betanure*. Harrassowitz Verlag. Wiesbaden

<sup>13</sup> Sabar, Juna (1982): *The Folk Literature of the Kurdistan Jews: An Anthology*, Volume 23. Yale University Press. 250p.

<sup>14</sup> Daphne Tsimhoni (2001): The Pogrom (Farhud) against the Jews of Baghdad in 1941. In Roth, J., Maxwell, E. (Eds.), *Remembering for the Future the Holocaust in an Age of Genocide*, Palgrave Macmillan, UK.

Iraqi state in 1921 had a more complex structure resulting from the characteristic historical duality of religion (Christianity) and ethnicity (Chaldeans and Assyrians) of the Iraqi Christians, who were persecuted, either for their religion by Islamic extremism, or ethnicity by the nationalistic Arabs, or for both at the same time, which historically was the case.

### Christians Under the New Iraqi State

After the establishment of the monarchical Iraqi state in 1921 headed by its first Hashemite King Faisal the first, minorities enjoyed relative public liberties of religion, ethnicity, civil, education, culture, and politics. Christians and Jews were represented in the nascent council of representatives and a few held ministerial positions. The first Iraqi Constitution of 1925, under King Faisal, embodied the fundamental rights of all Iraqi citizens.<sup>15</sup> But the extension of those rights, in principle, to the Christians and Jews can be seen as a British influence, because subsequent political events corroded the very essence of those rights.

Christians, with their denominations: Catholics, Nestorians, Jacobites, and Orthodox and ethnicities: Syriacs, Chaldeans or Assyrians (mainly dialectal differences), generally enjoyed a large margin of religious and cultural freedom. The churches and monasteries did not suffer from restrictions, and priests graduated from seminaries and theology schools.

The Christian communities, similar to their Jewish counterparts, had separate schools where their respective native languages were taught. Only higher educational institutions were restricted to the state, but Christians and Jews were able to enroll freely (in the 1940s, heavy restrictions were imposed on the Jews' enrollment in higher education). Access to public offices was also common; some positions were quite in higher administrative hierarchy mainly due to higher educational qualifications of the two Jewish and Christian communities due to private westernized schooling. Christians owned printing houses and newspapers, and many were quite influential.<sup>16,17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.constitution.org/cons/iraq/iraqiconst19250321.html>

<sup>16</sup> See Sarah D. Shields (2000): *Mosul before Iraq: Like Bees Making Five-Sided Cells*. State University of New York Press.

<sup>17</sup> To mention only a few names: Razouk Ghannam, a well-known journalist, established the Iraq Press in 1921 in Baghdad. Tawfiq El-Sama'ani, founded Al-Zaman press in 1937, and Yousif Hermoz established Ul-Umma Press in 1935. Rafael Butti stands as the prominent journalist, writer and newspaper publisher in the history of Iraqi journalism.

This newly-found freedom (with memories of Armenian-Assyrian genocides during WWI by the Ottoman Empire military still fresh in their minds, and where many survivors inhabited Kurdistan), was brutally broken in 1933 with a bloody massacre committed by the Iraqi army against Christians, who were inhabitants of *Semelle* village in Kurdistan, and at least 600<sup>18</sup> Assyrian Christians were killed.<sup>19,20,21</sup> This massacre came just after few years after the establishment of the Iraqi state and followed the end of British mandate in 1932. It was this massacre that inspired the Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin<sup>22</sup> to coin the term “genocide” for the first time. The Simele massacre opened the door for systematic persecution of Christians and Kurds. Government authorities quickly learned that the use of brutal military force against civilians *en masse* could proceed and even be rewarded as an act of heroism.<sup>23</sup> The Armenian-Assyrian genocide during WWI was an example of unpunished atrocities. It also showed that military dictatorships learn from each other, and with minimal international intervention, dictatorships will proceed with increased barbarism towards their subjects. The Ottoman atrocities of 1896, 1915–1918,<sup>24,25</sup> the Jewish holocaust, and the Anfal campaign against Kurdistan in 1988–1989, are stark examples.

## New Cycles of Persecution

Kurdistan is the native habitat of Christianity and Christians since the first century A.C. Their villages, spread all over the Kurdistan with increased presence in the mountainous area of the Duhok province, gen-

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<sup>18</sup> Assyrian resources give much higher estimates above 3,000 (see Hysri *op.cit.*)

<sup>19</sup> Russell A. Hopkins (2016): *The Simele Massacre as a Cause of Iraqi Nationalism: How an Assyrian Genocide Created Iraqi Martial Nationalism*. Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Akron.

<sup>20</sup> Husry, K (April 1974). “The Assyrian Affair of 1933 (I)”. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. Cambridge University Press. 5 (3): 161–176. JSTOR 162587. doi:10.1017/S002074380002780X.

<sup>21</sup> Husry, K (April 1974). “The Assyrian Affair of 1933 (II)”. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. Cambridge University Press. 5 (3): 344–360. doi:10.1017/S002074380003498X.

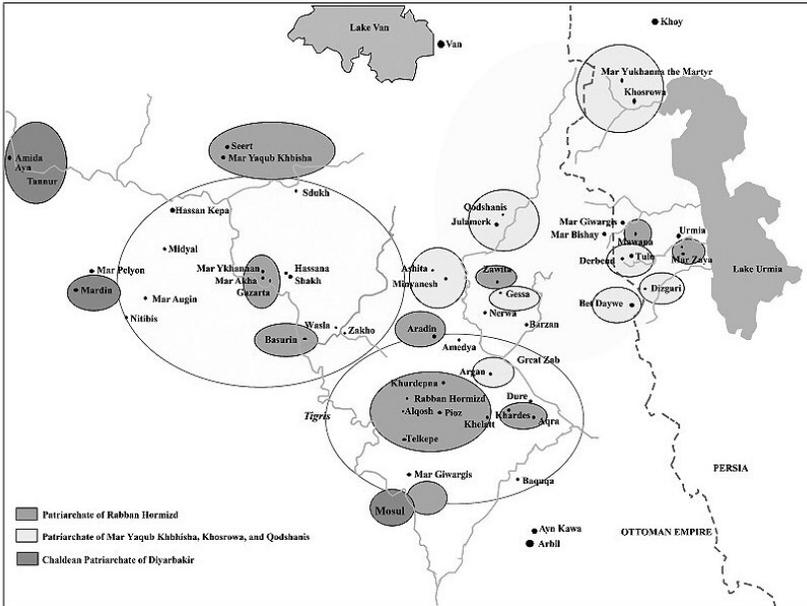
<sup>22</sup> Douglas Irvin-Erickson (2016): *Raphael Lemkin and the Concept of Genocide*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 320p.

<sup>23</sup> Husry, K *op.cit.*

<sup>24</sup> Toynbee, Arnold J. (1915), *Armenian Atrocities. The Murder of a Nation*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

<sup>25</sup> Toynbee, Arnold Joseph (1917), *The Murderous Tyranny of the Turks*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.

**Figure 1. A map showing the three patriarchates between the 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> Century to which Christianity in current Kurdistan and Hakari areas adhered. (Modified after: Murre-van den Berg H.L., 1999).<sup>26</sup>**



erally following the Tigris and Greater Zab rivers courses (Figure 1). Traditionally, the Christian and Kurdish population and villages occupy same areas and usually in quite near vicinity to each other. In larger cities (Zakho, Duhok, Erbil, Kirkuk, Sulaimani) a mixed population is the norm. The proximity of Christians and Kurdish villages made them share not only the homeland but also the same fate.<sup>27</sup>

### *The 1961–65 Period*

The period between 1961-1965 was very significant in shaping the fate of Christians and approximately 250 Christian villages in Kurdistan, specifically in the mountain area. The Kurdish revolution was resumed during this period and led by the late Mulla Mustafa Barzani, spanning

<sup>26</sup> Murre-van den Berg H.L. (1999), *The Patriarchs of the Church of the East from the Fifteenth to Eighteenth Centuries*, *Hugoye. Journal of Syriac Studies* 2(2).

<sup>27</sup> President Masoud Barzani eloquently expressed this idea when addressing Christians in Kurdistan, quote: "either we live [together] or [we] die together."

three successive regimes: Abdul-Karim Qasim (1958-1963), the Baathists (1963), and Abdulsalam Arif (1963-1966), all of which came to power during a bloody coup d'état, and shared a strong nationalist Pan-Arab ideology. To subdue the revolution, the Iraqi army attacked villages and civilians using excessive military force. The bombardment, especially in the Dohuk province, led to the destructions of villages and inhabitants became refugees, mostly in Baghdad and Mosul. It is during this period that many Christian villages were abandoned, destroyed and their actual numbers went from 240 to less than 70. North-South displacement and migration resulted in confrontation with Arabic language and culture in major Arabic cities.

### ***The 1968–89 Period***

The second coup d'état by the Baathists in 1968 brought another cycle of destruction to both Christians and Kurds in Kurdistan, especially in 1975. Some 180 Chaldo-Assyrian villages were destroyed and their residents deported during this period and as a result of the ANFAL Campaign launched by Iraqi regime in 1988, the government decided to destroy all Christian and Kurdish villages within a twenty-kilometer-wide strip along the Iraqi-Turkish border, in addition to churches and buildings of great historical value that date back to the 4th century A.D. With the threat of chemical gassing of Chaldo-Assyrians, Kurds, and others, in Zewa in 1987, followed by the Halabja chemical massacre in 1988, fear had spread among the civilian population in all of Kurdistan. Chaldo-Assyrians fled, many disappeared, some took refuge in Turkish refugee camps and many moved abroad.

### ***The 1991–2003 Period***

Towards the end of the Iraq-Iran war, Saddam Hussein gradually shifted to increased Islamic rhetoric, reflected in the media and the educational system. The political language became heavily impregnated with Islamic texts. The Iraqi population quickly adopted this new trend. Christians and Yezidis felt the changes and the already present alienation resulted in estrangement and isolation. Traditional Christian names were rejected by civil authorities for newly borns, and only Arab names were allowed. Shops and bars selling alcoholic drinks were closed. An anti-Christian mood developed, first as a counterattack to the coalition lead by the Americans and other western countries to liberate Kuwait after Saddam Hussein's invasion in August 1990. For the first time, the Iraqi society associated its Christian

population with the “infidel west” and “guilt by association” reemerged, first used against Iraqi Jews, associating them with Zionism and Israel. Turning Iraq into a religious society did not benefit the regime, but the damage was done. Extremism took root in many Iraqi cities. The fabric of Iraqi society was changed forever. Large parts of the Christian population sought refuge in western countries. Some moved back to their ancestral villages in Kurdistan from where found they their way to the west.

### *The 2003–2007 Period*

By the time of the American invasion of Iraq, the political rhetoric was already speaking of a Jihad against the infidels. Foreign extremists and al-Qaida had already infiltrated Iraqi society. A full-blown Shiite-Sunni sectarian conflict resulted in a bloody campaign against Christians and their churches in all major cities: Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul. The Shiite and Sunni political parties, through their armed militias (including al-Qaida), made their goals quite clear: Christians must either convert to Islam, leave, or die. A mass exodus of Christians began. In Baghdad and Basra, the Christian population went from numbers in the hundreds of thousands to just a few. The total Christian population shrank from 1.4 million in 1980 to only 500,000 in 2007.<sup>28</sup>

### **ISIS: Cataclysmic genocide of Christians and Yezidis**

On February 3, 2016, the European Parliament adopted a resolution designating the atrocities of ISIS against the Christians and Yezidis in Mosul, Nineveh Plains, and Sinjar as genocide and crimes against humanity. On March 14, 2016, The American House of Representatives adopted a similar resolution and urged the United Nations and other governments to follow suit. The French parliament and the U.K House of Commons designated those atrocities as genocide.

It is one of history’s tragedies that both Christians and Yezidis have been the subject of genocidal atrocities several times in their recent history and under similar religious extremism perpetuated under the reign of Ottoman caliphs<sup>29</sup> Sultan Abdul Hamid II and Mehmed V in the years

<sup>28</sup> Kolo K. (2007): The Exodus of Oriental Christians: Similarities and parallels with that of the Jews (A case study from Iraq). Presented at the EU parliament 17/10/2007.

<sup>29</sup> Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1876–1909); Mehmed V, 1909–18

1894–96<sup>30</sup>, 1915–18<sup>31</sup>, the Iraqi government in 1933<sup>32</sup> and now Daesh, the Islamic Caliphate state.

The Yezidis' bitter history did not differ in essence from that of the Assyrian Christians under the Ottoman Caliphate. Iraqi sociologist Ali Al-Wardi documented how Yezidis men, women, and children were gathered by the Ottoman Wali (governor) from Mosul, Tel Afar, Sheikhan, and Jabal Sinjar, and were made to choose between converting to Islam or accept death. Thousands were killed, and many women and children enslaved.<sup>33</sup>

In his book “the Yezidis,” Iraqi historian Siddiq Al-Damaloji<sup>34</sup> gives a detailed account of systematic and successive military campaigns by the Ottoman army against the Yezidis of the Mosul Wilayat and Jabal Sinjar. The methods of the atrocities and their underlining ideology have such strong similarities that we are left with no doubt to conclude that Daesh and the Ottoman Caliph and the Walis of Mosul follow the same evil religious ideology:

In the Mosul calendar year of 1312 Hijri (1894 A.C) the Wali of Mosul the Einjah BeraQdar attacked Sinjar after he had subdued and annihilated rebellious Tel Afar, he beheaded them and packed the heads in baskets and sent them to Mosul as a lesson and to instill terror<sup>35</sup>

The campaigns against the Yezidis stronghold in Jabal Sinjar extend from 1750 to nearly the entire 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The last military campaign against them was in 1918 at the hands of the Sinjar military administrator Haji Ibrahim Beg. Dozens of Yezidi villages were ransacked and burned.<sup>36</sup>

It is not the persecution, torture and even death, though horrible, that induces fear in a human being. The real horror is when those people realize that the actions taken against them are an effort to lead to extinction.

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<sup>30</sup> Toynbee A. opt. cit.

<sup>31</sup> Toynbee A. opt. cit.

<sup>32</sup> Husry opt. cit.

<sup>33</sup> Alwardi Ali (1994): *Mahzalat Al'Aql al-Bashari*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Kufaan Publishing, UK. 302p.

<sup>34</sup> Al-Damaloji, Siddiq (1949): *Al Yazidiyya (the Yezidis)*, al-Etihad Press, Mosul, Iraq. 547p.

<sup>35</sup> Op. cit. p. 499.

<sup>36</sup> Al-Damaloji, Siddiq, op. cit.

Then marriage, birth, children, hope, happiness, and future stop having a meaning.<sup>37</sup>

## Independence of Kurdistan: the State and the Minorities

The emergence of an independent state in Kurdistan is a matter of time. The planned referendum on September 25, 2017 on the establishment of the state of Kurdistan is widely expected to support the declaration of independence from Iraq. The establishment of this nation-state will mark a historic geopolitical change in the region. In the last 70 years, apart from Southern Sudan, no other state has been declared based on self-determination and secession in the Middle East, which itself was formed as a result of the Sykes-Picot treaty in 1916.

Regional geopolitical challenges will be serious following the referendum, and it is likely that neighboring countries will see Kurdish independence of Iraq as a threat to their national integrity through the setting of a precedence for more political rights, autonomy, and eventually self-determination for their own Kurdish populations. Turkey,<sup>38</sup> Iran, and Syria will be the main foes to this nascent state. Historically, Arab countries only had Sudan as an example of territorial secession following the Sykes-Picot treaty, WWI, and the end of the British-French colonial period. The Arab countries are expected to oppose the declaration of independence out of solidarity with other Arab countries and fears of domestic religious Sunni-Shiites fragmentations.

Having outlined this, we argue that the most vital challenge to this statehood declaration would be domestic: political, social, tribal, and territorial, in relation to the structure within the state itself as much as with relation to Baghdad. A conflict with Baghdad, aside from fear for state integrity, is more than probable along traditional ethno-religious (Arab-Kurds, Shiites-Sunnites), demographic, and oil territory friction lines, all of which have a profound historical background.

Within this complex picture stands the fate and destiny of the main ethnic-religious minorities in Kurdistan, the Christians (Assyro-Chaldeans) and the Yezidis. History shows that territorial changes between states, whether agreed or *de facto*, usually force the minorities to face major

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<sup>37</sup> Kolo K. op.cit.

<sup>38</sup> Turkey has already called the referendum of independence a “mistake.”

challenges, including a loss of citizenship, property, land, or acquired rights (political, cultural, civil, religious etc.). Any resettlement or mass movement of population, voluntary or forced, will incur difficulties that might continue to persist up to second or third generations.

As already stated, Christian and Yezidi minorities have been subject of deliberate and systematic terror campaigns in the 2005–17 period, designated as acts of genocide by United Nations and European Parliament in 2015. Because of this continuous persecution, the Christian population diminished to fewer than 250,000 Christians in Iraq, down from a pre-2003 estimate of 1.4 million.<sup>39</sup>

The coming new state of Kurdistan can be the last safe haven for Christian and Yezidi minorities. If they are not protected by the state, their very survival would be put into question. Iraq has already lost one of its indigenous minorities, the Jews, when they were forced into exile in the mid-20th century.

The liberation of Mosul, the last stronghold of Islamic State (IS) in Iraq, appears imminent. Kurdish and Iraqi forces, alongside a U.S.-led coalition, have managed to secure surrounding towns, enter the city, and retake several neighborhoods in Mosul. This important development offers the Kurdish leadership and international community a unique opportunity. It is a chance to finally allow the region's most vulnerable minorities the possibility of self-preservation and self-determination. The forming of a province for these minorities in the area known as the Nineveh Plains, their ancestral homeland in the northwest boundaries of Mesopotamia would be the right answer in securing a stable future and prevent any atrocities in the future. Under the terms of the United Nations' Genocide Convention, states must "undertake to prevent and to punish" genocide. This prevention could take substantial form in the creation of a protected province in the Nineveh Plains.

The liberation of Nineveh Plains and the city of Mosul from Daesh opens a crucial window of time and territory. To create an autonomous, democratic, pluralistic province for Iraq's Christians, Yezidis, and other minorities, within the region that IS has occupied since the summer of 2014. The territorial initiative would also be an opportunity to repatriate many of the nearly 2 million refugees who have fled to the relative safe

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<sup>39</sup> United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2017 Annual Report. Retrieved July 8, 2017. <http://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2017.USCIRFAnnualReport.pdf>

Kurdistan region in northern Iraq. Even now, members of vulnerable ethnic minorities from the Nineveh Plains continue to flee to Kurdistan, Turkey, Syria, and neighboring regions.

Such a territorial initiative would be fraught with dangers, which any viable plan must take into consideration. International peacekeeping forces will be indispensable. The Nineveh Plains are rich in natural resources, with vast, largely untapped oil reserves, and control of these resources will be strongly contested, which in the long or short run will be a basis of conflicts if not dealt with in advance.

Kurdistan has long been a land of tolerance and coexistence to different ethnic and religious groups who have been living all in peace for centuries. Despite all the wars, persecution and occupation that Kurdistan has faced for centuries, it has remained a land of many religions and beliefs. The historical cohesion among different ethnicities and religions is a solid base for peace and coexistence. Therefore, Kurdistan society has become a beacon of hope in the Middle East. This culture of peaceful coexistence has made people from the rest of Iraq who were forced to flee their homes due to violence, atrocities and prosecution they have faced by ISIS to see the Kurdistan Region as a safe haven for themselves.

## **The Internal Challenges and Trust Building Process**

Kurdistan's Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani stated:

Making a real national agreement based on the principles of politics, social, geography and demography of areas in Mosul and its surroundings, which are special areas for all ethnic and religious groups, is the only guarantee for peaceful future for all ethnic groups. This agreement will also prevent a fire, which many sides try to light in order to serve an internal and regional agenda. If all interested parties do not show concern, no one can predict a stable situation and peaceful future for the area. We have to be aware that this is a serious direct threat.<sup>40</sup>

The parties involved in the fight against Daesh realize that the aftermath will bring many of them in a collision course of a territorial and power struggle to control liberated areas, mainly the city of Mosul, Nineveh

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<sup>40</sup> Nechirvan Barzani, opt.cit

plains, and the Sinjar-Tel Afar areas. On the other hand, Kurdistan's position on the issue of minorities is well-defined and its basic thesis is that it's the right of those minorities to choose their future and decide whether to join Kurdistan as autonomous area, or opt for other forms of self-determination. The report of the KRG on the question of self-determination has been issued years before the invasion of Daesh of Christian and Yezidis territories, cities, and villages. The report bears the concept of a "political statement or declaration," declaring the political thesis of the KRG regarding the minorities<sup>41</sup>:

The KRG supports the principle of an autonomous region for minority nationalities, where they form a majority in an area. Article 35 of the Kurdistan constitution "guarantees the rights of national, cultural and administrative Turkmens, Arabs, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Syriac, Armenian, including self-rule where any of them form a majority of the population and regulated by law." The KRG believes that this principle should apply not only in the Kurdistan Region but also in the disputed territories in the Nineveh plains. However, the KRG has not and does not believe in imposing the idea on any group or nationality, who should decide for themselves by democratic means how they wish to be governed.<sup>42</sup>

The reconstruction of Christian cities and villages, and the financial aid to Christian families, with the involvement of international organizations, the United States and European countries is crucial in the return of displaced Christians and Yezidis to their homes with dignity and to ensure a promising life. The main burden of building trust falls on the KRG, as the bulk of Christian minorities and Yezidis are settled in Kurdistan or its peripheries. The Kurdistan Regional Government has experience in rebuilding the destroyed Kurdish and Christian villages following the Anfal campaign, with a reported reconstruction of 104 Christian villages.<sup>43</sup> Thousands of Christians returned to their ancestral villages in Kurdistan, especially in the Duhok province during the Al-Qaida campaign (2005–08) against Christians in Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul. The central govern-

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<sup>41</sup> The status of Christians in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq. A short report by the Kurdistan Regional Government UK Representation, December 2009. [http://cabinet.gov.krd/uploads/documents/Status\\_Christians\\_Kurdistan\\_Region\\_Dec\\_09\\_2009\\_12\\_22\\_h16m26s16.pdf](http://cabinet.gov.krd/uploads/documents/Status_Christians_Kurdistan_Region_Dec_09_2009_12_22_h16m26s16.pdf)

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

ment has proven incapable of providing neither protection nor a secure future for minorities since 2005.

The Christians and other minorities span areas within Kurdistan proper and its peripheries, the Nineveh Plains. In both locations, the Christians have inhabited villages, many of which date back to early Christianity or even older.<sup>44</sup> Historically and demographically they are closely connected and related through language (neo-Aramaic), ethnicity and religion (Figure 1). The Assyrian tribes had strong partnership with the Kurdish tribes in the Hakari and the Kurdish emirates in the region. Sharaf Khan Al-Bidlisi, the oldest Kurdish historian, revealed that the Assyrians and the Kurds were two partners sharing the common emirate of Hakari and enjoying equal tribal rights. This state of affairs dates back to the late fifteenth century.<sup>45</sup>

Kurdistan leadership can play a major role in bringing all Christians together in a trust building process that, aside from the rebuilding of destroyed villages and repatriation of the Christians to their villages, should adopt a concrete, viable, and inclusive political program that allows the Christians in the Nineveh plains to choose freely to be a part of the new Kurdistan State in the form that they decide. Initiating this process will help curtail any possible conflicts and confrontations with the central government.

A starting point would be the Kurdish constitution, which in its 2009 draft version, ensured the fundamental rights of Christians and other minorities.

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In a recent study by the Middle East Research Institute (MERI)<sup>47</sup> on protecting the minorities in Kurdistan, constitutional rights, genuine part-

<sup>44</sup> L'Abbé Albert Aboona (1973): *History of Church of the East*. Beyrouth: Dar Almhcriq. 192p.

<sup>45</sup> Hermis Aboona (2008): *Assyrians, Kurds and Ottomans. Intercommunal relations on the periphery of the ottoman Empire*. Cambria Press, Amherst, New York. 325P.

<sup>46</sup> *The status of Christians in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq*. Opt.Cit.

<sup>47</sup> Middle East Research Institute (2015): *Protecting minorities' rights in The Kurdistan region. A tailor-made mode*. Erbil - Kurdistan Region - Iraq

nership in governorship, and representations in both parliament and government institutions are key steps to establish confidence. The rights might not have real value if not embodied within a legal body of laws that ensure access.

Kurdistan is on the crossroads of building a nation-state. It has a historical moment to carve a model of a viable democratic state that is based on citizenship, freedom, tolerance, prosperity, and modernity within a shared homeland.

