

Lives on Hold: Assyrian Refugees in Jordan

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ABOUT ASSYRIANS

An estimated 3.5 million people globally comprise a distinct, indigenous ethnic group. Tracing their heritage to ancient Assyria, Assyrians speak an ancient language referred to as Assyrian, Syriac, Aramaic, or Neo-Aramaic.

The contiguous territory that forms the traditional Assyrian homeland includes parts of southern and southeastern Turkey, northwestern Iran, northern Iraq, and northeastern Syria. The Assyrian population in Iraq, estimated at approximately 200,000, constitutes the largest remaining concentration of the ethnic group in the Middle East. The majority of these reside in their ancestral homelands in the Nineveh Plain and within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Assyrians are predominantly Christian. Some ethnic Assyrians self-identify as Chaldeans or Syriacs, depending on church denomination. Assyrians have founded five Eastern Churches at different points during their long history: the Ancient Church of the East, the Assyrian Church of the East, the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Syriac Catholic Church, and the Syriac Orthodox Church. The majority of Assyrians who remain in Iraq today belong to the Chaldean and Syriac churches.

Assyrians represent one of the most consistently persecuted communities in Iraq and the wider Middle East.

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ABOUT THE ASSYRIAN POLICY INSTITUTE

Founded in May 2018, the Assyrian Policy Institute works to support Assyrians as they struggle to maintain their rights to the lands they have inhabited for thousands of years, their ancient language, equal opportunities in education and employment, and to full participation in public life.

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LIVES ON HOLD: ASSYRIAN REFUGEES IN JORDAN

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COVER IMAGE COURTESY OF RITA EDWARD.

An Assyrian mother and daughter from Baghdad, Iraq celebrating Easter in 2018 as refugees in Amman, Jordan.

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"I love my homeland just as much as those who remain [in Iraq]."

(32-year-old male, Sarsing, Household 48)

"It was very hard for me to leave my country and my village. I think about home every day. I know I will miss it every day of my life. I hope to see it again, but I fear I may have seen it for the last time. I wish I had known when we fled [from ISIS] that we wouldn't be back. I would have taken a moment to kiss the land before I left it."

(63-year-old male, Sharafiya, Household 4)

"I never thought I would leave [Iraq]. I never even owned a passport. I did not have one until weeks before I left. I never thought I would leave, even after ISIS."

(36-year-old male, Bakhdida, Household 14)

"We would have left a long time ago if we wanted to leave. We did not have a choice."

(68-year-old female, Household 2)

"It was the hardest decision of my life. I weighed a lot of things. It is my country, you see. I have always been against migration. I was the one who tried to get people to move back, and now look at where I am."

(35-year-old male, Ankawa, Household 44)

"I was born there and grew up in that village. I lived my whole life there. To have to leave home as a man in his sixties very hard. For my children and grandchildren, it might be a good decision. But for me, there was no better place than my village. But it does not exist anymore."

(66-year-old male, Batnaya, Household 26)

"We didn't realize that the night we left [as ISIS neared] would be the last time we'd see our home. We thought we would be back. We left behind our family home, our land, our dead, and all of our memories."

(55-year-old female, Batnaya, Household 26)

"If I could choose anywhere in the world to live—if it were up to me—I would choose Iraq. But Iraq has proven that it does not want us."

(36-year-old male, Alqosh, Household 10)

Abbreviations Used in this Report

| | |
|-------|---|
| ADM | Assyrian Democratic Movement |
| ACOE | Assyrian Church of the East |
| ANCOE | Ancient Church of the East |
| CCC | Chaldean Catholic Church |
| IDP | Internally-displaced person |
| ICRC | Iraqi Christian Relief Council |
| ISIS | Islamic State of Iraq and Syria |
| NGO | Non-governmental organization |
| NPU | Nineveh Plain Protection Units |
| KDP | Kurdistan Democratic Party |
| KRG | Kurdistan Regional Government |
| KRI | Kurdistan Region of Iraq |
| PMU | Popular Mobilization Units |
| SCC | Syriac Catholic Church |
| SOC | Syriac Orthodox Church |
| UNHCR | United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees |

Key Terms

- **Internally-displaced person (IDP)**
An internally displaced person is someone who is forced to flee his or her home but who remains within his or her country's borders. They are often referred to as refugees, but they do not meet the legal definition of a refugee.
- **ISIS**
ISIS (also known by its language Arabic acronym *Daesh*) is a jihadist militant group that follows a fundamentalist, Salafi doctrine of Sunni Islam. It has been designated as a terrorist organization internationally by the United Nations and individual countries. ISIS gained global prominence in early 2014 when it claimed territory in Iraq and Syria and committed genocide and ethnic cleansing campaigns against Yazidis, Assyrians, and other ethnic and religious minorities.
- **Nineveh Plain**
The Nineveh Plain is a region in Iraq's Nineveh Governorate located northeast of the city of Mosul. It abuts the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and is officially (though not entirely in practice) under the administration of the central government in Baghdad. The Nineveh Plain is the only region in Iraq where the largest demographic group is Assyrian. The area is considered the ancient Assyrian heartland.
- **Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU)**
The 500-strong NPU is comprised exclusively of ethnic Assyrians and undertakes security in the southern towns of the Nineveh Plain. It was initially authorized via the PMU, but has consistently operated independently of PMU leadership.
- **Non-governmental organization (NGO)**
A non-governmental organization is a non-profit, citizen-based group that operates independently of government.
- **Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)**
The Kurdistan Democratic Party is the dominant Kurdish faction in the KRI. The KDP has been led by the Barzani family from its earliest years in the mid-1940s. The party claims to exist to combine "democratic values and social justice," however, the KDP has been described as tribal and autocratic—and as the ruling party in the KRI is guilty of extensive human rights violations against Assyrians and other minoritized groups.
- **Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)**
Established in 1992, the KRG is the official ruling body of the autonomous Kurdistan Region in northern Iraq.
- **Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)**
The Kurdistan Region of Iraq is an autonomous region located in northern Iraq gov-

erned by the KRG. It includes four governorates: Erbil, Dohuk, Sulaymaniya, and Halabja. Its unofficial capital is the city of Erbil.

- **Peshmerga**

The Peshmerga is the official military force of the KRG. Formally, the Peshmerga are under the command of the KRG Ministry of Defense, however, in practice the forces are largely divided and controlled separately by the two dominant Kurdish factions: the KDP and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

- **Popular Mobilization Units (PMU)**

Formally integrated into the Iraqi security apparatus, the PMU (also known as *Hashd al-Shabi*) operates as a parallel institution to the state security forces, with their own chain of command. The umbrella organization is comprised of some 40 militias that are mostly Shia Muslim groups.

- **Refoulement**

Refoulement is the forcible return of refugees to a country where they are liable to be subjected to persecution.

- **Refugee**

A refugee is a person who has been forced to leave his or her country in order to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster.

- **Repatriation**

Repatriation is the act or process of returning someone to their country of citizenship.

- **Resettlement**

Resettlement is the transfer of refugees from an asylum country to another country that has agreed to admit them and ultimately grant them permanent settlement.

- **United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)**

The UNHCR is a United Nations program with the mandate to protect refugees, forcibly displaced communities and stateless people, and assist in their voluntary repatriation, local integration, or resettlement to a third country.

- **Urban refugee**

An urban refugee is a refugee who decided or was obliged to settle in an urban area rather than in a refugee camp in the country or territory where the person fled to.

Key Findings

- The emigration of Assyrians from Iraq is predominantly a migration of families. The highest volume of movement of population took place in 2014 and 2015 following the rise of ISIS, however, the large-scale emigration of Assyrians from Iraq persists. The largest segment of the Iraqi Assyrian refugee community in Jordan is comprised of former residents of the Nineveh Plain, most of whom arrived in Jordan between 2014 and 2015. Assyrians from Baghdad have consistently emigrated from Iraq since the start of the conflict in 2003 and continue to do so. An increasing number of refugees originated from the KRI, with the rate of emigration of Assyrians from the KRI intensifying in 2016 and 2017.
- Respondents indicated four main reasons for leaving Iraq: concerns about security, lack of respect for the rule of law, crushing socio-economic factors, and a desire for family reunification. The root causes of forced migration are largely the same for Assyrians from different regions in Iraq, but the particularities vary depending on the place of origin.
- Jordan is being used as a country of transit by many Assyrian refugees. Most Assyrians in the country are there on a temporary basis and have concrete plans to emigrate to a third country. These refugees seek resettlement via the UNHCR resettlement program and the Australian Special Humanitarian Program. When asked about what factors drive them to seek resettlement in a third country, households cited safety, religious freedom and respect for human rights, educational and economic opportunities, and family reunification. Visa processing times vary widely; while some visa applications may be approved in a matter of months, humanitarian visas can take years to get approved. Some Assyrian families have been resettled in a few months, while others have had pending cases for upwards of four years with no developments.
- Assyrian refugees face specific vulnerabilities and challenges in displacement, as they do not seek shelter in refugee camps due to religious discrimination and fear of targeted attacks. Instead, Assyrian refugees are compelled to rent private homes in urban neighborhoods, which limits their access to humanitarian services and often leads to increased feelings of isolation. Despite the disadvantages of life as an urban refugee, most Assyrians in Jordan benefit from the infrastructure in the capital city of Amman and neighboring suburbs. Unlike refugees that live in camps, urban centers offer refugees

the opportunity to live autonomously. However, the cost of living is very expensive, and Assyrian refugees are increasingly susceptible to exploitation and discrimination.

- The humanitarian assistance provided to Assyrian refugees is vital and helps families meet basic needs, but it cannot work as reliable support in the long-term. Most families rely on their savings in addition to remittances from relatives and friends abroad in order to meet household needs. This trend exposes a large segment of the Assyrian refugee community to the possibility of economic vulnerability, given the depletion of savings and various factors that might affect the remittances that support these households.
- Despite the threat of deportation, many Assyrian refugees have sought unauthorized employment opportunities out of desperation. Unable to secure formal employment, many Assyrians are forced to take informal, low-paid work in exploitative conditions. Most individuals who reported employment explained that they had a variable and unstable income. In some cases, their pay is unethically withheld. They are unable to seek redress in such instances or report abuse due to the nature of their employment.
- Assyrian refugees are largely isolated from the wider refugee community in Jordan. There appear to be few or no cultural support networks available specifically catered to the needs of the Assyrian community. Although various actors—including the UN-HCR and an array of NGOs—offer social and community-focused events for refugees, Assyrians generally do not participate despite their yearning for social relations and activity. Most feel that such events are not designed to appeal to Assyrians or other minoritized communities. It is evident that many of these groups work with a Western-centric perspective and do not have the tools to understand the nuances of the region nor the unique situation of the Assyrians.
- Prior to their departure from Iraq, Assyrian refugees may have experienced imprisonment, torture, forced displacement, physical

assault, rape, kidnapping, religious persecution, loss of property, loss of livelihood, family separation, and extreme fear. There are very few resources available to support Assyrian refugees in addressing issues of trauma.

- The psychological strain of living in limbo is having a negative impact on the mental health and well-being of the Assyrian refugee community. The redundancy and inactivity has contributed to issues related to stress and mental health. Many respondents expressed feelings of worthlessness and lack of purpose. Morale within the community is low. The uncertainty about the future is often overwhelming and crippling.
- Prolonged displacement is likely to make future integration more challenging. As the state of limbo persists, depression and other health problems are worsening, and time away from work or school is lengthening. Despite preparation prior to leaving Iraq, all respondents had underestimated the difficulty of life as a refugee and have struggled to adapt to this degree of thwarted mobility.
- The perpetual state of limbo coupled with the increasing unaffordability of life in Jordan has rendered many susceptible to exploitation and forced returns to Iraq. There are two major factors that contribute to a family's decision to return: for most returnees, the difficulties of meeting the high cost of living in Jordan is the primary factor; the denial of visa applications is also an increasingly important factor.
- Common priorities for repatriation included: security, livelihoods, reconstruction of homes and infrastructure, restitution for loss of property, family reunification, and the creation of a semi-autonomous Nineveh Plain Governorate for marginalized communities.
- The likelihood of large-scale repatriation of Assyrians to Iraq is very slim given that the root causes for their displacement have yet to be resolved.

Part I: Introduction

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Jordan currently hosts the second-highest number of refugees compared to its population in the world.¹ Of the millions of refugees in the country, little is known about the fate of the ethnic Assyrians among the refugee population.

The pervasive violence and ethnic cleansing campaigns targeting Assyrians in Iraq in the aftermath of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq fueled high levels of emigration, evidenced by the rapid decline in the population of Assyrians in the country. In the years since 2003, at least 80 percent of the Assyrian population has disappeared.

The emigration of Assyrians from Iraq has steadily persisted over the course of the past two decades, but the recent spike in emigration rates was a direct response to the rise of ISIS in 2014.

The events of 2014 and their sustained impact forced large numbers of Assyrians—including those indirectly affected—to flee the country and seek refuge in neighboring countries, including Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon which continue to host significant numbers of Assyrian refugees.

This report seeks to convey the living conditions of the Iraqi Assyrian refugee community in Jordan. It also seeks to document the root causes for their displacement and assess the community's priorities for voluntary repatriation to Iraq.

Assyrian refugees are in various stages of grief as they left behind all they have ever known and continue to process the trauma they have experienced. They arrive in Amman separated from their families, friends, and a land that their ancestors have called home for thousands of years.

There are three principal solutions for Assyrian refugees in Jordan: voluntary repatriation to Iraq, integration within their host community, or resettlement in a third country.



An Assyrian refugee and his son in Amman, Jordan. (April 2019)

The overwhelming majority of Assyrian refugees in the country have concrete plans to emigrate to a third country and are actively seeking resettlement. The majority of those stuck in limbo have been waiting more than two years—some since the rise of ISIS in 2014—hoping that they still may be able to access a “better life” defined by safety, equal rights and opportunity, and the chance to rebuild their lives.



The Assyrian Church of the East holds mass for refugees in Amman, Jordan. (December 2017)

Due to the lack of reliable figures on the number of Assyrian refugees in Jordan, it is unclear exactly how many Iraqi Assyrians have arrived since 2014, though unofficial estimates—largely based on church records—suggest the current number residing in Jordan is approximately 16,000.

The number of Assyrian refugees in Jordan fluctuates as families are resettled; however, while some refugees depart, their numbers are quickly matched by new Assyrian arrivals in Jordan.

In December 2017, API researchers interviewed a priest from the Assyrian Church of the East (ACOE) whose records showed 348 ACOE refugee families in Amman as of December 1, 2017. By the end of the month, the number had risen to 371 ACOE families. The priest estimates that at least one Assyrian family (accounting for all church denominations) leaves Iraq every day. He said, “The number of Assyrians leaving Iraq is far greater than the number of Assyrians born there each year. Their stories do not make the news, but we are losing our people to diaspora with every day that passes. Is this not a slow, silent genocide?”²

While the violence in Iraq has impacted all peoples, Assyrians and other minoritized commu-

nities like Yazidis are uniquely affected as they presently face an existential crisis. The rapid rate of emigration among Assyrians in particular threatens their existence in their traditional homeland. Therefore, when arriving in Jordan, Assyrians carry with them the weight of concerns not only about their own lives, but about the future of the Assyrians they left behind.

Methodology

This report is based on interviews conducted by the Assyrian Policy Institute during a research trip to Amman, Jordan in December 2017 and January 2018. It seeks to convey a detailed understanding of the current situation facing Assyrian refugees in Jordan and assess their priorities for repatriation.

The Assyrian Policy Institute interviewed a total of 54 Assyrian refugee households living in Amman, Jordan and the surrounding suburbs. The interviewed households were comprised of 263 individuals, out of which 80 were children aged 17 and under.

The Assyrian refugees interviewed in preparation of this report hold Iraqi nationality. While tens of thousands of Syrian Assyrians have been externally-displaced due to the conflict in Syria (the large majority of them fled to Lebanon), this report does not necessarily account for their experiences as refugees.

The questionnaire included questions at the household and individual levels and was designed to collect information regarding household demographics, arrival to Jordan, registration, shelter, financial situation, expenditures, food consumption, coping strategies, resettlement, and repatriation.

Most interviews took place in the respondents’ homes and involved the members of a single household. In some cases, the Assyrian Policy Institute conducted group interviews with multiple households that shared a town of origin.

The Assyrian Policy Institute conducted a series of follow-up interviews by phone between January and April 2019 in order to obtain an update concerning their status. Respondents were asked to report updates concerning the status of their resettlement applications as well as any notable changes to their place of residence, household size, and financial situation.

All individuals interviewed were informed of the purpose of the interview, and verbally consented to the use of information provided in this report. Names and identifying information of many interviewees have been withheld in the interest of their personal safety and to protect their privacy.

Respondents

Between December 2017 and January 2018, the Assyrian Policy Institute interviewed a total of 54 households comprised of 263 individuals that were displaced from various regions in Iraq—specifically Baghdad, the Nineveh Plain, and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)—who were living as urban refugees in Amman, Jordan and surrounding suburbs. The start of their

residencies in Jordan of respondents ranged from 2014 to 2017.

The household is defined as a group of persons who make common provision of food, shelter, and other essentials for living. The average household size among those interviewed by the API was comprised of 4.85 persons. Many Assyrian refugees are living in extended family households. The API did not encounter households living with unrelated persons. The largest household size interviewed by the API was comprised of twelve persons; the smallest was a single-person household.

Interviewed participants ranged from 12 to 74 years old. Throughout this report, the listed ages of individual respondents reflect their age at the time of the cited interview.

Background variables such as church affiliation, education levels and the economic status of households varied.

Table 1 describes the household characteristics of the Assyrian families interviewed for this report, including church affiliation, start of residency in Jordan, and their current status after follow-up interviews conducted between January and April 2019.

Table 1. Assyrian Refugee Households Interviewed by the Assyrian Policy Institute.

| | HOUSEHOLD | START OF RESIDENCY IN JORDAN | DISTRICT | HH SIZE | NO. OF CHILDREN UNDER 18 | NO. OF HH MEMBERS EMPLOYED | TOWN OF ORIGIN | CHURCH AFFILIATION | CURRENT STATUS |
|---|------------|------------------------------|----------|---------|--------------------------|----------------------------|----------------|--------------------------------------|----------------|
| 1 | April 2015 | North Hashmi | 5 | 2 | 1 | Bakhdida (NP) | SCC | Resettled in Australia in Dec. 2018 | |
| 2 | July 2015 | Marka | 3 | 0 | 0 | Baghdad | CCC | Remains in Jordan | |
| 3 | Aug. 2015 | Jabal Hussein | 7 | 1 | 2 | Bakhdida (NP) | SCC | Resettled in Australia in March 2019 | |
| 4 | Aug. 2015 | Jabal Amman | 5 | 3 | 1 | Tesqopa (NP) | CCC | Returned to Iraq in April 2018 | |

| | | | | | | | | |
|----|------------|---------------|----|---|---|----------------|------|--|
| 5 | Sept. 2015 | Marka | 8 | 3 | 2 | Dohuk | ACOE | Three HH members remain in Jordan |
| 6 | Sept. 2015 | North Hashmi | 4 | 2 | 1 | Bartella (NP) | SOC | Resettled in Australia in Sept. 2018 |
| 7 | Oct. 2015 | North Hashmi | 5 | 0 | 2 | Bartella (NP) | SOC | Resettled in Australia in Jan. 2019 |
| 8 | Oct. 2015 | Marka | 7 | 3 | 1 | Tel Keppe (NP) | ACOE | Remains in Jordan |
| 9 | Oct. 2015 | Jabal Amman | 5 | 3 | 1 | Tesqopa (NP) | CCC | Returned to Iraq in April 2018 |
| 10 | Nov. 2015 | Marka | 4 | 2 | 0 | Alqosh (NP) | CCC | Remains in Jordan |
| 11 | Jan. 2016 | Marka | 5 | 3 | 0 | Tel Keppe (NP) | CCC | Remains in Jordan |
| 12 | April 2016 | Fuheis | 6 | 1 | 2 | Tesqopa (NP) | CCC | Remains in Jordan |
| 13 | April 2016 | Marka | 6 | 1 | 3 | Sarsing (KRI) | ACOE | Resettled in Australia in June 2018 |
| 14 | April 2016 | Jabal Hussein | 12 | 5 | 2 | Bakhdida (NP) | SCC | Remains in Jordan |
| 15 | April 2016 | Marka | 7 | 3 | 2 | Alqosh (NP) | CCC | Remains in Jordan |
| 16 | June 2016 | Marka | 4 | 3 | 0 | Ankawa (KRI) | CCC | Resettled in Australia in August 2018 |
| 17 | July 2016 | Jabal Amman | 7 | 4 | 1 | Tesqopa (NP) | CCC | Remains in Jordan |
| 18 | Aug. 2016 | Marka | 3 | 1 | 1 | Baghdad | ACOE | Remains in Jordan |
| 19 | Aug. 2016 | Jabal Hussein | 9 | 3 | 2 | Tel Keppe (NP) | CCC | Five HH members remain in Jordan |
| | | | | | | | | Four HH members resettled in Australia Nov. 2018 |
| 20 | Aug. 2016 | Marka | 5 | 1 | 0 | Ankawa (KRI) | ACOE | Returned to Iraq in April 2018 |
| 21 | Sept. 2016 | Marka | 5 | 1 | 1 | Tel Keppe (NP) | CCC | Remains in Jordan |
| 22 | Sept. 2016 | North Hashmi | 6 | 0 | 2 | Bakhdida (NP) | SCC | Remains in Jordan |
| 23 | Sept. 2016 | Jabal Hussein | 3 | 1 | 1 | Batnaya (NP) | CCC | Remains in Jordan |

| | | | | | | | | |
|----|------------|---------------|---|---|---|-----------------|-------|--|
| 24 | Sept. 2016 | Marka | 8 | 4 | 2 | Karamlesh (NP) | CCC | Resettled in Australia in Dec. 2018 |
| 25 | Sept. 2016 | Jabal Amman | 5 | 0 | 1 | Zakho (KRI) | CCC | Unable to make contact with family. |
| 26 | Oct. 2016 | Jabal Hussein | 7 | 0 | 2 | Batnaya (NP) | CCC | Six HH members remain in Jordan |
| | | | | | | | | One HH member resettled in Australia in Feb. 2019 |
| 27 | Oct. 2016 | North Hashmi | 5 | 2 | 1 | Bartella (NP) | SOC | Remains in Jordan |
| 28 | Nov. 2016 | Marka | 5 | 0 | 2 | Ankawa (KRI) | ACOE | Resettled in Australia in Oct. 2018 |
| 29 | Mar. 2017 | Fuheis | 6 | 4 | 0 | Bakhdida (NP) | SOC | Returned to Iraq in March 2018 |
| 30 | April 2017 | Jabal Hussein | 5 | 0 | 2 | Karamlesh (NP) | CCC | Remains in Jordan |
| 31 | April 2017 | Marka | 6 | 4 | 1 | Dohuk (KRI) | ACOE | Resettled in Australia in July 2018 |
| 32 | April 2017 | Fuheis | 3 | 0 | 0 | Berseve (KRI) | ACOE | Remains in Jordan |
| 33 | June 2017 | Jabal Hussein | 2 | 0 | 0 | Dohuk (KRI) | ACOE | Remains in Jordan |
| 34 | June 2017 | Fuheis | 5 | 0 | 2 | Dohuk (KRI) | ACOE | Three HH members resettled in Australia in June 2018 |
| | | | | | | | | Two HH members resettled in Australia in Feb. 2019 |
| 35 | July 2017 | Marka | 4 | 1 | 0 | Baghdad | ACOE | Remains in Jordan |
| 36 | July 2017 | Marka | 5 | 3 | 1 | Baghdad | ACOE | Remains in Jordan |
| 37 | Aug. 2017 | Marka | 1 | 0 | 0 | Sharafiya (NP) | ANCOE | Resettled in Australia in Nov. 2018 |
| 38 | Aug. 2017 | Fuheis | 5 | 2 | 2 | Gondekosa (KRI) | ACOE | Remains in Jordan |
| 39 | Aug. 2017 | Marka | 4 | 2 | 1 | Baghdad | ACOE | Resettled in Australia in July 2018 |
| 40 | Aug. 2017 | Fuheis | 5 | 1 | 1 | Nahla (KRI) | ANCOE | Returned to Iraq in March 2018 |
| 41 | Aug. 2017 | Marka | 4 | 0 | 2 | Shaqlawwa (KRI) | CCC | Remains in Jordan |

| | | | | | | | | |
|----|------------|---------------|---|---|---|----------------|--------------|--|
| 42 | Aug. 2017 | Marka | 3 | 0 | 1 | Shaqlawā (KRI) | CCC | Remains in Jordan |
| 43 | Aug. 2017 | Marka | 4 | 2 | 0 | Sheikhan (NP) | ACOE/ CCC | Remains in Jordan |
| 44 | Aug. 2017 | Marka | 3 | 1 | 0 | Ankawa (KRI) | ACOE | Resettled in Australia in April 2019 |
| 45 | Aug. 2017 | Marka | 2 | 0 | 0 | Dohuk (KRI) | ACOE | Remains in Jordan |
| 47 | Sept. 2017 | Fuheis | 4 | 0 | 2 | Nahla (KRI) | ANCOE | Resettled in Australia in Oct. 2018 |
| 48 | Sept. 2017 | Marka | 2 | 0 | 0 | Sarsing (KRI) | ACOE | Remains in Jordan |
| 49 | Sept. 2017 | Jabal Hussein | 5 | 1 | 2 | Ankawa (KRI) | CCC | Remains in Jordan |
| 50 | Sept. 2017 | Marka | 2 | 0 | 0 | Baghdad | ANCOE | Resettled in Canada in Oct. 2018 |
| 51 | Sept. 2017 | Fuheis | 6 | 3 | 1 | Dohuk (KRI) | ACOE | Remains in Jordan |
| | | | | | | | | One HH member returned to Iraq in March 2018 |
| 52 | Sept. 2017 | Marka | 4 | 2 | 0 | Ankawa (KRI) | ACOE/ CCC | Remains in Jordan |
| 53 | Oct. 2017 | Marka | 2 | 0 | 0 | Deralok (KRI) | ACOE | Returned to Iraq in Feb. 2018 |
| 54 | Nov. 2017 | Marka | 4 | 1 | 2 | Ankawa (KRI) | CCC | Remains in Jordan |

■ *Resettled* ■ *Returned to Iraq*

Organization of this Report

This report is divided into six parts: Part I provides an introduction as well as an overview of the root causes of Assyrian emigration from Iraq; Part II deals with the resettlement process; Part III then with the situation for Assyrian refugees based on interviews with 54 households. Part IV then examines the priorities for voluntary repatriation; Part V provides an update about the status of the 54 households based on

follow-up interviews conducted approximately one year after their initial interview in Amman, Jordan; the report is completed with policy recommendations in the concluding Part VI.

Root Causes for Assyrian Emigration

The largest segment of the Iraqi Assyrian refugee community in Jordan is comprised of former residents of the Nineveh Plain, most of whom arrived in Jordan between 2014 and 2015. Assyrians from Baghdad have consistently emigrated from Iraq since the start of the conflict in 2003 and continue to do so. An increasing number of refugees originated from the KRI, with the rate of emigration of Assyrians from the KRI intensifying in 2016 and 2017.

The decision to leave Iraq is a trying one for Assyrians. Many respondents explained the difficulties of leaving behind everything they have ever known. Anxiety regarding separation of families and friends was also common, and many have concerns about the Assyrian community's future in Iraq.

"I never thought about leaving [Iraq] before. I have visited America before, but never had the desire to live there over my homeland," said a man from Dohuk who hopes to be resettled in Australia where his brother now resides. "I know that Australia is not some sort of paradise. I know that life there will bring its own challenges. But imagine how bad our situation must have been to move us to decide that it was better for us to start from nothing in a foreign land."³

Respondents indicated four main reasons for leaving Iraq: concerns about security, lack of respect for the rule of law, crushing socio-economic factors, and a desire for family reunification.

However, the distribution of the start of residency in Jordan across place of origin indicates that there are differing factors driving emigration between the population groups. Indeed, the information collected by the Assyrian Policy Institute demonstrates that while the root causes of forced migration are largely the same for Assyrians across Iraq, the particularities vary depending on the place of origin. The API's

findings related to the root causes for Assyrian emigration from the Nineveh Plain, Baghdad, and the KRI are outlined in the next sections.

Nineveh Plain

The area inhabited by Assyrians most affected by the events of 2014 was the Nineveh Plain—this is reflected in the proportion of former Nineveh Plain residents currently residing in Jordan compared to those refugees from Baghdad or the KRI.

The Nineveh Plain is a region in Iraq's Nineveh Governorate located northeast of the city of Mosul. It abuts the KRI, and it is officially—though not entirely in practice—under the administration of the Iraqi Central Government in Baghdad.



API's Reine Hanna with an Assyrian refugee household from the Nineveh Plain following an interview in Jabal Hussein, Amman. (January 2018)

Prior to the emergence of the ISIS in 2014, the villages in the Nineveh Plain were inhabited by several ethnic and religious minority groups, the largest among them being the Assyrians. The area is considered the ancient Assyrian heartland.

The root causes for the emigration of Assyrians from the Nineveh Plain since 2014 identified by the Assyrian Policy Institute include the rise of

ISIS, the lasting instability and devastation, lack of trust in various security actors, lack of livelihood opportunities, loss of property, fears of demographic change, and fears of future violence targeting Assyrians.

According to Minority Rights Group International:

Minority groups must contend with an Iraqi government that has yet to include them in post-conflict planning, a Kurdistan Regional Government that openly states that lands that were once homes for Iraq's minorities will be annexed to Kurdistan, and an international community that appears to be indifferent to their fate. Given the existential threat facing minorities, emigration from Iraq has continued at a steady rate among these communities. Returns to retaken areas are very slow, due to the absence of adequate security and reconstruction assistance, as well as outright obstruction from political and military authorities in retaken areas.⁴

Respondents from the Nineveh Plain provided the following collection of statements with regard to their decision to leave Iraq:

What type of government just up and leaves its land? Abandons its own citizens? The Iraqi Army and the Peshmerga left our lands to ISIS. That is when it was clear to me that neither side cares about us and that it was time to leave.

(38-year-old male, Karamlesh, Household 24)

We did not choose to leave [Iraq]. ISIS showed up at our doors. The only option we had was to leave.

(45-year-old male, Bartella, Household 7)

We always planned to return once [the Nineveh Plain] was liberated. When it first happened, we were told we could expect to return at the new year. Then they said we would be able to return at the end of 2015. But that was not the case, when our soldiers [the NPU] were able to go back, we learned how bad it really was. We saw photos of all the destruction. Our house had been burned. So, we left.

(48-year-old male, Bakhdida, Household 29)

We had no choice but to leave—how could we possibly feel safe in Iraq again, knowing we had been left to ISIS?

(33-year-old female, Bakhdida, Household 14)

I am 45-years-old now. As an Assyrian, I have not seen anything positive from Iraq in my lifetime—from the war with Iran and then Kuwait, life under Saddam, the chaos after the American invasion, the corruption and oppression under the KRG, and finally ISIS. I have seen enough to know that Iraq was never meant to be our country.

(45-year-old male, Sheikhan, Household 43)

It was very hard to leave, but circumstances made it impossible for us to stay. I think about home every day. We left behind our entire lives.

(29-year-old male, Batnaya, Household 26)

Before ISIS, we had never even talked about leaving Iraq. But after ISIS, we had no choice.

(38-year-old female, Bakhdida, Household 22)

ISIS is gone, but the ideology lives on. We keep hearing about how ISIS has been eliminated, but what people do not realize is that ISIS was not some foreign force. They were our neighbors. In some cases, they were people who had been welcomed in our homes and had eaten at our tables. How could we have returned home after that?

(50-year-old male, Tel Keppe, Household 8)

Iraq and the KRG are fighting over the Nineveh Plain. They only care about their own interests and how they can use us to advance their own interests. The KRG paints a picture of coexistence. Baghdad paints a picture of diversity. But that is all it is—a picture. If Iraq cared about us, they would have prevented [ISIS], and if the KRG cared about us, they would not have abandoned us [to ISIS]. We had no choice but to leave.

(40-year-old female, Alqosh, Household 15)

The demographics of the Nineveh Plain are going to change. It is inevitable after what has happened. We have seen it happen in the south and we have watched it happen under the Kurds in the north. There is no way to

stop it. Once we had accepted that, we decided it was best to get ahead and leave now so that our children might have a better future.

(44-year-old male, Bartella, Household 6)

The following sections detail the root causes for Assyrian emigration from the Nineveh Plain described to the API.

THE RISE OF ISIS

The Nineveh Plain was captured by ISIS in August 2014, forcing hundreds of thousands of Assyrians and other marginalized groups to flee their homes. The collective trauma, grief, and loss that weigh on Assyrians—most of whom escaped the terrorist group—are impossible to discount. For many, emigration was the only option as the thought of returning home causes extreme fear and the events of 2014 have rendered them unable to imagine a future in Iraq.

While ISIS has been territorially defeated, the fear of resurgence is high among Assyrian refugees. Many view ISIS as the latest manifestation of a terrorist ideology that has terrorized Assyrians and driven them from the country.

“Yesterday it was Al Qaeda, today it’s ISIS, and tomorrow?” said a refugee who previously lived in Tel Keppe, Iraq.⁵

Further, a number of respondents were also disturbed by the actions of many of their Muslim neighbors in response to ISIS, who—by many accounts⁶—welcomed ISIS and “turned on” their Christian neighbors. According to respondents, some of them even joined the ranks of the terrorist organization. In many cases, Assyrian homes were looted by their Muslim neighbors. These experiences have made the reintegration of Assyrians into their former communities very difficult.

A man from Tel Keppe told API researchers, “As we were leaving, we received a call from our [Muslim] neighbors saying, ‘ISIS is coming and we will support them. This is your only chance to leave before it’s too late.’”⁷

FRAGILE SECURITY SITUATION

The Nineveh Plain remained under ISIS occupation until its liberation in early 2017. Nearly fifty percent of its original Assyrian population has since returned. The security situation in the area remains unstable and divided among forces with competing political ambitions, including the Kurdish Peshmerga, Iran-affiliated forces authorized via the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), and the Assyrian-led Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU).

The current security arrangement in the Nineveh Plain undermines central authority in the area, prevents the emergence of functioning state institutions, and has largely hindered the return of displaced Assyrians.

Assyrians, Yazidis, and other minoritized ethnic groups from the Nineveh Plain deeply mistrust the Kurdish Peshmerga, the force that controlled security in the area pre-ISIS, due to their calculated and preemptive withdrawal from the Nineveh Plain as ISIS advanced:

In Sinjar and the Nineveh Plain—the minority heartlands absorbed unilaterally into the KRG after 2003—Peshmerga told Yazidi and Assyrian residents (with occasional threat of punishment) to remain in their places, confiscated their weapons, pledged to protect them, and fled without firing a shot when ISIS attacked. The consequence of the Peshmerga’s coordinated withdrawal was genocide.⁸

The Peshmerga’s actions have been called a betrayal by the affected communities. Yazidi genocide survivor and 2018 Nobel Peace Prize laureate Nadia Murad wrote in her memoir *The Last Girl*:

We were even more shocked, though, by the Kurds who had sworn to protect us. Late at night, without any warning and after months of assuring us that they would fight for us until the end, the Peshmerga had fled Sinjar, piling into

their trucks and driving back to safety before the Islamic State militants could reach them...We tried to focus our anger on the leaders in Kurdistan making the decision rather than on the individual soldiers. What we could not understand, though, was why they left without warning or taking us with them or helping us get to safety...Villagers called it treason. Those with houses near their posts saw the Peshmerga leave and begged them, with no success, to at least leave their weapons behind for the villagers to use.⁹

Respondents from the Nineveh Plain said they are unable to trust KRG forces: “The Peshmerga left us to the mercy of ISIS. We watched their cars drive away—I saw it with my own two eyes,” said a woman from Tesqopa.¹⁰

“The Peshmerga were supposed to protect us—they put up their flags in our towns, but they were the first to leave and abandon the villages. By the time ISIS arrived, they were already in Erbil,” said a man from Karamlesh.¹¹

“The Peshmerga gave assurances to the locals. They told us, ‘We will never leave you. We will protect you.’ They assured us that ISIS would never enter. What choice did we have but to trust them?” said a man from Batnaya.¹²

“It was about 3pm in the afternoon. I was driving with a friend when we heard an explosion nearby. We headed that way to see what had happened. We heard people screaming as we neared. Two young boys—aged six and eight—who had been playing soccer were struck by a mortar. This is when we knew ISIS was coming. We gathered their remains and put them into an empty bag of chips and delivered them to their families. We realized the Peshmerga had abandoned us during the night. Word spread quickly and then the church bells were ringing—a signal that it was time to leave. We did not know if we would make it out in time. No human being should have to experience this kind of terror.”

(38-year-old male, Bakhdida, Household 14)

Four households from Tel Keppe reported that Peshmerga forces prevented them from leaving the town for a period of two days as ISIS approached. Respondents said the Peshmerga set up 3-foot dirt barriers around checkpoints to block cars from passing.

In an interview, one man from Tel Keppe stated the following with regard to the reported blockade:

“The Kurds told me ‘we will shoot you.’ I told them they could shoot me, but I was going to get my family out of there. When I returned to the checkpoint [with my family] they told me I was not permitted to leave. I told them ‘if you want to shoot me, shoot me.’ I got out and others followed after me.”¹³

Following the liberation of the Nineveh Plain, the Peshmerga and other KRG forces reasserted their control of the northern towns in the Nineveh Plain. Their presence has contributed to the lasting instability and has created a threatening environment for locals. KRG intelligence forces continue to harass, assault, and employ arbitrary detentions in areas occupied by Peshmerga in order to intimidate the local populations as the KRG continues to seek annexation of the Nineveh Plain.

Equally unsettling for Assyrians is the presence of Iran-backed Shia militias that are now operating in southern towns of the Nineveh Plain, namely the Babylon Brigade and PMU Brigade 30:

- The 1000-strong Babylon Brigades is an overwhelmingly Shia Arab militia; the force includes only a handful of Christian soldiers, but it is used by the PMU to project diversity within the organization. The Babylon Brigades entered the Nineveh Plain at the end of its liberation and are currently operating in the towns of Tel Keppe (Tal Kayf) and Batnaya. They have since gained notoriety in the region for perpetrating abuses and criminal activity.

- PMU Brigade 30 is a force comprised of approximately 1,000 fighters mostly of Shia Shabak background. Brigade 30 operates mainly in Bartella and has earned a reputation for perpetrating abuses and harassing local Assyrian populations. The Assyrian Policy Institute has received numerous reports from locals detailing harassment at checkpoints controlled by Brigade 30 as well as incidents of religious discrimination. Multiple women interviewed by the API have reported that Assyrian women and young girls—generally when traveling without a male companion—are subjected to verbal harassment of a sexual nature and are pressured to wear hijabs.

Both forces operate under the leadership and command of the Badr Organization, with the backing of powerful nonlocal PMU forces.



Assyrian refugees are highly unlikely to return to areas controlled by these militias, as demonstrated by the rate of return to the village of Batnaya, which has to date seen the lowest number of returnees.

“The presence of *Hashd al-Shabi* [PMU] makes it impossible for us to return home. Our town is now controlled by the Babylon Brigades. We could never trust them—we cannot trust anyone except for our own people to protect us,” said a man from Batnaya.¹⁴

Many residents fear that Brigade 30’s seizure of security responsibilities in historically Assyrian areas not only threatens their political interests, but signals an increase in power for the Badr Organization in the Nineveh Plain and impending demographic change. Their presence has impeded the authority of the NPU, which is independent of external patronage and therefore underfunded and consequently prevented from expanding.

According to Minority Rights Group International:

Government forces, Popular Mobilization Units (PMUs), and Kurdish Peshmerga and intelligence units have all been accused of human rights and international criminal and humanitarian law violations, including the wholesale destruction of retaken villages to ensure former inhabitants do not return.¹⁵

The fear of future violence targeting Assyrians in the region is widespread and Assyrians lack the necessary confidence in the current security structure in the Nineveh Plain.

RUMORS OF A DRAFT

Many respondents, particularly those from the Nineveh Plain, reported that there were rumors that the Iraqi military was going to enforce conscription in order to combat ISIS. According to an NBC News report published in March 2016, “Iraq’s embattled military chiefs announced they will try to impose conscription for the first time since the fall of Saddam Hussein.”¹⁶ Under the proposed law, men aged 19 to 45 would be drafted, including those from the Nineveh Plain.

While the proposed draft law was never enacted, the fear of conscription was widespread among Assyrians, many of whom did not wish to serve. My left Iraq to avoid the rumored draft. A man from Bartella said, “We first heard about the impending draft from our parish priest. It definitely contributed to our decision to leave.”¹⁷

“The notion that the Iraqi Army would ever consider drafting us, after we were left entirely unprotected, is an insult. I know many young men who fled because of this reason,” said a man from Bakhdida. “Why should we fight for a country that won’t fight for us?”¹⁸

POST-CONFLICT DEVASTATION

The Nineveh Plain exists today in a state of devastation and destitution following ISIS occupation. In most towns, basic infrastructure has been destroyed, including roads, water and

sewage systems, and power supplies. As a result, Assyrians and other minoritized communities in the Nineveh Plain lack access to basic needs, including potable water and electricity.

Many roads are severely damaged, restricting movement, and the foundations of public buildings have been destroyed. It is estimated that 13,000¹⁹ Assyrian homes were damaged to varying degrees—some of them completely leveled. All of them were looted.

Many respondents from the Nineveh Plain reported that their homes had been completely destroyed by ISIS. Some were able to visit their homes before leaving Iraq, while others have only seen photographs sent to them by friends and family who remain.

Devastation in Batnaya, Nineveh Plain, Iraq. Photo courtesy Eduard Pröls. (December 2016)



“With each day that passed [in internal-displacement], our hope that we might be able to return lessened. Once we saw photos of Batnaya, we lost all hope. Our town was destroyed. Our house was burned. They called it a liberation, but it didn’t feel that way,” said a woman from Batnaya.²⁰

The socio-economic status of Assyrians in the Nineveh Plain prevents healing and remains a major barrier to self-reliance.

While international actors, most notably the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), have launched large-scale projects aimed at creating lasting future prospects for inhabitants of the Nineveh Plain, the

restoration process has been very slow and has discouraged the return of displaced Assyrians.

Adding to the fundamental challenges, the restoration and reconstruction process is politicized wherever the KRG is endeavoring to gain control of these broken areas in Nineveh and Sinjar. The KRG has imposed restrictions on NGO activities in the Nineveh Plain, leveraging its strategic consent for an NGO’s presence and operations, as well as control over checkpoints, as part of a selection of KRG-approved actors in the region. If the KRG continues to limit NGO operations and access to returnees, their actions will not only hinder progress, but may leave returnees without adequate aid and exposed to further danger.

LACK OF LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITIES

Livelihood opportunities in the Nineveh Plain are scarce, and the lack thereof is another major factor driving emigration. Agriculture has historically been the mainstay of the Nineveh Plain’s economy. In many cases, Assyrian farmers are unable to relaunch their own projects due to the loss of property, damaged farmlands, lack of access to water networks, and loss of equipment and livestock.

Many small business owners were left economically devastated by ISIS and face high financial barriers when looking to renovate their stores and restart their business activities.

LOSS OF PROPERTY AND FEARS OF DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

Many Assyrians fear that the various groups contesting for control of the Nineveh Plain are using the post-ISIS instability to seize a greater claim over the historically Assyrian territory.

The ability to control security in an area enables powerful actors to influence local political and security dynamics. This is particularly harmful in the Nineveh Plain and other so-called disputed territories, as the lack of central government authority creates the space for demographic change and patronage systems in anticipation of a future referendum to settle the status of these territories.

There are widespread reports of the seizure of abandoned properties for various purposes, including shelter for displaced persons and squatting by PMUs and Peshmerga.²¹

The town of Bartella in the Nineveh Plain is a prime example. Prior to the ISIS attack, Bartella was predominantly an Assyrian-majority town with a population of roughly 20,000. Following the return of local populations since its liberation from the terrorist group, the number of ethnic Assyrians that have returned is less than 10,000, while the number of Shabak residents has increased. Many of the returnees are Bartella's original Shabak population, but others are Shabak residents who previously lived in surrounding areas. The southern towns of the Nineveh Plain have also seen an influx of IDPs of Arab background since its liberation.

Many also fear the ongoing process of Kurdification in the Nineveh Plain that is unfolding in the areas controlled by the KRG—for example, through the school systems and the forced installment of KDP-affiliated officials to local offices—which they feel will ultimately give way to a change in the demographic character of the region.

“The Kurds claim Alqosh as part of Kurdistan,” said a man from Alqosh, Iraq. “There is not one Kurd living in Alqosh, but they fly their flags in our town and put up portraits of [Masoud] Barzani. They want to take what is left of our lands.”²²

Baghdad

In the aftermath of the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, the federal security apparatus in the country collapsed, leaving minoritized populations particularly vulnerable to terror attacks.

The root causes for the migration of Assyrians from Baghdad since 2014 identified by the Assyrian Policy Institute include the constant risk to civilian life due to the volatile security situation, ongoing violence and discrimination against Christians, a rise in the level of religious hostility to Christians following the rise of ISIS, and the lack of livelihood opportunities for Christians.

The ongoing persecution against the beleaguered community fueled high levels of emigration and internal displacement of Assyrians. It is estimated that less than 20,000 Assyrians remain in Baghdad today.



API's Reine Hanna with Assyrian refugees from Baghdad following a group interview in Marka, Amman. (December 2017)

Respondents from Baghdad provided the following collection of statements with regard to their decision to leave Iraq:

I wanted to leave Baghdad many years ago, only I did not have the means. I left as soon as I knew I would be able to support my family as we await resettlement.

(39-year-old male, Baghdad, Household 39)

Leaving was not a choice. Look at all the Assyrians you see here [in Jordan]. You see how hard it is for us to live like this. We should not be here. We had a right to live in our country with dignity. Why should we live as refugees? We never planned to leave. But look at us now. Look at what has happened to us, the Assyrians.

(73-year-old male, Baghdad, Household 2)

Nobody cared about us when we were there [in Iraq]. Nobody will care that we are gone.

(36-year-old male, Baghdad, Household 18)

It was hard for us to leave our country. We did not want to leave. But we left because we had no choice. What could force you to into making a painful decision unless the alternative was a pain that was worse?

(41-year-old male, Baghdad, Household 2)

I have not seen anything in my life apart from war. From the day I was born, until the

day that I left, there was only war. We left because we want a different life.

(34-year-old female, Baghdad, Household 18)

It was difficult to leave behind the career I had built. I worked hard for my degrees and earned respectable positions. I know that I will not have the same opportunities wherever I resettle. It is not fair, but we had no other choice.

(32-year-old female, Baghdad, Household 35)

We were caught between the Sunni and Shia conflict for years. We were constant targets—our churches were bombed. We don't even remember a time where there was peace. The Americans did nothing to protect us.

(27-year-old female, Baghdad, Household 50)

There was no reason for us to remain in Baghdad. The last fifteen years took everything from us.

(31-year-old female, Baghdad, Household 35)

The following sections detail the root causes for Assyrian emigration from Baghdad described to the API.

PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS

In the years that followed the 2003 invasion, there were widespread reports of targeted violence against Assyrians due to their Christian faith, including abductions, torture, murders, and bombings. The plight of Assyrians and other minoritized groups was overlooked by the U.S. and coalition forces who failed to provide them any special considerations or protection amid the power vacuum. The Iraqi Government has repeatedly demonstrated a lack of regard for the fate of its indigenous peoples as well as its incapability to end the bloodshed and protect civilian life.

Churches and Christian religious figures were frequent targets. Upwards of 70 churches were attacked or bombed during these years, and an

alarming number of Assyrian priests were kidnapped and killed.

Two households reported that their parish, Mar Gewargis Assyrian Church of the East in Baghdad, was bombed in 2004 and since that day, they never felt safe attending church.

“It was very difficult for us to watch our community in Baghdad disappear. We would go to church on Sundays only to find it empty. In recent years, there would usually be only ten people in attendance—usually the elderly,” said a woman from Household 18.²³



A memorial for victims of the October 2010 massacre at Our Lady of Salvation Syriac Catholic Church in Baghdad, Iraq.

Respondents reported that major Christian holidays and holy days were observed amid feelings of terror. “Our holiday celebrations were always rushed,” one woman said. “No one dared to linger after church. We would leave immediately after services ended. If we were in public, only the brave ones would dare to whisper ‘Merry Christmas.’”²⁴

The pervasive persecution of Christians in federal territory seemingly climaxed in 2010 with a horrific church massacre in Baghdad which claimed the lives of over 60 people during a church service at Our Lady of Salvation Syriac Catholic Church.²⁵

Christian homes were regularly targeted with homemade bombs. Families were threatened through text messages and envelopes left on their doorsteps with bullets inside—a direct threat on the household that had received it. The message was clear: If the family refused to flee, they would be killed. Every household from Baghdad interviewed affirmed they knew of a family that had received this type of threat.

An elderly man from Household 2 reported that his son was murdered outside their family home in Ramadi in 2003 by masked gunmen. “It all happened so fast. He was sitting outside. They appeared out of nowhere, shot him, and drove off shouting *Allahu akbar*.”²⁶ His family moved from Ramadi to Baghdad immediately after this incident. Years later, in 2007, his brother was kidnapped in Baghdad by an extremist group and held for ransom:

“They called me and told me they had my brother. They put him on the phone, which is how I knew it was true. They told me I had two hours to pay them \$10,000 USD or he would be killed. As soon as they hung up, I started crying, because I did not have the money. I thought my brother was dead. I was desperate, so I contacted family and friends in Iraq and in diaspora. We managed to come up with the money in time, and he was freed. I had to hand-deliver the money, which was terrifying. I thought they might take the money and kill both of us, but I had to try to save my brother.”²⁷ In the days following his release from captivity, his brother fled Iraq with his wife and children.

There are major Assyrian cemeteries in parts of southern Iraq, including Baquba, Diyala, and various districts in Baghdad. Respondents reported that due to increased risks, Assyrian priests of all denominations stopped performing funeral services at burial sites for a period of several years. Instead, they would conduct services inside the churches, and families were expected to bury their dead on their own.

In Dora, a neighborhood in southern Baghdad, many Assyrians were forced out after the imple-



Assyrians in Baghdad mourn the loss of loved ones killed by Islamic extremists.

mentation of *jizya*—the Islamic tax often levied on non-Muslims—which was instituted under the threat of conversion or death.²⁸ Dora became an Al-Qaeda stronghold and remains a “notorious trouble spot” laden with Sunni extremists.²⁹

“My father was the only reason I remained in Iraq for so long. He suffered from an illness for many years before passing away in 2013. When he died, we buried him in a nearby cemetery in Baghdad, because it was simply too dangerous to go to Dora which is where his family was buried. I always planned to leave after he passed, but for some reason, I couldn’t bring myself to leave knowing he was buried there. It didn’t feel right that he was alone in that sense. So, I waited. When it was safe enough for me to go to Dora, I had my father’s casket exhumed and reburied in Dora next to my mother, my uncle, and my grandparents. It was his rightful place. A few months later, I left Iraq knowing I would never return. It brings me peace to know that he is buried alongside his family.” (43-year-old male, Household 36)

In Baghdad, Assyrian women face additional challenges. Female respondents reported that there was constant pressure on Christian women to wear the Islamic hijab, dress modestly, and “be mindful of their behavior in public.”³⁰

“As women,” one said, “even a laugh might be an insult to someone. We weren’t allowed to live.”³¹

“Muslim men would tell us that even the Virgin Mary wore a hijab,” said another.³²

Household 35 was an all-female household

from Baghdad, comprised of a mother and her three daughters. One of the daughters told API researchers, “My mother was terrified every time we left the house. She lit a candle every morning as I left for work. She would call me several times during the day to make sure I was okay. There was always a real possibility that we would not see each other again.”³³

Her sister said, “Our entire neighborhood knew that our household was all women. That always worried us, because to others it meant we were unprotected. Anytime the doorbell would ring, we would go up to the roof to see who it was before we dared to approach the door.” She said members of her household would rarely leave the home, except out of necessity, due to their fears.³⁴

One woman recounted an incident that occurred just months before her family left for Jordan in July 2017. “I approached a taxi driver asking for a ride. He was an Arab. He said to me, ‘What is your kind still doing here?’ and refused service.”³⁵ Several respondents reported similar experiences with taxi drivers, but also at banks, restaurants, and other places of business.

In addition to persecution on the basis of their faith, Assyrians were also seen as “Western sympathizers” given their cooperation with the US and the large number of Assyrians serving as translators for the US military. Many were also targeted for this reason, as documented by the *Los Angeles Times*:

During the US occupation of 2003–11, Sunni insurgents regularly targeted Iraqi Christians and their churches, viewing them as sympathizers of Western “crusader” forces. Churches were bombed and clerics executed, prompting many Christians to leave Iraq and raising fears about their future here.³⁶

Recent reports indicate a significant decline of violence in Baghdad, but the security situation remains unstable.³⁷ The fear of potential violence is receding much slower than the statistics and continues to force Assyrians into exter-

nal displacement. Anti-Christian sentiments in southern Iraq are rampant and even fanned by prominent clerics. For example, Iraq’s Grand Mufti stirred controversy in December 2018 after issuing an “anti-Christmas fatwa.”³⁸

Many Assyrians who remain in Baghdad are unable to emigrate despite their fears due to the lack of financial means to leave. Most respondents who previously lived in Baghdad explained to API researchers that they had plans to leave Iraq for years, but their financial situation prevented them from doing so. One woman said, “The only reason we stayed [in Baghdad] for so long is because we simply did not have the means to leave. We knew that life for refugees is expensive, and we had to wait until we could afford it.”³⁹

Respondents described the constant anxiety and fear that they lived with on a daily basis. Violence in Baghdad became the norm, with bombings and other forms of violence occurring daily. A 39-year-old man said, “We never knew when or where the next bombs would go off. Imagine that type of life becoming normal. I still have to consciously remind myself that I am not there anymore—that I do not have to be afraid walking down the street here [in Amman].”⁴⁰

LACK OF TRUST IN LAW ENFORCEMENT AUTHORITIES

Respondents from Baghdad stated that they do not trust Iraqi law enforcement to protect them, and do not feel that police treat ethnic and religious groups equally, or that police are adequately held accountable for their actions. Assyrians and other minoritized groups are underrepresented, to varying degrees, in nearly all Iraqi law enforcement agencies.

The longstanding perception of the Iraqi police as a futile force has worsened throughout the years. According to the *Iraq 2018 Crime & Safety Report: Baghdad* published by the U.S. State Department:

Police and military units have the ability to

respond to security incidents, terrorist attacks, and criminal activities but response times and the capabilities of responding units vary considerably. Iraqi police do not meet U.S. or Western standards.

More worryingly, Iraqi police are known to be infiltrated by members of extremist groups and members of sectarian militias.⁴¹ While Iraqi officials claim that vetting processes have improved and that their police have “evolved into a trusted and professional force,”⁴² many Assyrians remain unconvinced and trust between the Assyrian community and Iraqi law enforcement has deeply eroded.

One respondent stated, “The [Iraqi] police are not there to protect the people. They are there to collect their salaries.”⁴³

Respondents from Baghdad described a phone-tree warning system that had developed organically over the years among members of the Assyrian community there, through which Assyrians would notify one another of any bombings that had taken place or other potential threats. As one woman explained, “If there was a bombing or a murder, we would call our family and our neighbors to notify them to steer clear of the area. They would call theirs, and so on. We did this to protect each other.”⁴⁴

Following the US-led invasion in 2003, 12-foot concrete blast walls were installed throughout the city, lining major roads, and dividing its neighborhoods in an effort to quell the violence. While they understood the barriers were erected to prevent militant attacks, respondents felt these measures were dehumanizing. “It felt like we were living in a zoo. This is how you tame animals, not people,” one man said.⁴⁵ In 2019, Iraqi authorities began removing the walls.⁴⁶

Most respondents acknowledged that violence in Baghdad has lessened in recent years, but maintain that the city is far from safe. A man from Household 2 stated, “Surely, [Baghdad] is much better now. But what does that mean? It

means instead of one hundred people killed in a day, it’s only a handful.”⁴⁷ He added that much of the violence in Baghdad goes unreported:

“In America, a bombing is a big deal. One bombing will dominate the news for weeks. In Baghdad, they happen every day, but they don’t make the news. Up until we left, there were bombings almost daily in Baghdad. In America, would they report cars driving down the street? Of course not, but that’s how common the violence [in Baghdad] had become.”⁴⁸

LACK OF LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITIES

Unemployment in southern Iraq is widespread. According to the Associated Press, 70 percent of adults under 40 were jobless in 2018.⁴⁹ For marginalized communities, there are additional challenges when seeking employment.

In Baghdad, Assyrians are widely prevented from obtaining government employment due to religious discrimination, nepotism, and corruption. Opportunities for Assyrian women in particular are scant.

One woman applied for a position at a local bank. After her interview, she was told she was qualified for the position but would not be hired due to the fact that she was not an Arab. Female respondents that many Christian women employed in both the public and private sector were required to wear hijabs at work.

Assyrian-owned businesses are frequent targets for attacks, particularly liquor stores, as Islam prohibits the consumption of alcoholic beverages.⁵⁰ These attacks are generally carried out by Shia militias or Sunni insurgent groups. Household 36 reported that their former neighbor owned a liquor store and was murdered in broad daylight while at his shop in 2010. As of writing, the latest attack on a liquor store in Baghdad was reported in May 2019.⁵¹

Many Assyrian businesses in Baghdad have closed as a result of the violence targeting Chris-

tian-owned businesses, and prospective Assyrian business owners are likewise deterred.

LOSS OF PROPERTY

Thousands of Assyrians from Baghdad have lost their homes and properties to fraud and forced sales. For years, a network of civil servants in the land registry office identify vacant Assyrian-owned properties and falsify ownership transfer documents in collaboration with corrupt local officials. The properties are then seized and sold using the forged documents.

There are three types of groups targeting Assyrian assets: organized crime operating on behalf of local officials through real estate groups and forged property deeds; Shia militias; and individuals acting for personal gain. Lawyers and other advocates seeking restitution for Assyrian property seizures have received death threats.

Many Assyrians in Baghdad have also lost their homes to squatters and lack adequate remedies. Christian homes are frequently looted, though less so in recent years. Members of Household 35 reported that they moved north into the KRI in 2010 to escape the increasing violence against Christians in Baghdad, but returned a year later after facing other forms of discrimination under the KRG. When they returned to their home in Baghdad, they found it had been looted.

Lasting instability and corruption in Baghdad and the ongoing targeting of religious minorities continue to prevent displaced Assyrians from returning and reclaiming their properties.

Kurdistan Region of Iraq

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) is often lauded for providing a “proven sanctuary and ‘safe haven’” for religious minorities, but the unceasing migration of Assyrians from areas administered by the KRG belies this popular narrative. While Kurdish officials and international media outlets point to new churches erected in the region as a sign of prosperity for

Christians, little attention is paid to the Assyrian families who silently pack their bags and leave.

Over the course of the past decade, scores of Assyrian villages under KRG rule have been emptied. The steady emigration of Assyrians from the KRI has been overshadowed by the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Assyrians from the Nineveh Plain. The findings of this report indicate an influx in the number of Assyrian refugees from the KRI in the months leading up to the failed September 2017 Kurdish referendum.

Many Assyrians from Erbil and Dohuk Governorates have been forced into migration due to harmful policies and practices of the KRG, including: widespread abuses of human rights, attacks on democratic political processes, the denial of freedom of speech and opinion, the systematic expropriation of lands belonging to Assyrians, extortion targeting minorities, other forms of racially-motivated prejudice, and lack of respect for the rule of law.

“KRG officials often act as though the Assyrian people should be indebted to them. The narrative that is pushed by the media and accepted by many of the Kurdish people is that the KRG saved us, and that we should be grateful. The KRG does not advertise what it has really done to us—denied our rights, stolen our lands. Nobody hears about any of that,” said a man from Ankawa.⁵²

Respondents from the Kurdistan Region provided the following collection of statements with regard to their decision to leave Iraq:

None of the Assyrians that left Sarsing wanted to leave. We love our village. But how can we survive without jobs or electricity?

(26-year-old male, Sarsing, Household 13)

It was very hard to leave—I left my childhood home. We left a lot of people behind, and I have accepted the fact that I will probably never see them again.

(29-year-old male, Nahla, Household 46)

When we were leaving for the airport, it was as though we were taking one step forward and one step back. We did not want to leave. At the airport, my husband and I looked at each other with sadness, because neither of us wanted to go. But we had no choice.

(36-year-old female, Ankawa, Household 52)

People used to have hope that after ISIS things would change and people would return home. We thought that it might be a turning point in our history—that now, finally the world would try to help us. But the referendum ruined everything. The problems between Iraq and the KRG have left no room for our people. It simply felt like we had nothing left to stay for. And so, like many people before us, we packed up and left.

(33-year-old male, Deralok, Household 53)

The Kurdish referendum was very frustrating, and for me, it was the final straw. The media made it seem like an independent Kurdistan was a real possibility at the time. It just highlighted for me how little say we have in determining our own future in our homeland. When we finally accepted that reality, we left.

(38-year-old male, Dohuk, Household 45)

There is no hope left for Assyrians. I left four days before the [Kurdish] referendum. We all assumed the Americans would back them [the KRG]. I do not regret leaving at all—the situation has only worsened since then.

(34-year-old male, Dohuk, Household 51)

We were treated like second-class citizens, but we always had hope that things would get better. But the days were passing by, and there was no progress. Things were actually getting worse, and I saw no future for my family.

(38-year-old male, Gondekosa, Household 38)

Laws are created to protect the rights of a nation's citizens. That is not how it works in the KRG. We only had rights on paper, never in practice.

(51-year-old female, Ankawa, Household 54)

There are many factors driving Assyrians into migration. Everyone only sees ISIS, but there is so much more than that. People like me are thinking about our children. For example, I'm thinking about my daughter and the opportunities she will have in her future. How many Assyrians have graduated from university only to be left unemployed?

(45-year-old male, Ankawa, Household 16)

The following sections detail the root causes for Assyrian emigration from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq described to the API.

POLITICIZED SECURITY FORCES

In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the Peshmerga, and other KRG security and intelligence forces like the *Asayish* and *Zerevani* are highly-politicized forces known to be used by the ruling parties to secure and maintain power.⁵³ KRG security forces are deeply partisan and are utilized to crush local dissent.

The Assyrian Policy Institute recorded dozens of incidents of intimidation, harassment, and assault against Assyrians reported by respondents who previously lived in areas administered or controlled by the KRG.

According to a Human Rights Watch report:

Kurdish authorities have resorted to harsh tactics in response to dissidents in these minority communities who challenge KRG control. Kurdish forces have mostly relied on intimidation, threats, arbitrary arrests, and detentions to coerce the support of minority communities for the KRG. In some extreme cases, Human Rights Watch found, they resorted to violence, including torture.⁵⁴

While most Assyrians feel relatively secure in the KRI, the community largely lacks confidence in the Peshmerga and other KRG security forces to protect them, and instead collectively view them as a repressive force. There is a widespread belief that these forces do not treat Assyrians and other minoritized groups equal-

ly, and that Kurdish security officers are not adequately held accountable for their actions. Assyrians are underrepresented in nearly all KRG law enforcement agencies, including local police forces in Assyrian-majority areas.

A man from Sarsing in Dohuk Governorate said, “I cannot fear for my life. But I also cannot say I ever felt safe.”⁵⁵

Further, Assyrians are underrepresented in KRG police forces, even in areas where they constitute the majority of the population. This is true even in Ankawa, where ethnic Assyrians comprise at least 80% of the population. According to the Assyrian Confederation of Europe:

Ankawa residents are not allowed to serve in the local police force unless they are not allowed to serve in the local police force unless they are KDP members. Many young Assyrian men have the desire to enter the police force, but refuse KDP membership and are therefore disqualified. As a result, despite its overwhelming Christian population, there is only one Christian police officer in Ankawa. He is a registered KDP member.⁵⁶

LACK OF LIVELIHOOD OPPORTUNITIES

Rampant unemployment and the nonpayment or irregular payment of salaries to civil servants exacerbate the economic and social hardships specific to marginalized communities like the Assyrians and are among the major factors driving migration from the KRI.

In order to obtain and keep jobs in the KRI, Assyrians are often forced to assume KDP membership, particularly in significant institutions, such as a hospital or university. This is a longstanding practice that is not exclusive to Assyrians.

A woman from Sarsing, Iraq graduated in 2012 with a law degree but was never employed. “There was always pressure to join the KDP in order to be hired, but I refused. I was unemployed for more than four years as a result,” she

said. “I told my husband that I did not want to start a family in Iraq. How could we? Our lives were unstable and our future was uncertain.”⁵⁷

The KRG has demonstrated discriminatory business practices when granting permits for new businesses. Assyrian applications for permits are often denied without a reasonable basis for their rejection, or simply without being given a valid explanation.

Further, Assyrian businesses operate under the constant threats and harassment of KDP intelligence forces, known as the *Asayish*. Assyrians are often forced to pay protection money to *Asayish* officers in order to continue business operations. This extortion occurs regularly but arbitrarily in Erbil and Dohuk Governorates.

Many Assyrians in rural areas are farmers and earn their livelihoods through the sale of their crops. However, due to lack of access to water networks in Assyrian towns, expropriation of farmlands, and other negative factors, agricultural workers are unable to earn an income.

In May 2019, The Assyrian Journal published the following testimony as part of its “Assyrian Stories” series quoting an Assyrian man from the Barwar region in Dohuk Governorate:

“We used to have a really nice, comfortable life. We had apples and fruits we could grow. We used to travel on donkey and farm wheat and rice. The neighbors would help each other farm. Now, because we don’t have proper water access, our apple orchards are barren. The problem started occurring this year. Our water comes from pipes in the mountains but our access to the pipes were cut off. We put in a formal request between the villagers outlining our grievances and delivered it to the party responsible for reviewing them but nothing has happened.”

A lot of people have been forced to leave these areas because we’re not able to farm. If we don’t get water then we can’t water our plants. That’s our livelihood.”⁵⁸



An Assyrian man from Dooreh, Barwar. Photo courtesy of Joe Snell, *The Assyrian Journal*: "Assyrian Stories." (May 2019)

ILLEGAL CONFISCATION OF LANDS

In the Kurdistan Region, the chronic and systematic expropriation of Assyrian lands continues unabated. This long-term problem has led to forced demographic change in historically Assyrian territory, and ultimately, the large-scale displacement of Assyrians from their homeland. Expropriation of Assyrian lands takes various forms, including: encroachment by neighboring Kurdish villages; the confiscation of lucrative orchards and arable farmlands; illegal construction of homes on Assyrian property or territory; and the seizure of land or property through outright aggression.

Assyrians seeking to overturn the occupation of their land have exhausted all legal and political means of seeking restitution against illegal confiscations, including frequent appeals to KRG courts. The absence of legitimate political institutions and the rule of law have left Assyrians with no legal recourse.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom addressed the issue of the appropriation of Assyrian lands in its 2017 report *Wilting in the Kurdish Sun*:

Christian citizens of the KRI have issued complaints and held protests against Kurdish residents for attacking and seizing their land and villages in the provinces of Dohuk and Erbil. Some Assyrian Christians accuse Kurdish government officials and party officials of taking lands for personal use or financial gain. These Christians believe they are specifically targeted as part of a policy to Kurdify historically Christian areas.⁵⁹

A man from Sarsing, Iraq stated that he complained to the town's Kurdish mayor about a Kurdish resident claiming a portion of his land. He reported that the mayor's response to him was as follows: "What do you expect me to do? You went and joined the Assyrian Democratic Movement. There is nothing I can do for you now."⁶⁰ The ADM is an Assyrian political party that is politically-opposed to the KDP. The respondent assumed membership in the organization in 2007. The land dispute occurred in 2016 and remains unresolved.

A household from Ankawa reported that their farmlands had been confiscated by the KRG for the construction of Erbil International Airport without consent or compensation. Erbil International Airport was rebuilt and reopened in 2010 on farmlands belonging to Assyrians living in Ankawa. Some of the lands belonged to the Chaldean Catholic Church.⁶¹ The land was seized by the KRG, and the legal owners received no recompense despite the hundreds of millions of dollars invested in the project. Many of these farmers lost their only source of income as a result.

A respondent from Nahla stated, "How many times have Kurds showed up in our villages and declared our land as theirs? We have done all that we can to stop them, but the law is not on our side. Those who stand up to them do it at great risk."⁶²

Such an incident was documented by the Assyrian Confederation of Europe in 2017:

On July 12, 2013, the mukhtar (an official similar to a mayor at the level of a village) of the Assyrian village of Rabatkeh

in Nahla, Zaya Barcham Khoshaba, confronted a Kurdish Peshmerga lieutenant who was attempting to build a home on stolen land that belonged to Assyrians. The Peshmerga lieutenant declared that the land was his. Khoshaba demanded official government documents to back

his claim. The lieutenant replied, “I am the government.” [...]

The residents later realized the lieutenant was sneaking construction supplies into Rabatkeh during the night, and illegally began construction. Khoshaba confronted him late one night, and told him what he was doing was wrong. The lieutenant struck him with his pistol.⁶³



Zaya Barcham Khoshaba after being attacked by a Peshmerga officer. (July 2013)

The intention and scale of the processes in Kurdistan Region constitutes a targeted and systematic attempt to ethnically cleanse the Assyrian population from their ancestral lands by appropriating property to which they are legally entitled and for which they possess deeds.

DENIAL OF FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND OPINION

While the purpose of KRG intelligence forces is ostensibly to provide security and safety to the citizens of the KRI, they perform the additional function of enforcing compliance with party policies and silencing oppositional voices.

Assyrians who speak out publicly against discrimination, injustice, prejudice, political coercion, and KRG annexation of the Nineveh Plain, or who are critical of other KRG policies and practices—even on social media—are frequently threatened with violence via phone calls and messages from these forces. The KRG has long sought to silence dissidents, regardless of ethnic identity.

Journalists critical of the KRG are frequently detained⁶⁴ and sometimes killed. Such cases serve as “examples” to others who might express dissent or critique the government and are particularly effective at deterring minorities from exercising free speech, as minorities already feel more vulnerable and are more susceptible to terrorization and intimidation.

Protests organized by Assyrians have also been blocked by KRG intelligence forces. For example, in April 2016, Human Rights Watch reported on a blocked protest:

Kurdish security forces on April 13, 2016, blocked roads to prevent Christian Iraqi families from reaching the regional capital, Erbil, to hold a protest. The Christians had planned to demonstrate against what they say is encroachment on their land by Kurds.⁶⁵



Assyrian residents of Nahla blocked by KRG security forces from entering Erbil to participate in a protest against land theft outside the KRG parliament building. (April 2016)

A 2017 report published by Minority Rights Group International addresses the issue of Peshmerga intimidation of minoritized communities:

Those who accuse the government of land grabbing and criticize violations discussed in earlier chapters of this report—including the KRG blockades of Sinjar and Tel Kaif, Peshmerga looting of minority properties, and restrictions on IDP returns to regained minority territories in Hamdaniya and elsewhere—are frequently subjected to arrests, detention, and threats so severe that they prompt emigration.

“Every time I write or speak publicly about the Peshmerga repeatedly looting my property after ISIS withdrew from my town, I get arrested and detained by the *Asayish* for one day or two days. Once I received a threat and I had to leave Iraq for a few months. It was not safe for me to stay here.” –Christian IDP and activist, Dohuk, March 2017⁶⁶

A man from Nahla said, “Anyone who tells you the KRG is a democracy is either afraid for their life or on the [KRG] payroll.”⁶⁷

“If you have a negative opinion of the KRG, you keep it to yourself. Everyone knows this. If you open your mouth, it might cause serious problems for you or your family, and there is no law to protect you,” said a man from Ankawa.⁶⁸

ATTACKS ON DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL PROCESSES

Kurdish authorities have for more than a decade practiced a strategy of offering incentives to minority communities in exchange for their support for the KRG’s policies, particularly with regard to the Nineveh Plain. The KDP buys the allegiances of Assyrian political and religious leaders through a patronage system that fosters political divisions within the Assyrian community. This patronage system also has the effect of obfuscating and muddling the voices of the Assyrian majority, making advocates, NGOs, and Western government officials less able to identify a clear picture of the local dynamics harming the community.

The Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament reserves five seats for Assyrians, however voting for Assyrian representatives is not restricted to Assyrian voters. This means that Kurdish citizens are able to vote in the very elections that determine the special representation of the Assyrians. The irony of this defective system is striking: the ostensible purpose for the quota is to protect the interests of an underrepresented minority, but this objective is undermined when the ma-

jority is able to override Assyrian wishes and determine who will fill the seats. Deliberate interference from the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in elections for Assyrian representatives—which includes the methodical mobilization of tens of thousands of Kurdish voters, voter fraud, and intimidation—has rendered Assyrian representation illegitimate. In the most recent KRG parliamentary elections held in September 2018, four of the five seats reserved for Assyrians were captured by Assyrians affiliated with the KDP. The KRG refused calls for reforms of the electoral system ahead of the 2018 elections.

“Those seats [in parliament] are not designed to give us a real voice. They exist only for the KRG to be able to claim they are an inclusive government. They exist so that the KRG can give a platform to Assyrians who will spread their propaganda,” said a man from Ankawa.⁶⁹

This dysfunctional minority quota system, which fails to protect the fragile political representation of communities like the Assyrians, poses very serious risks and threatens the future of Assyrians. Most Assyrians believe they lack legitimate representation and feel that genuine change cannot be achieved in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

DENIAL OF BASIC NEEDS

Most Assyrian villages in the KRI lack proper infrastructure including but not limited to electricity, hospitals, adequate schools, acceptable roads, water supply, waste management, and other public services.

Although all residents of the KRI experience frequent and random power outages varying in length, Assyrians living in rural villages sometimes have almost no access to electricity. Some families receive electricity for only a few hours each day. This causes many problems, including:

- Inability to cook meals as appliances cannot be used

- Difficulty preserving perishable foods
- Freezing conditions in the winter with heat provided only by kerosene stoves or firewood stoves
- Unable to shower in winter as water is too cold

A man from Sarsing, Iraq said that Assyrians in his hometown were forced to revert to usage of firewood stoves as the cost of kerosene spiked, making it unaffordable to most families, particularly those whose salaries were unpaid or who were unemployed. “It sounds like a small matter, but it was one of many signs for me that it was time to leave. It started to feel like while the rest of the world was moving forward with technological advances, we were moving backwards. We were using wood to keep warm in the winter while the Barzani family was living lavishly in their gold palaces.”⁷⁰

Roads leading to and within Assyrian villages are often in very poor condition, creating hazardous conditions for drivers, especially when there is rain or snow. It is also dangerous to drive at night given the absence of streetlamps and lack of clear signage. Public services such as waste management are sporadic in Assyrian villages. Public transportation does not extend to most Assyrian villages. Emergency services are inaccessible and unreliable.

Further, the large majority of Assyrian schools are in disrepair, and receive little to no assistance from the KRG, instead relying on support from NGOs.

“Go visit any Assyrian village in the north, and you will see with your own eyes how much the KRG cares about us,” said a man from Gondekosa.⁷¹

“My father cried the day I left—I couldn’t look him in the eye. Ever since we were children, he would tell us that [Iraq] was our homeland. He made us promise to never leave it. My brother left a few years before I did. I tried to convince him to stay, and reminded him of the promise we had made to our father and to our people. The day my brother left, I told him I would be there waiting for the day he returned home. But now look at where I am. I feel guilty—almost as if the suffering my father endured was for nothing because his children ended up leaving anyway.”

(33-year-old male, Nahla, Household 46)

“Everyone is slowly leaving, and often times no one knows they have gone. It happens quietly, but it is happening every day. People pack up their things, lock their doors, and leave behind their entire lives. Sometimes I will run into people I know here [in Jordan] and I’m surprised to see them. I think there is a sense of shame associated with emigration, even though we all know none of us had another choice. We avoid talking about it with one another, but the sadness is always there. It is scary to think about how quickly and quietly this is happening. I can’t help but think that those who wished to eliminate us—from 1933 until today—won.”

(38-year-old male, Dohuk, Household 45)

“One day, I reflected on my life and realized I had lived my father’s life—and he had lived his father’s life. Then I looked at my son and decided I didn’t want to damn him to the same fate.”

(35-year-old male, Ankawa, Household 44)

“I don’t have family left in Iraq. My brothers and sisters are all raising their children in Australia now. I am aware of the opportunities that my nephews and nieces now have. Those opportunities do not exist for Assyrians in Iraq—they never have. That might change someday, but there’s a very good chance that it won’t. I imagined that one day my daughter might ask me why she is denied the opportunities afforded to her cousins. I thought about how I would respond—I thought about that for a long time—and I could not come up with a good answer.”

(44-year-old male, Ankawa, Household 52)

“Naturally, we [Assyrians] have a negative outlook on the future given everything that we have been through as a people. After ISIS, I thought to myself it is really over for us. But then I met Assyrians who were determined to return home and rebuild, and it gave me reasons to hope. I cannot imagine that we would have endured all of this if we weren’t meant to survive it. I refuse to accept that all of it was for nothing. I continue to believe that many of us will go back someday.”

(34-year-old male, Dohuk, Household 51)

Part II: The Resettlement Process

Most Assyrians in Jordan are there on a temporary basis with concrete plans to emigrate to a third country. They are largely living from their savings and remittances sent by relatives abroad. These refugees seek resettlement to other countries via the UNHCR and the Australian Special Humanitarian Program.

When asked about what factors drive them to seek resettlement in a third country, households cited the following reasons: safety, religious freedom, respect for human rights, equal educational and economic opportunities, and family reunification.

Entering Jordan

Jordan is being used as a country of transit by many Assyrian refugees from Iraq. To gain entry into Jordan, Iraqi citizens are required to obtain a visa prior to arrival. Most respondents reported obtaining a tourist visa for this purpose. The waiting process for a Jordanian visa can take several months. Some households stated they had requested expedited visas citing medical reasons—whether real or fabricated—in order to accelerate the process. Expedited visas are typically issued within a two-week period.

There were two primary reasons that households sought refugee status in Jordan as opposed to neighboring host countries such as Turkey or Lebanon. First, Jordan is an Arabic-speaking country which enables them to easily navigate as opposed to Turkey, where the official language is Turkish. Second, migrant social capital resources are greater in Jordan for the Iraqi Assyrian community than in Lebanon.

Migrant social capital is commonly conceptualized as resources of information or direct assistance that individuals obtain through their social ties to prior migrants. Examples of social capital can be help with living arrangements upon arrival or information about humanitarian resources or job opportunities. There is also a widespread belief among Assyrian refugees in Jordan that visa processing times are shorter in Jordan than in neighboring host countries. For example, A man from Batnaya stated, “Over the past few years, it seems as though our friends and relatives who have awaited processing in Jordan were resettled faster.”⁷²



Assyrian refugees at the Brazen Serpent Monument at Mount Nebo in Jordan. (February 2018)

Similarly, a man from Ankawa stated he was advised by friends and relatives to apply through the Australian Visa Application Centre in Amman. “Everyone says that Jordan is better for those looking to emigrate to Australia. That is why [my family] came here,” he said.⁷³

More than forty percent of households interviewed cited this notion as a reason for choosing Jordan as their asylum

country; however, the API was unable to find evidence that support these particular claims. Humanitarian visas generally take quite some time to process, and processing times are similar throughout the region.

Prior to leaving Iraq, many respondents sold their properties, cars, and other belongings. However, the large majority of interviewees who previously lived in the Nineveh Plain did not have this option, as their properties had been looted and destroyed.

Most Assyrian refugees travel to Amman, Jordan by airplane and therefore are limited to two suitcases per passenger to stow their possessions. In some cases, the head of household—usually a male—travels to Jordan ahead of the rest of his family members in order to secure housing.

UNHCR Registration

Upon arriving in Jordan, Assyrian refugees register with the UNHCR Registration Center in Amman. When a family is registered with the UNHCR they receive a special registration card which will allow them to access basic services. More importantly, registration with the UNHCR also confers the legal status of refugee. Ac-

cording to international law, host countries must grant refugees certain rights and fulfil certain obligations to them. According to the UNHCR:

Registration and identification of refugees is key for the people concerned, as well as for States to know who has arrived, and facilitates access to basic assistance and protection...The very fact of being registered can, in many contexts, protect against refoulement (forced return), arbitrary arrest and detention.⁷⁴

UNHCR documentation constitutes formal proof of identity which facilitates greater freedom of movement for refugees in Jordan. They are routinely required to present this documentation to law enforcement officers (i.e. at checkpoints). Refugees without proper documentation who are stopped by the police are lawfully liable to arrest or to be summarily deported to Iraq.⁷⁵

During standard registration interviews, UNHCR staff identify vulnerable cases for possible resettlement. Resettlement under the auspices of the UNHCR involves the selection and transfer of refugees from a host country to a third country that has agreed to admit them with permanent residence status:

The status provided by the resettlement state ensures protection against refoulement and provides a resettled refugee and his/her family or dependents with access to civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights similar to those enjoyed by nationals. Resettlement also carries with it the opportunity to eventually become a naturalized citizen of the resettlement country.⁷⁶

Millions of refugees around the world await resettlement, but the number of individuals resettled is very small in comparison. Of 19.9 million refugees of concern at the end of 2017, less than one percent were resettled that year. According to the UNHCR:

In 2018, UNHCR submitted the files of over 81,300 refugees for consideration

by resettlement countries. By nationality, the main beneficiaries of UNHCR-facilitated resettlement programs during this period were refugees from the Syrian Arab Republic (28,200), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (21,800), Eritrea (4,300) and Afghanistan (4,000).⁷⁷

More than 55,600 individuals departed with the UNHCR's assistance in 2018. The largest number of refugees left from Lebanon (9,800), followed by Turkey (9,000), Jordan (5,100) and Uganda (4,000).

The Assyrian refugees interviewed for this report have little hope of being selected by the UNHCR's refugee resettlement program due to relatively low rates of resettlement.

An Assyrian man from Sarsing explained that when registering with the UNHCR, he was told by a UNHCR officer that he "should not get his hopes up" and that it was likely he would not hear from the UNHCR regarding his case for a least one year.⁷⁸

Despite the low prospects of resettlement via the UNHCR, registration with the agency is vital to Assyrians as it affords them legal status and protection in Jordan as they await immigration processing to other countries.

The large majority of households interviewed wished to be resettled in the United States, Canada, or Australia; however most believe resettlement in the United States to be impossible given increased restrictions on immigration in recent years. Countries like the United States and Canada require that refugees are referred by the UNHCR or another designated referral organization.

Australia, however, is unique in that refugees can apply for resettlement directly with the Australian Special Humanitarian Program. Due to the unlikelihood of resettlement via the UNHCR, most Assyrians will take additional steps to file a resettlement application with the Australian

Government. This trend will be discussed further on page 40.

Misconceptions about the Prioritization of Christian Refugees

The international response to the question regarding refugees of minority background has been uneven. Some governments prioritize resettlement applications based on religious identity, and have received objection to this method; while others disregard religious identity altogether, asserting humanitarian aid and assistance should be blind to religion.

There is reportedly a widespread misconception among refugees that amid the refugee backlog, Christian refugees are given priority in resettlement, particularly to the United States. Many Assyrian refugees attribute this to statements made by U.S. President Trump declaring that "Christians will be given priority when it comes to applying for refugee status in the United States."⁷⁹ However, despite these remarks, the number of Christians admitted from countries where Christians face the most extreme population saw a steep decline. For example, only 26 Iraqi Christians were admitted to the United States in fiscal year 2018.⁸⁰

The problem concerning religious identity arises when states classify refugees by religion according to their own nationally-specific about religious and cultural integration rather than based on the specific needs of the refugees. The former is discriminatory, whereas the real challenge of processing asylum claims hinges on the assessment of vulnerability.

The Assyrian Policy Institute interviewed Juliana Taimoorazy, president of the Iraqi Christian Relief Council which has been active in Amman, Jordan since July 2015; Taimoorazy stated that the low rate of resettlement of Christian refugees via the UNHCR is a major concern that her organization has been working

to rectify. “We have addressed the matter with UNHCR representatives who themselves have acknowledged that the unique needs of the Assyrians have been overshadowed largely due to the Syrian refugee crisis. We are not advocating for preferential treatment of this community—we are simply asking for just treatment.”⁸¹

The desire to move past religious distinctions is understandable when contemplating Western discourse on the refugee crisis; however, it is wrong to discount the unique suffering of religious minorities. Religious identities must be considered when determining *how* an individual or family receives assistance and protection—but certainly not when deciding whether they are entitled to it.

Australian Special Humanitarian Program

On the pretext that resettlement through the UNHCR is rare, every family interviewed by the Assyrian Policy Institute reported they were also seeking resettlement through the Australian Special Humanitarian Program. Unless otherwise noted, any reference to a humanitarian visa application throughout the course of this report refers to an application filed directly with the Australian government.

In order to be eligible for an Australian refugee visa, one must be located outside Australia, meet the UN definition of a refugee, be subject to persecution in his/her home country, and meet health and character requirements.

The Application for an Offshore Humanitarian Visa (Form 842)⁸² is available online, and must be submitted with all documents necessary to support an applicant’s humanitarian claims. Applications are generally submitted online or to the Australian Visa Application Centre in Amman. Visa interviews and biometric collection processes take place at the same location. There is no application or processing fee for humanitarian visas to Australia.

Members of a family unit can be included in a single application. The head of household—usually the father—serves as the main applicant and the spouse and unmarried children under the age of 21 are included in his or her application.

Processing times vary on a case-by-case basis. According to the Australian Government Department of Home Affairs:

The decision process could take many months, or even years. The number of applications we receive for resettlement each year is far greater than available visas.⁸³

The Australian Government does not fund travel costs for humanitarian visa holders; therefore, visa holders are responsible for their own travel to Australia and must enter the country by the date listed on their visa.

Applicants who receive a negative decision from the Australian Department of Home Affairs have the option to reapply.

Australia is an optimal resettlement country for Assyrian refugees, given the existing Assyrian community—particularly in Sydney and Melbourne—which has grown considerably in recent years due to the conflict in Iraq and Syria. Over the years, Assyrians in Australia have established various clubs, social organizations, churches, and private schools.

Visa Processing Times

Visa processing times vary widely; while some visa applications may be approved in a matter of months, humanitarian visas can take years to get approved. Some Assyrian families have been resettled in a few months, while others have had pending cases for upwards of four years with no developments. The consequences of protracted displacement on refugees will be examined in later sections.

Respondents provided the following collection of statements with regard to visa processing times:

When we made the decision to leave Iraq, we knew we would be here for two years at the very least. We have made peace with that. Some people get lucky, but everyone knows the process takes time and all we can do is try to prepare for it.

(43-year-old male, Dohuk, Household 31)

We applied through the UN and the Australian Government. There is no way to know how long we will be waiting. We know a family that was resettled after waiting only six months. But others have been here for years.

(55-year-old female, Nahla, Household 47)

We are living in limbo [for three years]. I would rather they just tell us we have been rejected, so that we can move on with our lives. Each day I think about just giving up and going back [to Iraq], but I always say to myself 'maybe tomorrow you will get an answer.'

(63-year-old male, Sharafiya, Household 4)

Family Reunification Through Immigration

While use of the term “chain migration” has become somewhat contentious in recent years, the use of the term in the context of this report refers to the social process by which migrants from a particular family follow others from that family to a resettlement country. Chain migration is common among Assyrians, many of whom have been forcibly uprooted from their homeland.

The desire to reunite with family members abroad is widespread among Assyrian refugees. Post-2003 conflicts have displaced upwards of one million Iraqi Assyrians, leaving many families fragmented.

Pressure to emigrate from family members abroad was also widely reported by respondents interviewed for this report. For example, a man from Sarsing, Iraq explained that his household is supported by his father who was resettled in Australia in 2015. He reported that his father had been urging him to emigrate for several years because “there is no future for Assyrians in Iraq.”⁸⁴

One woman from Shaqlawa, Iraq stated that the absence of her family was the main reason she wanted to leave Iraq. “My family lives in France now. They say that life is much better there. It is hard to live away from them, but I knew they were never going to come back—so what was the point of life in Iraq?”⁸⁵

Assyrian families that have been separated due to forced migration often seek reunification through the process of chain migration. Due to financial constraints, extended families—and in some cases, nuclear families—are unable to emigrate together and therefore do so in segments, prioritizing members of their family who are considered the most vulnerable (i.e. women, children, and the elderly).

As previously stated in this report, the majority of Assyrian refugee households in Jordan rely on remittances from family members abroad or from those who remain in Iraq in order to survive; in many cases, those who remain in Iraq have concrete plans to emigrate as well.

For example, a man from Berseve, Iraq explained his family’s migration story: “We all wanted to leave but would not have had the [financial] means to survive as refugees if we left together, so we decided to leave in smaller groups. My mother and my youngest brother went first. They lived as refugees in Turkey for two years before they were resettled in Australia. During that time, I helped support them financially. Now I am here with my other brothers, while our eldest brother remains in Iraq with his wife and children. They are supporting us. Once I make it [to Australia],

they will leave [Iraq], and my brothers and I will support them as they await processing.”⁸⁶

In a separate interview, a woman from Baghdad explained a similar arrangement with her son and daughter who remain in Baghdad with their spouses and children. “My daughter and son are still working and they send us money each month. Once we have resettled and found employment, we will provide [financial] support in return so that they are also able to leave [Iraq].”⁸⁷

Part III: Life for Assyrian Refugees in Jordan

Urban Refugees

Assyrian refugees face specific vulnerabilities and challenges in displacement, as they do not seek shelter in refugee camps due to religious discrimination and fear of targeted attacks. Instead, Assyrian refugees are compelled to rent private homes in urban neighborhoods, which limits their access to humanitarian services and often leads to increased feelings of isolation.

Despite the disadvantages of life as an urban refugee, most Assyrians in Jordan benefit from the infrastructure in the capital city of Amman and neighboring suburbs. Unlike refugees that live in camps, urban centers offer refugees the opportunity to live autonomously. However, the cost of living is very expensive, and Assyrian refugees are increasingly susceptible to exploitation and discrimination

Districts Inhabited by Assyrian Refugees

Assyrian refugees from Iraq are primarily concentrated in Amman, Jordan and its surrounding suburbs. A characteristic of the Assyrian refugee

community in Amman is their tendency to live in clusters, as opposed to homogeneously dispersed throughout the city. This partly stems from cultural preference, but it also aids with the process of migration: it is easier for a new entrant to move in closer to relatives or friends who can assist in finding housing and services and provide a sense of familiarity.



A street view in Marka, Amman, Jordan. Photo courtesy of the Jordan Times. (January 2014)

Many respondents reported that they were housed by relatives or friends until they were able to make their own living arrangements.

Assyrians have predominantly taken refuge in the following districts of Amman: Marka, Jabal Amman, Al-Abdali (specifically in the Jabal al-Hussein and Jabal al-Weibdeh neighborhoods), and North Hashmi. There is also a sizable Assyrian refugee

community in the Christian-majority town northwest of Amman called Fuheis.

The majority of Syriac Catholics and Syriac Orthodox Assyrians are concentrated in North Hashmi and Fuheis; the majority of Chaldean Catholic Assyrians reside in Jabal al-Hussein and Jabal al-Weibdeh; those belonging to the Assyrian Church of the East and the Ancient Church of the East are mostly



situated in northern Marka and Fuheis; and Assyrians from Mosul have largely taken refuge in Marka and an area of Amman known as Gardens.

There is also a very small population of Assyrians living permanently in and around Amman numbering approximately 2,000, most of them descendants of those displaced by previous conflicts.⁸⁸

Safety and Security

Most Assyrian refugees have had direct experience with persecution or have been directly impacted by targeted violence prior to their arrival in Jordan. The majority of respondents reported that they felt safer in Jordan than they did in Iraq, citing significantly lower threats of violence, competent law enforcement authorities, and greater respect for the rule of law.

The majority of households reported experiencing insecurities in Jordan; those respondents residing in Amman reported higher insecurity than those in Fuheis. The most commonly reported form of insecurity was verbal harassment from neighbors and host communities, generally related to religious hostility towards Christians. Religious discrimination against Christians in Jordan will be examined on page 45. There were no reports of physical harassment among households interviewed.

Respondents provided the following collection of statements with regard to their sense of safety in Jordan compared to Iraq:

This is the first time that we have had peace of mind. In Baghdad, when we were inside our homes with the doors locked, we were afraid. There was no safety for Christians anywhere.

(58-year-old female, Baghdad, Household 35)

When I registered with the UNHCR [in Amman], it was the first time that I felt safe. I finally feel like my wife and son are safe. Life is very expensive here, but my family's safety is worth everything.

(35-year-old male, Ankawa, Household 44)

We always knew the emergence of a group like ISIS was possible. We always lived in fear, and then one day we found our greatest nightmare had become our reality. Those [Peshmerga] who had sworn to protect us had abandoned us. Here [in Jordan], when I lay my head to rest, I do not have to worry about having to flee in the morning.

(42-year-old female, Bakhdida, Household 3)

We are much safer here than we ever were in Iraq. The Peshmerga and Asayish were never there to protect us—they were only there to watch us. Sometimes, I have to remind myself that there is no Asayish here. I can speak freely without fear [of reprisal].

(36-year-old male, Alqosh, Household 10)

We speak to our family and friends in Tesqopa regularly. They never know when clashes

might break out between the Hashd [Popular Mobilization Units] and the Peshmerga. We do not have to worry about those things anymore.

(47-year-old male, Tesqopa, Household 9)

Discrimination Against Christians

The state religion in Jordan is Islam, but the constitution provides for the freedom to practice one's religion in accordance with the customs that are observed in the country.

Jordanian society is for the most part socially conservative; this is particularly true in most districts where Assyrian refugees reside. The majority of the population in these areas is Sunni Muslim, with the exception of Fuheis—a Christian-majority town that many respondents likened to Ankawa, Iraq.

Most respondents from the Nineveh Plain and the KRI felt religious intolerance and discrimination against Christians is more prevalent in Jordan than it was where they lived in Iraq. However, Assyrians from Baghdad stated that while the levels of conservatism in Jordan are somewhat comparable to what they had grown accustomed to in Iraq, their experience in Amman is nowhere near as bad as it was in Baghdad post-2003 where targeted violence against Christians is common and widespread.

A number of respondents reported incidents of religious discrimination and harassment. However, based on the information gathered, most harassment against Christians in Jordan

does not go beyond verbal. For example, multiple individuals reported that taxi drivers often start playing an audio recording of the Quran when transporting Christian passengers. Two Assyrian women who formerly lived in Dohuk, Iraq reported they were refused service at a restaurant due to the fact that they were not wearing hijabs.

API researchers observed an incident on December 31, 2017, during which three Assyrian households inhabiting the same residential building gathered in one apartment to celebrate New Year's Eve together. Two Muslim men that lived a floor above confronted the families, claiming the gathering was a "disturbance" and referring to the Assyrians as infidels ("kafirs"), and threatened physical violence if the gathering did not end.

Most Jordanian women maintain the traditional Islamic code for dress by covering the head and the full body, which makes Christian women easily identifiable. Assyrian women complained about increased pressure to wear very modest clothing and even the hijab. A number of female respondents stated they are often subject to harassment sexual in nature when traveling without a male companion.

A man from Alqosh said, "This community benefits from our presence—for example, we are paying rent for apartments that would otherwise be vacant and we are giving them more business at their restaurants or stores—but we are unwelcome. To them, we are foreigners, we are non-Arabs, and we are Christians."⁸⁹

Despite the widely reported incidents of religious discrimination, many Assyrian refugees maintained that Christians are protected in Jordan due to the respect for the rule of law.

A man who previously lived in Ankawa stated, "Very rarely do you hear of any sort of violence towards Christians, and that is because the government here actually enforces its laws. In Ankawa several years ago, my uncle was a victim of a [physical assault]. There were witnesses, including Kurdish police, but they did nothing to intervene. [His attacker] was never arrested. In the [KRI], Kurds could act with impunity, but that would not happen here."⁹⁰



Assyrian refugees at a restaurant in Amman, Jordan. (June 2018)

A 30-year-old man from Sarsing told the API, “Back in Iraq, we were treated like second-class citizens on our own lands. We are made to feel that way here, as well, but this is not our country. We are refugees, so we are just passing through. The situation is tolerable because it is temporary.”⁹¹

Economic Resources

Jordan’s economic crisis⁹² has impacted its entire population, but it has created unique hardships for Assyrian refugees as they are unable to legally be employed in order to earn an income. Limited access to economic resources remains one of the main constraints on Assyrian refugee households in Jordan. Many Assyrian families find themselves in a precarious financial situation due to a depletion in savings and fear they may not be able to sustain themselves in the long-term.

Assyrian refugees struggle to afford the inflated cost of living; however, most are able to meet essential needs. Households interviewed were asked to share how much they spend monthly on rent, groceries, utilities, health care, and transportation. Based on the sample data collected, monthly expenditures of Assyrian households generally range from US \$800 to \$2200, depending on household size and needs.

Many respondents stated that the cost of living in Jordan is considerably higher than the cost of living in Iraq. An Assyrian woman from the village of Sharafiya said, “Life here [in Jordan] is much more expensive than what we are used to. We are essentially paying a lot more for less.”⁹³

Most Assyrian refugees rely on their savings as they await processing of their visa applications. Several families from Baghdad and the KRI explained that they had sold their properties in Iraq before departing and were using those funds to survive. A woman from Household 35 said she continues to receive a pension from the position she previously held at the Ministry of Health.⁹⁴

The large majority of households also reported using cash assistance, provided by NGOs, to meet some of their needs. Most respondents considered such assistance as a vital source of support, while some described it as their only source of income.

Financial support from abroad—in the form of gifts or loans from relatives and friends—was a common source of income. For those who reported receiving remittances, the quantity and frequency varied considerably. Some participants explained that they could comfortably rely on regular transfers, while others reported receiving support only sporadically. Many respondents stated they would be unable to remain in Jordan without remittances. This trend exposes a large segment of the Assyrian refugee community to the possibility of economic vulnerability, given the depletion of savings and various factors that might affect the remittances that support these households.

Many Assyrians have also secured unreported employment in order to manage—this development will be discussed on page 52.

A two-person household comprised of a husband and wife in their mid-thirties reported their monthly expenditures to be approximately US \$1100 for basic living expenses, including rent, utilities, groceries, and health care. In an interview with the API, a member of the household stated, “We pay 800 dinars [US \$1100] a month to barely get by. We are lucky because we have family members abroad that support us. There are Assyrians here who have to make sacrifices that we do not have to make. We all have to make our money work somehow.”⁹⁵

A woman who formerly lived in Ankawa stated, “We cannot afford to stay here for years. We are taking it day by day for now.” She added, “We have not thought about what we would do if this process takes more than a few years. Hopefully it does not come to that.”⁹⁶

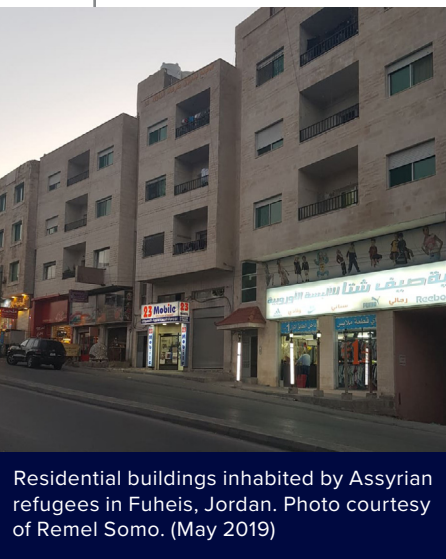
Living Conditions

Shelter, Household Assets, and Utilities

The majority of Assyrian refugees in Amman reside in residential buildings in overcrowded, impoverished neighborhoods. Other than size, rent costs and proximity of the residence to relatives and friends were the two most important factors affecting the choice of dwelling.

In many cases, Assyrian refugee families arriving in Jordan are housed by relatives or friends until they are able to secure housing. An Assyrian man from Sarsing explained, “When we first arrived here [in Jordan], we stayed with our old neighbors for about twenty days until we found and adequate place to live nearby.”⁹⁷

Similarities in housing conditions were evident among Assyrian households. While the sizes varied depending on the household size, most homes appeared to be in acceptable or generally good conditions. Few homes were in noticeably poor conditions or required repairs.



When asked about their household assets, nearly every household interviewed reported ownership of basic assets—mattresses, blankets, winter clothing, and a small gas stove. Most households had access to basic household appliances (refrigerators, water heaters, and washing machines) as well as furniture (tables, chairs, sofas, and bed bases). This does not necessarily indicate that

individual households own these items, rather that they have access to them in usable condition and enough to address household needs.

Rent

The influx of refugees of all nationalities in Jordan in recent years has led to a spike in rent prices, making costs increasingly unaffordable for refugee families. Every household interviewed by the Assyrian Policy Institute reported paying rent, however, most respondents indicated they did not have a written rental agreement with the landlord. Most Assyrian households reported paying between US \$300 to \$600 monthly for residential housing.

In most cases, rent prices do not include electricity and water bills—households pay these expenses separately. On average, respondents reported paying between 10 JOD to 12 JOD monthly (approximately USD \$14 to \$17) for electricity and 6 JOD to 10 JOD (approximately USD \$9 to \$14) every three months towards their water bill.

Food Security

Food security is defined as the state of having reliable access to a sufficient quality of affordable, nutritious food. A household is considered food secure when its occupants do not live in hunger or fear of starvation. Most Assyrian households in Jordan reported food security. The majority of respondents indicated eating between two to three meals per day. For most households, daily food consumption includes a diverse range of items, including bread and grains, dairy products, fruits and vegetables, and meat.



Assyrian refugees share a meal in a rented apartment in Marka, Amman. (February 2019)

However, Assyrian households with limited funds often compromise and consume less preferred or cheaper foods. Alternatively, they may eat a reduced number of meals per day or reduced portion sizes. Three households interviewed said they could not afford to purchase meat products on a regular basis.

On average, Assyrian households reported that food expenditures often accounted for upwards of forty percent of monthly expenses.

Communication and Technology

Most Assyrian households owned mobile phones, and had access to satellite television and internet which they reported using daily. In general, Assyrian refugees are active on social media, which respondents stated was their primary source for news and information.

Respondents reported that they communicate with friends and relatives on various messaging apps, including Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, and Viber.

Transportation

Foreign drivers in Jordan must be at least 18 years of age and hold a valid Jordanian driver's license; the latter requirement legally bars Assyrian refugees from driving.

Public transportation is limited and poor in Amman. Bus transportation is available, but buses do not follow timetable schedules.

According to a September 2018 report published by Refugees International:

The lack of adequate public transportation results in high costs for refugees, forcing many to spend a large portion of their income on traveling to and from work.⁹⁸

Assyrian refugees in the country generally travel by foot or by taxi when in need of traveling

longer distances. A Jordanian taxi can be recognized by its yellow color with green accents and Arabic writing. Fares vary but respondents indicated they are affordable.

Two households reported that at least one member of their household either owned or had access to a vehicle that they were regularly driving without legal license usually for work purposes.

Humanitarian Assistance

Assyrian refugees in Jordan receive two main forms of assistance: cash assistance in the form of multi-purpose cash grants and seasonal cash assistance; and non-cash assistance in the form of in-kind goods (i.e. household items, groceries, medicine, and education).



Ration packs offered to refugee families by the Syriac Catholic Church in Amman. (February 2019)

Urban refugee communities like Assyrians largely lack access to humanitarian services often provided to refugee communities by the UNHCR and other agencies, leaving the majority of Assyrian refugees with minimal assistance. While a number of NGOs and religious-based institutions offer support—financial and otherwise—to the Assyrian refugee community, many respondents expressed despair about their plight in Jordan and feel they have been neglected by international actors.

Of the 54 Assyrian households interviewed by the API, few reported they had received direct assistance from the UNHCR after registering. Among them was a female-headed household from Baghdad who reported a UNHCR aid worker had visited their home and conducted a needs assessment survey. They subsequently received groceries and winterization relief items.

Every household reported receiving non-cash assistance in the form of groceries and medicine from various NGOs in the last 30 days preceding the initial interview. Most organizations providing assistance to Assyrians are faith-based and often coordinate with the various Assyrian patriarchal churches. The churches play an essential role by facilitating the delivery of aid and the dissemination of important information given their access to Assyrian refugee households.



Assyrian refugees awaiting distribution of aid by ACERO in Marka, Amman. (March 2018)

Most notably, the majority of households reported they had received various types of support from the Catholic NGO Caritas Jordan. Multiple respondents stated that of all NGOs operating in Amman, Caritas Jordan was their most consistent source of assistance.

At the time of initial interview, more than fifty percent of respondents reported they receive cash-based assistance from Caritas Jordan on a monthly basis. The NGO issued ATM cards through which 150 JOD (the equivalent of US \$211) is transferred to Assyrian households. These funds aid households in meeting their specific needs by allowing them to determine their own purchasing choices. Cash loaded on

the card can be withdrawn at ATM machines throughout Jordan. Other organizations also offer cash-based assistance.

Many respondents also reported receiving assistance from the Catholic Near East Welfare Association (CNEWA). CNEWA reported in July 2018 that the papal agency was providing food vouchers to 1,754 families with 6,481 individuals.⁹⁹ In addition, it provides refugees with health care, blankets and heaters, and other miscellaneous needs. CNEWA has nearly a thousand individuals on a wait list, but the organization “does not have the funds to accommodate more or to sponsor a census of the total number of Iraqi Christians in Jordan.”¹⁰⁰ The organization also provides milk to all young children registered with the organization, regardless of whether or not their families officially receive food vouchers.

A number of families also reported receiving regular assistance from the Iraqi Christian Relief Council (ICRC). For example, in January 2018, the US-based nonprofit delivered groceries to hundreds of Assyrian refugees in Amman.¹⁰¹ In an interview with the Assyrian Policy Institute, ICRC president Juliana Taimoorazy indicated that the organization has been active in Amman since July 2015 and prioritizes basic needs items such as food vouchers and hygiene products. ICRC has also assisted many Assyrian refugee households by paying rental amounts. Taimoorazy also reported that the organization has funded life-saving treatments to a number of Assyrian refugees battling cancer.¹⁰²

In addition to serving the spiritual needs of the community, the various Assyrian churches have also been an important source of support for many Assyrian households. For example, the Syriac Orthodox Church (which has one parish located in Amman), temporarily housed refugees. The Syriac Catholic Church in Amman consistently offers food rations to families registered as members of the church.

The majority of households interviewed also reported receiving irregular cash-based assis-

tance from their churches. For example, members of the Chaldean Catholic Church reported they receive seasonal cash grants from their churches. In an interview with the API, a church committee member stated that the church had provided each registered household with 100 JOD (US \$141) at the start of winter in 2017.



Similarly, members of the Assyrian Church of the East and the Ancient Church of the East also reported receiving multi-purpose cash grants from the Assyrian Church of the East Relief Organization (ACERO) in the amount of 50 JOD (US \$70) ahead of the Christmas holiday in 2017.

On March 8, 2018, the ACERO announced it had delivered cash assistance to 370 Assyrian families in Amman. According to a statement published to their official Facebook page:

ACERO has not and will not forget the hundreds of needy families currently residing in Jordan. Over the last few months we have reached almost 400 families in countries where the concentration of refugees is at its highest. Throughout the bitterly cold winter and with living conditions deteriorating, each family was gifted with financial aid to go towards paying bills, heating, groceries and medication.¹⁰³

While the various humanitarian services available to Assyrian refugees in Jordan are vital, they cannot work as reliable support to refugee families in the long-term. Further, in a series of follow-up interviews conducted between January and April 2019, many respondents reported that aid deliveries have become less frequent and that access to fundamental services has lessened.

Access to Healthcare

The financial burden of hosting so many refugees for an extended period of time has placed a strain on Jordan and its infrastructure, especially public hospitals and health care clinics. For years, Jordanian authorities offered health services to refugees at a subsidized rate; however, in February 2018, Jordanian authorities were forced to increase fees at Ministry of Health facilities. Health care subsidies for refugees were reduced from 80 percent to 20 percent.¹⁰⁴ In some cases, costs were five times higher than previous rates.¹⁰⁵

According to a UNHCR report, the cost of a basic emergency check-up has risen from less than half a Jordanian Dinar (US \$0.7) to JOD 6.40 (US \$9), with additional procedures such as x-rays and blood tests often significantly raising costs.¹⁰⁶

The steep rises in health costs for refugees has put many in danger. With many Assyrian households struggling to meet the cost of living, few are able to afford additional medical costs. As a result, refugees have minimized the number of trips to Ministry of Health facilities, and only seek treatment in life-threatening situations.

A recent study conducted by the Government of Jordan found that nearly forty percent of urban refugees cannot afford needed medicines or access health care services.¹⁰⁷ More than thirty percent of households interviewed by the API reported at least one household member suffered from a chronic disease or disability, noting that they struggled to access affordable medicine or care.

Most households reported receiving varying degrees of health care assistance, financial and otherwise, from the UN, NGOs, and the various churches.

In rare instances, hospital admissions and medical procedures for Assyrian refugees are



covered by NGOs. For example, the Iraqi Christian Relief Council (ICRC) has funded cancer treatment for a number of Assyrian refugees in Jordan.

The reduction of health care subsidies has negatively impacted respondents affected by the decision. For example, Household 26 was comprised of seven persons who previously lived in the village of Batnaya in Iraq, including one who suffers from heart disease. Household members reported that their monthly expenses range from 1000 JOD to 1500 JOD monthly (US \$1411 to \$2116). In a follow-up interview conducted in April 2019, they expressed frustration over the lack of access to affordable health care, and reported that they rely on remittances from relatives abroad in order to afford medicine. “If I broke my arm tomorrow, I would not be able to go to the hospital,” one of the household members stated.¹⁰⁸

Access to Education

During periods of conflict, the initial response from the international community is to safeguard as many lives as possible in the shortest time. Often overlooked is the vital importance of education. The massive disruption to children’s education multiplies the likelihood of future disadvantages. Education is integral to helping children cope and rebuild—the ability to pursue an education is one of the biggest predictors of future success.¹⁰⁹

Access to education for Assyrian refugee children in Jordan is limited; many parents fear their children will become part of a lost generation.

Thirty-six families interviewed for this report included a total of 57 school aged-children (ages

6-17): 38 children (ages 6-12) and 19 adolescents (ages 13-17).

Of these 57 children, only 35 were enrolled in school at the time of interview with the majority attending parochial schools administered by branches of the Catholic Church. For example, many Assyrian children in Marka district attend Der Latin School—Amman, while those living in Fuheis attend Greek Catholic School—Fuheis. Enrollment is open to children up to 14 years of age, leaving many teenaged refugees without any form of formal education.



Iraqi refugees attend school at Der Latin School in Marka, Amman. (April 2019)

The parochial schools are normally only in session in the morning, however, for years now remain open three days out of the week after Jordanian children are dismissed for an afternoon session for Christian refugee children. The Catholic NGO Caritas Jordan helps pay teacher salaries for the afternoon sessions.¹¹⁰

Christian refugee families are able to enroll their children in the parochial schools free of charge, but families are responsible for purchasing uniforms and transportation fees where applicable. Some children are unable to attend school due to costs associated with transportation fees.

Displacement forces children to face the trauma of leaving their homes, relatives, and friends. Education provides children with a sense of normalcy and the skills they need to rebuild their lives and communities. It is a major long-

term solution for children displaced by conflict. Schools also create the space for children to socialize and release pent-up energy.

At the time of interview, a woman from Sharafiya had an 11-year-old son enrolled at Der Latin School in Marka district. She reported he was accepted a few months after her family arrived in Jordan in early 2015. “So many of us are indebted to Caritas [Jordan] and others that make this possible,” she said.¹¹¹

Many Assyrian families have difficulty enrolling their children in these schools, as most schools have reached their enrollment capacity given the influx of refugees in recent years. According to a statement released by Caritas, “With the increasing number of children, schools [in Jordan] are running out of space and lack the funding to continue to accommodate more.”¹¹²

A schoolteacher who formerly lived in Ankawa told API researchers she feels lucky that her two children, aged five and eight, had been accepted at one of the parochial schools despite the fact that they arrived in 2017, adding that not all families are as fortunate.

“Enrolling my children in school was my highest priority when we arrived here, because we simply do not know how long we will be here. There are many Assyrian children here [in Amman] who are not in school,” she said.

“Their education will be permanently hindered. My niece, for example, was not accepted because they did not have a spot for her. She is only ten years old and she has already been out of school for two years.”¹¹³

She added that she often volunteers her time homeschooling some of the Assyrian children in her neighborhood using resources available to her.

Parents of children not attending school expressed feelings of guilt and distress. The API interviewed a man who formerly lived in Ankawa about his 14-year-old son who was too old to be accepted in one of the schools. “I feel bad that he spends most of his time in this apartment. I know that it is not fair to him.”¹¹⁴

Assyrian refugees lack access to postsecondary education opportunities in Jordan. Among the households interviewed for this report were 26 individuals considered traditional college-aged adults. Some of them had been attending college in Iraq, while others never had the opportunity.

Fourteen of these individuals told API researchers they do not expect to attend school when they are ultimately resettled due to their age and the amount of schooling they have already missed, believing themselves to be too old to “start over.” Despite the expected obstacles, many see education as the path to rebuilding their lives.

A 20-year-old woman from Sharafiya explained that she left Iraq with her family in early 2015, months after turning sixteen. In an interview with the API, she explained that she was teaching herself the English language to “prepare for Australia.” She stated that she uses free Arabic-to-English resources available online, including videos on YouTube. She expressed feelings of loneliness and lack of purpose, stating she hoped to continue her education in the future, but fears she will not have the opportunity. “My dream is to be a dentist, but I never even completed high school,” she said. “I feel like it is already too late for me.”¹¹⁵

Unauthorized Employment and Exploitation

Assyrian refugees from Iraq are unable to access the required work permit in order to be



Two Assyrian refugee children from the Nineveh Plain receive certificates from Der Latin School in Amman. (May 2016)

employed legally in Jordan due to the restrictive administrative process and the prohibitively expensive filing fees.

According to Article 12 of the Jordanian Labor Law, non-Jordanian workers cannot be employed except by the approval of the Ministry of the Labor provided that the work shall entail an experience and qualification not available among Jordanian workers or that the number of qualified Jordanians does not meet the need, in which case workers of Arab descent are given priority. Those who violate this law may be subject to deportation.¹¹⁶

The denial of the right to work has had a negative impact on Assyrian refugees, undermining dignity and exacerbating a sense of alienation and hopelessness.

A 41-year-old man who previously lived in the town of Tel Keppe, Iraq informed API researchers he was offered a job at a nearby restaurant months earlier but declined the offer. “I considered taking the job because we desperately need the money, but I have heard that restaurant owners sometimes report their competition for hiring refugees. We cannot risk being sent back to Iraq—we have nothing to return to.”¹¹⁷

ment opportunities out of desperation. More than sixty percent of Assyrian households interviewed by the API reported that at least one member of the household was employed in the last 30 days preceding the initial interview. A total of 56 individuals reported they were employed—none of them female. Of those working, no individual had obtained a work permit.

Unable to secure formal employment, many Assyrians are forced to take informal, low-paid work in exploitative conditions. Most individuals who reported employment explained that they had a variable and unstable income. In some cases, their pay is withheld. They are unable to seek redress in such instances or report abuse due to the nature of their employment.

Assyrians from Iraq are generally fluent in the Arabic language and therefore do not face language barriers when seeking employment in Jordan. The majority of those respondents who reported employment were working service jobs, primarily at restaurants, hotels, and beauty salons.

At the time of interview, a 22-year old man from the town of Bartella, Iraq was employed as a hairdresser at a salon in Amman. He informed API researchers that he frequently works exceptionally long hours for low pay, and reported that he is usually paid 8 JOD (approximately US \$11) for 12-hour shifts. He reported working five days each week, and estimated that his weekly wages typically ranged from 20 to 40 JOD (US \$28 to \$56). He stated that there was no set method used to calculate his wages, and that his earnings were not affected by the amount of revenue generated by his labor. He claims his labor often produces in excess of 500 JOD (US \$705) in weekly revenue, and yet he is only paid a fraction of the amount. He also added that a portion of his salary was used to cover his travel to and from work.

He stated he does not complain about his wages due to his fear of losing employment. He said, “Forty dinars is better than zero dinars,



API researchers conduct a group interview with Assyrian refugees from Baghdad. (December 2017)

Despite the threat of deportation, many Assyrian refugees have sought unauthorized employ-

and working long shifts is better than spending long hours at home with nothing to do.” He noted that he also appreciates the opportunity to maintain and improve his professional skills.¹¹⁸

A 12-person household interviewed by the API included two brothers from the town of Bakh-dida, Iraq who at the time of interview were employed at the same restaurant in Amman. They complained about low pay and extended hours of work. They also expressed their anxiety about the possibility of deportation in the event that they are discovered by Jordanian authorities, however, they stated that their dire financial situation compelled them to work. They estimated that their monthly household expenditures ranged from 1000 JOD to 1500 (approximately US \$1410 to \$2116). Unlike the majority of Assyrian households interviewed, they reported that they do not receive remittances from relatives living elsewhere.

One of the brothers stated, “We face the same financial struggles here [in Jordan] that we did in Erbil [as IDPs]. We knew that this would be the case before we came here, but we figured we might as well struggle to make ends meet here instead of Erbil—at least here there is a chance for a better future [through resettlement].”¹¹⁹

A software engineer who previously lived in Ankawa, Iraq informed API researchers that he found employment online, which eliminated risks associated with unauthorized employment in Jordan. He heads a three-person household and reported that their monthly expenditures are often as high as 1000 JOD (US \$1400). He reported that he relies exclusively on his own savings and does not receive remittances from family or friends abroad and therefore views his work as necessary.

“The pay is minimal, but it helps—not only with our expenses, but it keeps me busy and helps me pass the time. It gives me something to do, otherwise I would go crazy,” he said.¹²⁰

In 2016, Jordan became the first country in the

Middle East to ease the provision of work permits for Syrian refugees—who comprise the overwhelming majority of refugees hosted in the country—by waiving the filing fees and lessening administrative requirements, creating a legal pathway for them to seek employment. If all requirements are met, Syrian refugees are eligible to apply for short-term work permits in approved sectors, including agriculture, construction, textiles, and food.¹²¹ Upwards of 100,000 work permits have since been issued to Syrian refugees.¹²²

Respondents hope that such provisions will be extended to Iraqi refugees as a way of improving economic opportunities, reducing their dependence on aid, and afford them the opportunity to use and develop their skills.

Mental Health

Most aid agencies and NGOs prioritize providing humanitarian assistance in the form of shelter, health care, and groceries for the Assyrian refugee community, however, often overlooked are what have been termed the “silent killers:”¹²³ waiting, boredom, hopelessness, and isolation.

Like most displaced peoples, feelings of weariness and frustration are widespread. Life is monotonous for many Assyrian refugees, as they spend years awaiting resettlement with little to do on a daily basis. While the long wait for a visa is anticipated, there is no guarantee of resettlement. This state of limbo has had a negative effect on the emotional wellbeing of Assyrian refugees.

Barred from seeking formal employment, most Assyrian refugees in Jordan are not working and are often confined to their homes. For the large majority, their days are spent doing household chores, watching television, browsing social media, or on phone calls with family and friends living elsewhere. Social interactions with other Assyrians in the neighborhood also help pass the time.

The redundancy and inactivity has contributed to issues related to stress and mental health. Many respondents described to the API how the lack of job opportunities, financial pressure, and the length of time they have spent in Jordan have taken a toll on them and their families psychologically. Respondents expressed feelings of worthlessness and lack of purpose. The uncertainty concerning their futures is often overwhelming and crippling.

“Day after day, nothing changes,” said a 22-year-old man from Dohuk. “We cannot work. We cannot attend university. We just find ways to pass the time each day with the hope that tomorrow we might get good news.”¹²⁴

A woman from the town of Batnaya, Iraq explained that her three sons (aged 19 to 26) were frustrated by the absence of educational and employment opportunities available to Assyrian refugees. She said, “When we left Iraq, we did not think we would remain in Jordan for so long. Our lives are on hold, but the rest of the world keeps going and does not care.”¹²⁵

The family’s residence in Amman began in October 2016—as of April 2019, they remain in Jordan.

A man from Sharafiya whose residency in Jordan began in January 2015 made the following statement: “All we do here is wait. Day after day, we are just waiting. Everyone’s future is up in the air. It is very difficult to be here for so long, but at least we are safe here.”¹²⁶ In a follow-up interview conducted in February 2019, the man reported his family finally received visas for entry into Australia after a four-year wait.¹²⁷

Prolonged displacement is likely to make future integration more challenging. As the state of limbo persists, depression and other health problems are worsening, and time away from work or school is lengthening. Despite preparation prior to leaving Iraq, all respondents had underestimated the difficulty of life as a refugee and have struggled to adapt to this degree of thwarted mobility.

For many, the state of limbo has made the future difficult to imagine. Some were unable to imagine the possibility of remaining in Jordan for another year—in some cases, it was inappropriate to ask this question, as respondents were already distressed. When asked about their future, respondents’ answers gave an indication of the extent of their hopelessness and depression—common responses included “I don’t know” and “it is in God’s hands.” Hopes of continuing their journeys were matched by fears that circumstances might force them to return to Iraq.

“Our life here is temporary, and that knowledge is what makes it bearable,” said a man from Gondekosa. “No matter how bad it gets, we all know it is only temporary. It is not about right now, but about the future.”¹²⁸

Processing Trauma

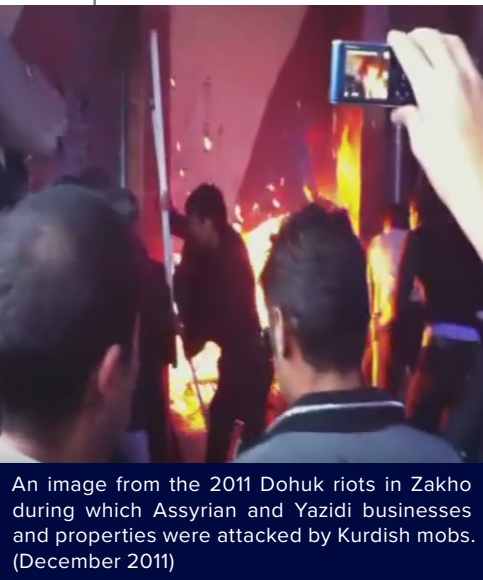
Assyrian refugees have endured many traumatic experiences due to their exposure to war, ethno-religious persecution, political oppression, forced displacement, and genocide. According to the Refugee Health Technical Assistance Center, refugee trauma often precedes the primary war-related events that causes them to flee.¹²⁹

Prior to their departure from Iraq, Assyrian refugees may have experienced imprisonment, torture, forced displacement, physical assault, rape, kidnapping, religious persecution, loss of property, loss of livelihood, family separation, and extreme fear.

All households reported incidents of violence in which their family members, friends, or community members were victimized.

For example, an elderly man reported his son was murdered outside their home in Baghdad by unknown gunmen shouting “Allahu Akbar.”¹³⁰ Another man from Baghdad said their former neighbor, who owned a liquor store in Baghdad, was murdered one afternoon at his store.¹³¹

Household 25 reported surviving the 2011 Dohuk Riots, during which properties owned by Assyrians and Yazidis in Zakho were looted and burned by mobs.¹³² The attacks were instigated by a sermon delivered by a Kurdish Muslim cleric and lasted for several days.¹³³



An image from the 2011 Dohuk riots in Zakho during which Assyrian and Yazidi businesses and properties were attacked by Kurdish mobs. (December 2011)

Two sisters from Baghdad recounted an incident in 2008 in which they witnessed a taxi driver murdered and then robbed by masked gunmen in broad daylight. “It happened just a few meters away from where we stood,” one of them said. “I have never been able to forget the image of him bleeding, slumped over his steering wheel. I still think about it to this day.”¹³⁴

As a result of past abuses or experiences in Iraq, some Assyrians suffer mental health problems, including depression and anxiety. Fleeing home due to fear of persecution and family separation impact overall health and wellness, and prolonged displacement—as discussed in the previous section—exacerbates these issues to a significant degree.

The lack of resources available to support Assyrian refugees in addressing issues of trauma coupled with the cultural stigma surrounding issues of mental health forces many of these individuals to deal with such matters in private.

Religious Services

Assyrian refugees in Jordan have been able to maintain a sense of community largely organized around religious services. Many families indicated that church services afford the community the opportunity to gather on a regular basis.



Members of the Syriac Catholic Church celebrate the Easter holiday in Amman. (April 2019)

The Syriac Orthodox Church has one parish located in Amman called St. Ephraim’s Cathedral. The Syriac Catholic Church has a small church located in Amman called the Church of the Virgin Mary and also rents additional locations in order to accommodate the growing number of refugees. These church communities established a permanent presence in the city well before to the recent influx of refugees, but a growing number of parishioners are refugees from Iraq and Syria.

The Chaldean Catholic Church does not presently have a diocese that formally encompasses the growing refugee community in Jordan. The same is true of the Assyrian Church of the East and the smaller Ancient Church of the East. In response to the influx in the number of Assyrian refugees of all denominations following the advent of ISIS in 2014, the Chaldean Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East formally began organizing religious services on a regular basis.



Members of the Assyrian Church of the East attend Easter mass in Marka, Amman. (April 2018)

There is currently a Chaldean Catholic priest assigned to serve the refugee community in Amman. There was previously a priest from the Assyrian Church of the East assigned to the local refugee community, but respondents reported that he was resettled in Australia in 2017. The Assyrian Church of the East now rotates priests from Iraq to observe major Christian holidays. In the absence of a priest from the Assyrian Church of the East, members of the church generally attend religious services organized by the Chaldean Catholic Church due to the similarities in religious rites. The same is true of members of the Ancient Church of the East, which, except in rare instances, does not have visiting priests.

Religious services for these communities are generally held on Sundays or Fridays, and they are conducted in existing church facilities. For example, the Chaldean Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East alternate usage of St. Mary's Latin Church in the Marka district of Amman. Church representatives reported the Assyrian congregations are permitted to use the church free of charge due to the generosity of the parish priest Father Khalil Jaar, who is Palestinian and has earned a reputation for his efforts to help provide shelter to Assyrian refugees.¹³⁵

Respondents reported that they generally receive information and important updates related to church services via social media.

In addition to serving the spiritual needs of the community and facilitating the delivery of humanitarian aid, the various Assyrian churches also play a crucial role in arranging educational activities and social events tailored for this largely marginalized refugee community.

For example, the Syriac Catholic Church and the Chaldean Catholic Church offer Assyrian language courses for refugees; the former also offers English language lessons and vocational training such as knitting and cosmetology classes.

The churches also organize communal events in the form of parties, picnics, and other recreational gatherings tailored for the needs of the community. For example, in January 2018, the Assyrian Church of the East hosted a Christmas party for refugee children filled with games and distribution of gifts. In April 2019, the Syriac Catholic Church hosted an Easter party with live entertainment and dancing and in May 2019 hosted a “table (backgammon) tournament.”

These events are vital to the social needs and help reduce emotional concerns such as depression or anxiety, and enable refugees to cope with their distressing situations.

“Church is the way we stay connected to each other in our displacement,” said a former resident of Alqosh.¹³⁶

Similarly, the Assyrian Church of the East is permitted to use St. George Greek Catholic Church in Fuheis and the Chaldean Catholic Church holds services in St. John the Baptist De La Salle Church in Jabal Hussein in Amman.

Assyrian refugees attend barber training course hosted by the Syriac Catholic Church in Amman. (May 2019)



Members of the Chaldean Catholic Church attend Sunday mass. (December 2017)

Members of the Syriac Catholic Church participate in a “table (backgammon) tournament” hosted by the church in Amman. (May 2019)



Assyrian refugee children attend a Christmas party hosted by the Assyrian Church of the East in Amman. (January 2018)



Social and Cultural Needs

While many organizations offer extra support to Assyrian refugees in Jordan, their efforts do little to address the community’s social and cultural needs.

Assyrian refugees are largely isolated from the wider refugee community in Jordan. There appear to be few or no cultural support networks available specifically catered to the needs of the Assyrian community. Although various actors—including the UNHCR and an array of NGOs—offer social and community-focused events for refugees, Assyrians generally do not participate despite their yearning for social relations and activity. Most feel that such events are not designed to appeal to ethnic and religious minorities. It is evident that many of these groups work with a Western-centric perspective and do not have the tools to understand the nuances

es of the region nor the unique situation of the Assyrians.

Many respondents expressed inhibitions about engaging or socializing with other refugee populations and their host communities

owing to their past experiences in Muslim-majority areas, where religious differences were used as justification to harm their community. The distinctive and specific challenges of reconciliation inherent to persecuted groups like Assyrians are often downplayed or ignored despite their seriousness.

Groups like CNEWA offer a variety of classes designed for refugees, including English language lessons for adults and children which are important for those planning to resettle in English-speaking countries:

Adults practice speaking and writing with Americans and Canadians who volunteer at the library, while their children mingle and play board games surrounded by shelves of English and Arabic books.¹³⁷

Assyrian language classes are also available to some refugees through their churches. Remel Somo, an Assyrian refugee himself, teaches dozens of students at both the beginner and intermediate levels in classes facilitated by the Chaldean Catholic Church. The classes are held at the Pontifical Mission Library in Amman and the space is provided by the library free of charge.

In an article published in *America Magazine*, he stated:

“Arab nationalism and Kurdish nationalism worked hard to erase our identity,” he says. “Aramaic is like my eyes or my tongue. I’m afraid of it vanishing.”¹³⁸



A refugee family from the Nineveh Plain celebrates the Assyrian New Year in their rented apartment in Makra, Amman. (April 2018)



An Easter party for refugees organized by the Syriac Catholic Church (April 2019).

Individuals sometimes take it upon themselves to organize a social outings or events for the Assyrian refugee community, but these opportunities are limited due to financial constraints. For example, API researchers attended a Christmas party held on December 26, 2017 at a banquet hall in Amman. Approximately 250 Assyrian refugees (of all church denominations) attended the gathering. The party organizers reported that they were able to rent the banquet hall at a discounted price; attendees shared the cost (approximately 25 JOD per person).

In an interview with the API, a man from Tesqopa said, “We gather for church and sometimes we have parties like [the Christmas party] where we get to see one another. Any divisions that existed in Iraq have melted away—all we have here [in Jordan] is each other.”¹³⁹

Part IV: Repatriation

Perspectives on Repatriation

Voluntary repatriation is considered the “durable solution for the largest number of refugees” and may be one solution for Assyrians displaced from Iraq. In order for voluntary repatriation to occur, refugees must be assured the option of a safe and dignified return and must be ensured the exercise of a free and informed choice.

Repatriation of refugees is often protracted; returns sometimes happen rapidly or at a slower pace. The process can be spontaneous or assisted.

The process also requires the continued support of the international community and the Iraqi Government in the post-conflict phase to enable returnees to rebuild their lives in a stable environment.

For Assyrians, prospects for repatriation are contingent on the creation of an environment in Iraq that sustains their return. The rate of Assyrian returns to Iraq post-2014 is very low and has not kept pace with the rate of new displacements. Collectively, Assyrian refugees are averse to the idea of repatriation.



Assyrian refugees from the Nineveh Plain prepare for Palm Sunday in Amman. (April 2018)

Respondents who previously lived in Baghdad in particular reject the idea of repatriation; this stance appears to be unique to Assyrians from Baghdad. Respondents originating from the Nineveh Plain and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) were more receptive to the possibility of repatriation; however, they were largely pessimistic about the factors that would enable their return.

In addition, many respondents reported that they have sold their property prior to emigrating and also that most of their relatives and friends have resettled; therefore, they feel they have “nothing to return to.”

The following sections document statements made with regard to the possibility of repatriation to Iraq organized based on place of origin:

Baghdad

The majority of interviewees from Baghdad appeared to hold feelings of resentment towards the Iraqi state. Of the fourteen adults interviewed that previously resided in Baghdad, Iraq, not a single individual voiced a desire to return.

Respondents from Baghdad, Iraq provided the following collection of statements with regard to possible repatriation to Iraq:

I will never return. It took me a long time to finally leave—it was a decision that took years to make. If there was a chance I would return, I never would have left in the first place.

(68-year-old female, Household 2)

Which Assyrian would go back to Baghdad? It is never going to change so long as there is oil, corruption, and Islamic extremism. We are tired of living in constant fear.

(32-year-old female, Household 35)

I have seen nothing in my life apart from war and violence. From the day I was born, until the day I left. There is nothing there that I would want to return to.

(36-year-old male, Household 18)

There are not very many Assyrians left [in Baghdad], and most of those who remain are elderly. Surely, they are not starting families. We simply do not have a future there.

(39-year-old male, Household 39)

If every Assyrian in Baghdad had the opportunity to leave—if they could afford it—there would be not one left. No Assyrian will stay—it is over for us in Baghdad.

(43-year-old male, Household 36)

We [Assyrians] are done in Baghdad—there is no question there. The same is happening in the north, under the Kurds, only it is a slower process. I do not think you will find

any Assyrians in Iraq ten years from now. Iraq has left no place for us.

(41-year-old male, Household 2)

I do not think about Iraq at all. I want to forget Iraq.

(29-year-old male, Household 50)

Nineveh Plain

Respondents from the Nineveh Plain held conflicting stances on the prospects of repatriation. While many expressed a deep sense of attachment to their homeland and a longing to return home, they did not view repatriation as a viable option.

Respondents from the Nineveh Plain provided the following collection of statements with regard to possible repatriation to Iraq:

If I could choose anywhere in the world to live—if it were up to me—I would choose Iraq. But Iraq has proven that it does not want us.

(36-year-old male, Alqosh, Household 10)

I hope I will see the beauty of my village again someday, but my heart tells me that I will not. Seeing photos and videos on Facebook makes me yearn to return home.

(66-year-old male, Alqosh, Household 15)

Go back to what? My town does not exist anymore. Batnaya has been flattened.

(66-year-old male, Batnaya, Household 26)

We will not return unless the Nineveh Plain becomes its own [governorate]. That is how the Kurds survived Iraq, and we deserve the same opportunity.

(38-year-old male, Karamlesh, Household 24)

There is no way we would return now, unless we can no longer afford to live in Jordan. But we might consider returning if [Assyrians] are given some form of autonomy in our lands.

(28-year-old male, Batnaya, Household 26)

The Nineveh Plain is in ruins, and the Iraqi Government and the KRG are fighting over those ruins. That does not leave any space for our people.

(26-year-old male, Bakhdida, Household 1)

There were 420 people living in Sharafiya before ISIS invaded. Now [in January 2018], there are only 57 people. I doubt they will stay. I speak to them regularly, and most of them want to leave [Iraq]. There is no going back.

(63-year-old male, Sharafiya, Household 4)

We made the decision as a family that we will never return. We speak to our family and friends in Bartella daily, and they say the situation is not improving. The demography of the Nineveh Plain is going to change, as it has in other parts of Iraq, leaving no place for us. I would not be surprised if several years from now Bartella is a Shabak-majority town.

(40-year-old-female, Bartella, Household 27)

Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Similar to respondents from the Nineveh Plain, respondents that previously lived in governorates administered by the KRG expressed a deep sense of attachment to their homeland and an aching to return home. Respondents from the KRI appeared slightly more amenable to the idea of return than former inhabitants of both Baghdad and the Nineveh Plain, however, the general consensus was that a return was not possible given the current conditions and future prospects.

Respondents from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq conversely provided the following collection of statements with regard to the possibility of repatriation to Iraq:

I do not see myself returning. Why would I go back? In my mind, I'm not planning my life in Iraq anymore—it is only Australia. Even if we

are here for years, I do not think we will return.

(32-year-old male, Sarsing, Household 48)

Unless there is some significant change—and by that, I mean if Assyrians are given a province administered by Assyrians—no one will return. We need an area with our own schools and curriculum, our own hospitals, a place governed by our own values, and most of all, respect for human rights. The problem is that this is not an overnight change, but I still have hope that someday it might happen.

(35-year-old male, Ankawa, Household 44)

There is no incentive to return. The situation for Assyrians is worsening by the day. The harassment, the corruption—all of the reasons we left are still there.

(37-year-old male, Dohuk, Household 33)

We are actually waiting for news that the situation is improving, but we are in constant communication with our family and friends there, and everyone advises us against going back. My Kurdish friend and colleague just the other day told me the situation is getting so bad that even she is considering migration.

(36-year-old female, Ankawa, Household 52)

All of my family and friends in Iraq tell me I made the right choice. Not one person has urged me to come back. The economic situation is crushing us. If the [KRG] does not start paying salaries and if people cannot find work, it will be hard for any Assyrian to stay.

(42-year-old male, Dohuk, Household 5)

I would never close the door on returning home [to Iraq]. There are many Assyrians who made it all the way to Europe and America, but came back to Iraq.

(43-year-old male, Shaqlawa, Household 41)

I do not miss Iraq at all, because all I remember are the hardships and the constant strug-

gles we faced as a people.

(38-year-old female, Dohuk, Household 45)

We simply do not know what the future holds for Assyrians in Iraq. People are looking at the situation as it is today, and making decisions based on what is happening today. They can only see what is happening now, but the situation is always changing. Maybe this time it will change for the better.

(44-year-old male, Ankawa, Household 52)

If tomorrow there was a region established for minorities, like there is one for Kurds, a lot of Assyrians would change their minds. I never thought I would leave, and yet here I am. But I would be the first to go back if we were given the chance to govern ourselves.

(34-year-old male, Dohuk, Household 51)

I want my children to grow up in our country, on our lands, surrounded by my family and our people. I want this for every Assyrian family. But we need security, jobs, and our full rights in order to return. I think a lot of Assyrians would return, but a lot has to change. Assyrians have moved back to Iraq after living abroad. My own family has moved back—I had an uncle living in Sweden and an uncle living in Canada, and they both moved back [in 2011 and 2012, respectively]. If the situation improves, of course we would consider going back.

(33-year-old male, Nahla, Household 46)

Priorities For Repatriation

In order to gauge the likelihood of the voluntary repatriation of Assyrians to Iraq, it is necessary to conduct a realistic assessment about whether the causes of displacement have been resolved.

Part of the API's research in Jordan examined both the deterrents and incentives concerning voluntary return to Iraq. Household members were asked about what factors have influence over their decision to return or continue to seek resettlement in a third country.

Common priorities for repatriation included: security, livelihoods, reconstruction of homes and infrastructure, restitution for loss of property, family reunification, and the creation of a semi-autonomous Nineveh Plain Governorate

Security

The main factor cited by Assyrian refugee households that would influence their potential return was safety and security in Iraq. In order to promote return, Assyrians must be guaranteed protection from continued and future threats of violence, harassment, intimidation, or persecution. Security needs for each region are unique.

THE NINEVEH PLAIN

The current security arrangement in the Nineveh Plain undermines central authority in the area, prevents the emergence of functioning state institutions, and has largely hindered the return of displaced Assyrians. It must be urgently resolved to stabilize the region and promote return.

In a February 2018 report, the International Crisis Group—an independent NGO committed to preventing and resolving deadly conflict—concluded that only the Iraqi state can stabilize contested territories inhabited by minoritized communities like Yazidis and Assyrians.¹⁴⁰ While it is the responsibility of the Iraqi Government to provide protection, international actors may have to help maximize equal access for returnees to security.

A return to pre-ISIS security arrangements in the Nineveh Plain would pose serious risks to the

disappearing Assyrian community, as the various security actors—namely the Peshmerga—proved unable or unwilling to defend Iraq’s most vulnerable communities in their time of need.

Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) forces with ties to Iran operating in the Nineveh Plain must be disarmed and demobilized. The Peshmerga and other KRG security forces must be transitioned out of the Nineveh Plain. The Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU) should be formally incorporated into Iraqi Security Forces and expanded as part of an initiative to enable and empower minoritized communities to defend their own communities.

NPU soldiers guarding Palm Sunday celebrations in Hamdaniya District in the Nineveh Plain. (April 2019)



The towns in the Nineveh Plain currently secured by the NPU boast the highest post-ISIS return rates, underscoring the importance of the inclusion of minoritized communities in security decisions impacting their lands.

“Security is most important to us and it is the one thing we have never had,” said a man from Alqosh. “We need to be defended by our own people because we are the only ones who care about our survival. I would like to see the NPU defending all of our villages [in the Nineveh Plain], but I don’t see that happening.”¹⁴¹

BAGHDAD

The Iraqi Government must take measures to build public respect for and confidence in the Iraqi police force. This will require improving the performance of the police, increased visibility of police on the streets, and improving recruitment and vetting procedures.

Negative minority community perceptions of police will be difficult to overcome and must not be ignored. Public trust in the police is predicated in large part in minoritized communities on how these communities perceive the fairness of their treatment by police. Personal prejudices or partiality on the part of police officers that interfere with their level of commitment and professional judgement have no place in law enforcement.

KURDISTAN REGION OF IRAQ

Dominant Kurdish factions such as the KDP and the PUK must end party influence over Peshmerga forces and their operations. Private militias and intelligence forces reporting directly to politicians or political parties must be disbanded. All Peshmerga forces must be centralized under a reformed, nonpartisan Ministry of Peshmerga affairs. Integration should then extend to include police and intelligence forces on a nonpartisan basis.

The demographics of police forces in Assyrian-majority areas should mirror those of the jurisdiction it serves. Proactive recruiting of Assyrian police officers is necessary in areas like Ankawa. KRG authorities must transform recruitment strategies to build inclusive forces.

Many of these recommendations will be difficult to implement while power in the KRI continues to be monopolized by KDP leadership; therefore, the KRG’s international partners, namely the United States, should support measures to depoliticize the Peshmerga and other KRG security forces and condemn the oppressive measures employed by the *Asayish* to silence and terrorize ordinary people.

Livelihoods

The access of Assyrian refugee households to livelihood assets and opportunities in Iraq is a key factor that influences their decisions regarding return. Empowering Assyrians with access to livelihoods will enable them to rebuild their lives. It will also give them a sense of ownership in the reconstruction of their communities and country and gradually reduce their dependence on aid.

Prior to the ISIS occupation, the economy in the Nineveh Plain was dominated by agricultural production, private businesses, and government employment. Reactivation of these essential activities largely depends on the return of local populations. This process should be aided by local government institutions, NGOs, and civil society organizations. The government must guarantee salaries for civil servants that return, and efforts must be taken to restore and protect the livelihoods of vulnerable communities.

To improve livelihoods and economic security of Assyrians in the Nineveh Plain, the government must support measures to restore and protect agriculture production capacities, including the reconstruction of irrigation systems and access to grants for small and medium-sized enterprises.

For many Assyrians in the Nineveh Plain, prospects for reestablishing livelihoods are directly linked to their ability to reclaim their lands. Returnees must be given opportunities to be productive and self-reliant upon return, as opposed to being passive recipients of aid.

Local actors should also aim to increase income generation opportunities by establishing centers for vocational training and providing opportunities for the Assyrian community to build the capacity for small business development.

In Baghdad, chronic unemployment and widespread corruption make it difficult to identify immediate solutions to help improve livelihood

opportunities for Assyrians and other marginalized communities.

KRG authorities must resume the payment of salaries for all civil servants and promote employment and livelihood opportunities for marginalized communities. In addition, the KRG must end the harmful practices of racketeering and extortion targeting Assyrian businesses by the *Asayish*, cease the discriminatory practices utilized when granting business permits, and promote the employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for Assyrians who have been deprived of work due to their political views.

Reconstruction of Homes and Infrastructure

Reconstruction of homes and infrastructure in the Nineveh Plain is critical to enable Assyrian refugees to return home. The current state of the Nineveh Plain has left many of its former inhabitants feeling as though they had nothing to return to.

Repairing basic fundamental structures and facilities, including roads, water and sewage systems, and power supplies must be a high priority for Iraqi authorities and their partners. The reconstruction of public facilities is also critical as a response to basic human needs—health, education, safety, recreation, and worship.



Assyrians in the Nineveh Plain celebrate the reconstruction of dozens of homes in the Batnaya. (May 2019)

Most respondents felt that the Iraqi Government is not prioritizing the restoration of the Nineveh Plain, despite its importance to the survival of this indigenous community. To ensure the longevity of Assyrians in Iraq, restoration of the Nineveh Plain must be a high priority for federal authorities and international actors.

Similarly, regional authorities in the KRI must focus on rebuilding infrastructure in rural Assyrian villages. The KRG should prioritize funding for initiatives to repair roads, restore electricity, reinstall water networks, and build medical care facilities in Assyrian territories.

Restitution for Loss of Property

Property in the Nineveh Plain should be restored to rightful owners who lost it as a result of conflict, even in cases in which it entails evicting other displaced persons who may be using it for shelter and finding alternative solutions for those evicted. This may also require dealing with those who have seized abandoned properties for whatever purpose.

Homes are not the only forms of property lost amidst conflict. In many cases, agricultural workers from the Nineveh Plain have lost equipment and livestock. Compensation support should be provided to those who have lost property that serve as the means for livelihoods.

The longstanding problem of land confiscations afflicting Assyrian lands and properties pre-date ISIS and extend to Baghdad and areas under KRG jurisdiction.

The intention and scale of the processes in both Baghdad and the Kurdistan Region constitutes a targeted and systematic attempt to ethnically cleanse the Assyrian population from their ancestral lands by appropriating property to which they are legally entitled and for which they possess deeds.

Iraqi and Kurdish authorities must fairly address issues of land encroachment and call for

immediate action in the affected areas to provide solutions to resolve these issues. Steps must be taken to return land to the rightful owners wherever possible and appropriate; where this is unfeasible, just compensation must be provided.

The US and other international actors must support the protection of Assyrian property rights regardless of political transformations in Iraq.

Family Reunification

While post-2003 sectarian violence in Iraq devastated all peoples, there were unique and specific vulnerabilities for Assyrians who were largely unprotected. The result was the rampant ethnic cleansing and forced displacement of Assyrians. It is estimated that prior to 2003, Assyrians in Iraq numbered 1.5 million; today, they are approximately 200,000. Most Assyrians were forced into migration.

Migration has divided Assyrian families, leaving a majority of the community with a deep desire to reunite with parents, siblings, or children. It appears that the migration of one family unit increases the likelihood that extended family members will follow.

Family reunification is one of the major factors contributing to the growing appeal of emigration for Assyrians. On the whole, Assyrian families are unable to reunite in their homeland, rendering return increasingly unlikely for most families. The process of Assyrian migration from Iraq appears irreversible due to its sheer scale. Many Assyrians have permanently resettled in ethnic enclaves in parts of the United States, Europe, and Australia with little incentive to return.

The majority of households interviewed considered family reunification a top priority. Most respondents expressed hopes of reuniting with family abroad. For example, the members of Household 35 hope to be resettled in Canada to reunite with extended family members who left Iraq years prior.

The reunification of friends and family helps returnees to feel comfortable as they are reintegrated into their communities. Intimate and familiar relationships are critical to a person's psychological support system, and the absence of such relationships negatively impacts those Assyrians who remain in Iraq.

Therefore, the conditions which would enable the safe and dignified return of expatriates of Assyrian background must be prioritized to increase the likelihood that Assyrian families forced into migration over the years have the option to return home.

A woman from Shaqlawa, Iraq said, "If my family [in France] was to return to Sarsing, I would go back immediately without question."

A respondent from Tel Keppe, Iraq told API researchers, "Even if everything is fixed—if they rebuild the towns and there is finally safety—my whole family is already living in Australia now. In some sense, it is too late. It would be hard to go back without them."

A man from Ankawa stated, "I do not have any family left in Iraq anymore—they are all in Australia now. That is why we hope to end up there as well."¹⁴⁴

Creation of a Nineveh Plain Governorate

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein, the Nineveh Plain has been an area of focus to create an administrative entity in which Assyrians could exercise some political power in light of their plurality in the area. For many Assyrians, the Nineveh Plain represents the community's final hope for a safe and sustainable future in their homeland.

In the drafting of the Iraqi Constitution, minoritized communities, including Assyrians, managed to secure language that would guarantee them the right to such a governorate. Article 125 in the Iraqi Constitution states:

This Constitution shall guarantee the administrative, political, cultural, and educational rights of the various nation-

alities, such as Turkomen, Chaldeans, Assyrians, and all other constituents, and this shall be regulated by law.¹⁴⁵

Due to their lack of power and the credible threat of force, Assyrians and other minoritized communities in Iraq rely on the development and respect for the rule of law in order to achieve their rights. Therefore, they entered the federalism dialogue post-2003 with insurmountable disadvantages.

The creation of a Nineveh Plain Governorate has consistently been undermined by the negligence of the Iraqi Government towards the Assyrians and other minoritized communities, as well as the deliberate interference from the KRG which seeks its annexation into the Kurdistan Region. These factors have eroded the capacity of Assyrians in Iraq to achieve and secure conditions of real equality.

In a landmark moment for Assyrians and other minoritized communities in Iraq, on January 21, 2014, the Iraqi Council of Ministers voted for the creation of three new governorates in Iraq—among them a Nineveh Plain Governorate. This new governorate would ostensibly serve as a safe haven for marginalized groups, including Assyrians, while remaining part of Iraq and under the authority of the Iraqi Central Government. However, following the onslaught of ISIS, the January 2014 decision has not been implemented.

"Most of those who have returned [to the Nineveh Plain] do not have the financial means to leave, or they cannot leave for whatever reason," said a man from Karamlesh. "If there is a province, they might stay, and perhaps those who are still displaced elsewhere in the country might return home."¹⁴⁶

The Iraqi Government should implement Resolution No. 16 of 2014 issued by the Iraqi Council of Ministers which gave preliminary approval for the creation of a Nineveh Plain Governorment, as well as the authorization of legislative and administrative procedures required to implement the Resolution in order to preserve the continuity of the Assyrian people in Iraq.

Part V: One-Year Update

Between January and April 2019, the Assyrian Policy Institute conducted a series of follow-up interviews by phone with members of each household (with the exception of Household 25) interviewed between December 2017 and January 2019 in order to obtain an update concerning their status. Respondents were asked to report updates concerning the status of their resettlement applications as well as any notable changes to their place of residence, household size, and financial situation.

Spontaneous Returns

Seven households reported having had at least one household member return to Iraq since January 2018. There are two major factors that contribute to a family's decision to return: For most returnees, the difficulties of meeting the high cost of living in Jordan is the primary factor; the denial of visa applications is also an increasingly important factor.

Of the seven households that returned to Iraq, not a single individual reported that the causes of their displacement had been resolved, noting the situation for Assyrians in Iraq has yet to improve. Those respondents who have returned to Iraq since the time of their initial interview did so due to financial instability and other negative factors. The following accounts are relevant examples:

Household 53 (Deralok, Iraq) entered Jordan in October 2017. In a follow-up interview, household members reported they returned to Iraq in February 2018. The reasons provided for their return included the high costs of living and the monotonous lifestyle. One household



Assyrian refugees at a picnic hosted by the Chaldean Catholic Church in Amman. (April 2019)

member said, “The situation for Assyrians there [in Jordan] was much worse than I had expected. I also started to think about how we [Assyrians] have almost no one left in Iraq, and I realized that I had to go back for that reason. We have to band together—those of us that are left—we cannot go our separate ways.”¹⁴⁷

Household 29 (Bakhdida, Iraq) entered Jordan in [Month] 2017. In a follow-up interview, a member of the household reported that the household returned to Iraq in March 2018, after less than one year of residence in Fuheis, Jordan. The reasons for their return included the increasing unaffordability of life in Jordan and the uncertainty regarding their future, adding that they were also discouraged by the number of rejections being issued to Assyrian refugees applying for humanitarian visas. “We missed home too much, and decided it was not worth it to spend years of our lives living in those conditions when there was not any guarantee we would eventually be resettled,” he said.¹⁴⁸

Upon returning to Iraq, the family rented a home for a period of approximately six months while their home was rehabilitated. They returned to Bakhdida in August 2018.

Household 40 (Nahla, Iraq) lived in Fuheis, Jordan from August 2017 to March 2018. In a follow-up interview, a member of the household explained that the decision to return was made after two applications for humanitarian visas to Australia were denied. He also stated that it was difficult to meet the cost of living.

Household 9 (Teskopa, Iraq) entered Jordan in April 2016 and returned to Iraq in April 2018. In a follow-up interview, a member of the household stated they returned to Iraq after their applications for humanitarian visas to Australia were denied. He said, “We applied three times, and each time we were refused. After the third time, we decided it was time to return home.”¹⁴⁹

One man from Household 51 (Dohuk, Iraq) returned to Iraq in March 2018 after less than sev-

en months of residency in Fuheis, Jordan. He provided the following reason for his return: “I’ve lived my entire life in Iraq. I’m sixty-five years old—at this point, moving to another country won’t change my life. There are so many young Assyrians there [in Jordan] waiting for the chance at a better life. It wouldn’t feel right if I got called on to be resettled before any of them. In many ways, my life is already over, but the younger generations have a real chance at a fresh start. I felt like I was taking up a spot in line for someone perhaps more deserving.”

In a follow-up interview, a man from Household 47 stated, “I have tried to go back [to Iraq] three times since arriving in Jordan, but my family has stopped me. What kind of life is this [in Jordan]? And what for? Giving away years of my life for a chance to live in America or Australia, when the only place I really want to be is home.”¹⁵⁰

Resettlement Approvals

A total number of 18 households reported at least one member of their household had been resettled in a third country after their applications for resettlement were approved. The overwhelming majority of these families were resettled in Australia through the Australian Special Humanitarian Program. Only one household reported resettlement to Canada via the UNHCR resettlement program.¹⁵¹



An Assyrian household from the Nineveh Plain departs for Australia. (February 2019)

Visa holders are required to enter their resettlement country by a date specified on their visas, and they are responsible for their own travel costs. Upon receiving their visas, respondents generally departed for their new homes within a two-week period, however, in some cases the family waited longer due to various factors such as the cost of airfare. Most reported receiving financial assistance from family members abroad in order to secure travel.

The resettlement process often divides members of a single household, as individual resettlement applications are restricted to members of a family unit but households are often comprised of multiple family units. For example, Household 19 was divided after four members were resettled. Similarly, Household 26 was divided after one household member was resettled. Such changes to the household situation may create challenges for those left behind, particularly when those who are resettled were essential to providing household needs.

On the whole, those who had been resettled appeared to be integrating well into their new communities. In most cases, relatives and friends provided immediate accommodation needs until families were able to make permanent living arrangements.

Many respondents were able to secure employment quickly following resettlement. Children and teenagers were excited to return to school. Several adult-aged children reported enrolling in universities. For example, a 22-year-old woman from Household 4 stated she will be attending RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia at the start of the new school year in May 2019 after spending more than five years out of school.¹⁵²

Common challenges faced by Assyrian refugees in their new homes include:

- Many Assyrian refugees struggle to find suitable and affordable housing;
- Most Assyrian households continue to

experience financial insecurities which cause significant challenges;

- Language barriers prevent many otherwise qualified Assyrian refugees from finding suitable employment;
- Many highly-educated Assyrian refugees are unable to have their credentials recognized and as a result are overqualified for the jobs in which they work;
- Some Assyrian refugees struggle to adapt to the new work-life balance;
- The lack of traditional support structures within their community leads many Assyrian refugees to feel isolated and lost and contributes to mental health challenges;
- Mental health issues caused by the trauma that refugees endured in Iraq as well as their experiences in Jordan may arise and largely remain unaddressed.

Settlement agencies maintain that the resettlement process for refugees extends beyond the point of entry, and generally lasts three to five years until they are able to be full-functioning, contributing members of society.

Resettlement Denials

Nearly half of the households that remain in Jordan reported that their applications for resettlement via the Australian Special Humanitarian Program had been rejected since the time of their initial interview with the Assyrian Policy Institute (between December 2017 and January 2018). If an application is denied, there is no opportunity for an appeal, however, applicants do have the option of reapplying.

Common reasons for resettlement rejections included insufficient documentation, failure to demonstrate persecution, and material discrep-

ancies between interview testimony and evidence submitted. In addition, if an applicant returns to Iraq at any point while their resettlement application is processing, denial is highly probable.

Many respondents whose applications had been denied expressed frustration over the reasons for their rejection. Respondents were particularly frustrated by denials based on a failure to demonstrate persecution, given the conditions for Christians in Iraq. Further, some respondents denied on the basis of insufficient documentation stated they did not have the requested documents as they were forced to flee their homes.

Some families reported receiving multiple rejections after reapplying. Household 26 from Batnaya, Iraq—a town that was decimated in the war against ISIS—reported three consecutive application rejections due to a lack of documentation.

Visa application rejections are extremely discouraging to the families who receive them, more so when the applicants have been residing in Jordan for an extended period of time. The following accounts are relevant examples:

In their initial interview, members of Household 20 reported that they had reapplied for resettlement to Australia after their first application was denied in August 2017. In a follow-up interview conducted in January 2019, a household member reported that they had yet to receive a decision with regard to their second application. He said, “We have been waiting for almost two years now. I am starting to think more seriously about the possibility of returning home. I do not want to spend two more years of my life here only to be rejected again.”¹⁵³ Household 20 ultimately returned to Iraq in April 2018.

In a follow-up interview conducted in January 2019, a man from Dohuk informed API researchers he had filed a third application for entry into Australia. He stated, “My wife and I have decided to give [resettlement] one more chance, but if we are rejected again, we really have no choice but to return to Iraq.”¹⁵⁴

Resettlement application rejections are one of the main factors contributing to spontaneous returns, but some respondents maintain that a denial will not impact their decision to continue seeking resettlement. Of the seven households interviewed that have since had household members return to Iraq, five of them received what is commonly referred to as a “refusal.”

The API interviewed a man from Baghdad whose initial application for resettlement was rejected. He said, “We will continue reapplying until we are accepted into a third country. I will never return to Iraq.”¹⁵⁵ He also stated that in the event that they are not admitted to a third country, he would prefer integration into Jordanian society and would seek legal pathways to permanent residency in Jordan. His family was later resettled in Australia in July 2018.¹⁵⁶

Left in Limbo

The majority of households interviewed by the API remain in Jordan—either having received a negative response to their resettlement applications or having received no update with regard to the status of their applications at all.

Most households reported no notable changes to their situation in Jordan; several households reported developments such as a change of residence or a new job. However, Assyrian families are increasingly vulnerable due to the depletion in household funds as they continue to await resettlement processing. A number of respondents indicated they were considering a potential return to Iraq due to the increasing unaffordability of life in Jordan and the extended delay in processing refugee visa applications.

Respondents were frustrated by the approval of resettlement cases filed by applicants who arrived in Jordan later than they did. “It’s not fair that my family has been waiting four years while other families are resettled in six months,” said a man from Baghdad whose residency in Jordan began in July 2015.



An Assyrian refugee celebrates his tenth birthday in Amman, Jordan. (August 2015)

Refugee families who have lived in Jordan for a considerable period of time find themselves facing a difficult choice: They either concede that they have wasted time and resources living in Jordan and return to Iraq despite the fact that the conditions that drove them to leave remain unchanged or they choose to remain in Jordan despite the uncertainties concerning their future.

A man from Ankawa said, “Our first application was refused in September 2017. I was told my case was not strong enough. At that point, my wife and I talked about returning, but we decided to wait to see what would happen after the Kurdish referendum. The situation for Assyrians worsened, so we filed a new application. We won’t be able to stay here [in Jordan] for two or three more years, simply because we cannot afford it.”¹⁵⁷

The hardships for Assyrian refugees are many, and respondents who remain in Jordan say the amount of humanitarian assistance provided to their community has lessened over the course of the past year. The decline in humanitarian aid means less access to basic needs, health care, education. Some attribute this downward trend to the decline in public interest in the plight of Iraq’s minoritized communities.

“The rest of the world has moved on, but we are stuck in 2014,” said a woman from Bakhdida.¹⁵⁸

The monotonous lifestyle is increasingly challenging for the community, as they struggle with mental health issues and fears concerning the uncertainty of their futures. The financial and emotional strain of exile paired with the international community’s failure to address the specific needs of Assyrian refugees have led to the collapse of social networks and widespread feelings of worthlessness.

Part VI: Conclusion

Lives on Hold

The Assyrian refugee community in Jordan faces unique challenges in displacement, and their specific needs often go unaddressed by international actors. Their wait for resettlement is characterized by limited information, uncertainty about their futures, and a growing sense of hopelessness.

For many Assyrian refugees, the prolonged state of limbo has made the future difficult to imagine. Protracted displacement and monotonous lifestyles have had a negative impact on the mental health of Assyrian refugees and may have long-term consequences. Many respondents—both adults and children—showed signs of psychological distress.

While the living conditions for most Assyrian refugees in Jordan are safe and sanitary, the perpetual state of limbo coupled with the increasing unaffordability of life in Jordan has rendered many susceptible to exploitation and forced returns to Iraq.

Assyrian refugees must be given opportunities to be productive and self-reliant in their dis-

placement, as opposed to being passive recipients of aid. This requires that Jordanian authorities treat refugees with Iraqi nationality as contributors to local development and also ensure that Assyrians in the country have access to socioeconomic activity.

Unable to move forward and unwilling to go back, their wait is becoming intolerable. However, for the large majority, intended destinations remain the same and the presence of family and friends in their planned destination continues to be a strong motivating factor for resettlement despite the challenges they face. Countries like Australia continue to represent what they hope will be a “better life” characterized by safety and security, equal rights and opportunities, and reunification with loved ones.

Media attention is often drawn to the stories of refugees who embark on dangerous and often tragic journeys across seas and land fleeing war and devastation. But for many, their stories are uneventful yet in some ways more trying—their lives are on hold as they wait to find out whether they will be given a chance at a new life. Years of waiting don’t land headlines, but they have lasting effects.

Emigration Poses Existential Threat

The forced migration of Assyrians from Iraq is ongoing; it is invisible and happening daily, and the number of externally-displaced Assyrians in the region continues to increase.

The Assyrian experience in Iraq has been characterized by genocide, persecution, and displacement since the establishment of the state. Many Assyrians view the rise of ISIS and the recent wave of increased migration as the “cap to a century of genocide.”

Over the course of the past decade alone, upwards of one million Assyrians from Iraq have been forced into migration. While the dominant ethnic groups in Iraq—Arabs and Kurds—can withstand high rates of migration, current migration trends threaten the longevity of the Assyrian people in their homeland. If these trends continue, the population of Assyrians in the country may be reduced to a symbolic level, similar to what happened to the Assyrians in their historical territories in Syria, Turkey, and Iran.

The ghastly memories carried by Assyrian refugees are impossible to discount, and the Iraqi state remains weak and ridden with fraud—rendering the likelihood of large-scale repatriation unlikely.

While resettlement is the immediate solution for individual families seeking conditions of security, stability, and equality, it is detrimental to the survivability of the Assyrian people. Ultimately, migration only further displaces the community from their homeland. Ethnic enclaves have been built and sustained by immigration, primarily in parts of the United States, Europe, and Australia where they are increasingly prone to cultural assimilation.

Time is working against this endangered indigenous community. The days pass slowly for the refugees uncertain of their futures, but the existential threat faced by Assyrians is rapidly ad-

vancing. Repatriation is the only durable solution, but it is not a viable option until the root causes for Assyrian emigration are rectified.

The Assyrian Policy Institute maintains that all externally-displaced persons should be permitted to make their own decision concerning repatriation without coercion or harassment of any nature. In accordance with the principle of non-refoulement of refugees, no person should be forced into a situation in which they may face extreme fear, persecution, or death. When the prospect of returning causes great fear, displaced populations should always have the option of a safe and assisted resettlement in a third-party country that is able and willing to take them.

While Iraqi and Kurdish officials have made repeated statements and symbolic gestures pledging to support marginalized communities, their rhetoric has not been matched by meaningful actions that demonstrate their intent to protect and preserve the Assyrian presence in Iraq.

Hope for a sustainable future for Assyrians in Iraq rests with the actualization of Article 125 of the Iraqi Constitution, which guarantees Assyrians and other marginalized groups administrative rights, through the creation of a Nineveh Plain Governorate as authorized by the Iraqi Council of Ministers on January 21, 2014. The creation of such a governorate will enable Assyrians and other ethnic communities in the Nineveh Plain to govern themselves and secure their own territory.

While it is not an overnight solution, in the long-term, a standalone province will enable Assyrians and other marginalized communities to prioritize their unique needs and safeguard their culture, thereby reducing rates of migration, and encourage repatriation.

The Iraqi Government, the KRG, and their international partners must take immediate actions to address the root causes of Assyrian migration from Iraq and enable the voluntary return

of those who are displaced. The post-conflict phase presents an opportunity to implement overdue administrative and security changes in the Nineveh Plain to secure a sustainable future for the Assyrians in their homeland. Failure to do so will have irreparable consequences and will lead to the disappearance of this ancient community.

Part VI: Recommendations

To the International Community:

- Provide adequate support to the Jordanian government to alleviate the economic and social pressures of the ongoing refugee crisis and significantly increase funding for UN agencies giving assistance to refugees in Jordan, prioritizing food, health care, and shelter support—namely cash-based assistance for rent;
- Support measures to remove obstacles to education to enable refugee children to recover from conflict, realize their rights, contribute to host countries, and ultimately rebuild their home countries;
- Support measures to address the root causes of Assyrian migration from Iraq and promote solutions including stabilization the security situation in the Nineveh Plain and rehabilitation of Assyrian lands devastated by ISIS;
- Urge the Iraqi Government to provide funds to assist Assyrian refugees in the various stages of repatriation;

- Develop refugee assistance programs that account for the plurality of the refugee community in Jordan to ensure that ethnic and religious minorities have equal access to aid and conduct research to ensure they benefit in practice. Promote initiatives that help enhance people's skills, knowledge, and livelihoods. Develop initiatives to support mental well-being and address mental health issues within refugee communities.

To the Jordanian Government:

- Reverse the decision to reduce health care subsidies for refugees to improve refugees' access to health care and lessen barriers that prevent refugees from seeking health services;
- Create a legal pathway for Iraqi refugees to seek employment, enabling them to provide for their families and contribute to Jordanian society. Increase access to short-term work permits by extending the current practice of waiving

work permit fees for Syrian refugees to refugees of other nationalities. Expand the sectors in which refugees can obtain work permits to improve access to legal employment. End disproportionate penalties for refugees caught working without authorization;

- Develop inclusive and flexible registration systems to enable Assyrian refugee children to enroll in and attend formal education. Ensure that lack of documentation is not a barrier to education. Increase the number of hours of instruction for refugee children in afternoon shift classes. Expand access to education for out-of-school children and amend requirements to enable refugee children to enroll in secondary school.

To the Iraqi Government:

- Implement measures to restore public faith in the Iraqi Government to provide incentive for Assyrian refugees who wish to return home;
- Restore federal authority in the Nineveh Plain and assume control over security in the Nineveh Plain, ending foreign interference in the region. Enable Assyrians and other marginalized communities to defend their own territories by formally integrating and expanding the role of forces like the Nineveh Plain Protection Units;
- Fulfill the central government's constitutional obligations and expedite the reconstruction and rehabilitation of the towns in the Nineveh Plain;
- Implement Resolution No. 16 issued by the Iraqi Council of Ministers in its meeting on January 21, 2014, which gave preliminary approval for the creation of a Nineveh Plain Governorate, as well as the authorization of legislative and ad-

ministration procedures required to implement the resolution;

- Support measures to assist the Assyrian people in developing sustainable, functional, and democratic forms of local administration and security within the framework of the united, federal, Iraqi state;
- Reject any referendum held with regard to the status of the Nineveh Plain. The population must first be resettled and have their rights to property, free assembly and speech restored. Devastated areas must be rejuvenated and residents must have access to the full spectrum of state provided services present elsewhere in the country. All suggestions pertaining to holding any kind of referendum before all of this work is undertaken is premature;
- Ensure returnees have recourse for property restitution or compensation upon return, and receive strong integration and support to build their livelihoods and contribute to long-term economic and political development.

To the Kurdistan Regional Government:

- Recognize the Nineveh Governorate's constitutional boundaries and transition KRG-affiliated forces out of the Nineveh Plain;
- Resume payment of civil servant salaries and promote employment and entrepreneurial opportunities for Assyrians who have been deprived of work due to their political views;
- Cease the repression of political and civil society organizations and activists that oppose Kurdish nationalist policies in the KRI and the Nineveh Plain. Allow

these organizations and individuals to operate freely and without fear;

- Implement Article 3, Sections 4 and 5 of Law No. 5 for the year 2015 regarding the protection of minority rights living in the KRI by addressing issues concerning land encroachment, and call for immediate action in the affected areas to provide solutions to resolve these issues. Return land to rightful owners wherever possible and appropriate; where this is unfeasible, provide just compensation.

Call to Action:

- Support NGOs with a proven track-record of delivering aid to Assyrians and other minoritized refugee communities in countries like Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon;
- Urge elected officials, government representatives, and relevant agencies to support policies that will promote the voluntary repatriation of Assyrians to Iraq;
- Advocate for the establishment of a Nineveh Plain Governorate as authorized by the Iraqi Council of Ministers in January 2014.

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