A Contested Coexistence: An Examination of Kurdish-Assyrian Relations from Antiquity to the Present

Introduction

The relationship between the Kurdish and Assyrian peoples represents a complex tapestry woven over millennia within the shared landscapes of Mesopotamia, Anatolia, and the Zagros Mountains.[1] As two of the region's most ancient indigenous groups, their histories are deeply intertwined, marked by periods of coexistence, cultural exchange, political alliance, and intense conflict.[4] Both communities have navigated the rise and fall of empires, the imposition of modern nation-state boundaries that divided their populations, and persistent experiences of marginalization and persecution, often as minorities within larger political entities.[2] Understanding this relationship requires delving into ancient roots, examining pivotal historical moments under successive empires, analyzing the devastating impact of 20th-century genocides and state-building projects, and assessing the intricate dynamics playing out in contemporary Iraq and Syria.

The significance of this relationship extends beyond the two communities themselves, offering insights into broader themes of minority politics, ethno-national conflict, state manipulation of intercommunal relations, and the challenges of coexistence in one of the world's most volatile regions. Their interactions have been profoundly shaped by their geographical proximity, overlapping territorial claims, differing socio-economic structures (nomadic/tribal vs. settled/agricultural/urban), religious differences (predominantly Muslim Kurds vs. predominantly Christian Assyrians), and their respective relationships with ruling powers. Periods of state weakness or political upheaval have often correlated with heightened intercommunal violence, sometimes exploited or directed by central authorities.[3] Conversely, shared experiences of oppression have, at times, fostered cooperation against common adversaries.[4]

This report seeks to provide a comprehensive, historically grounded, and multi-faceted analysis of the Kurdish-Assyrian relationship. Acknowledging the critical importance of rigorous source attribution, as previously highlighted, this analysis will meticulously cite evidence drawn from a diverse range of sources, including academic research, historical texts, archaeological findings, NGO reports, news archives, official statements, and community publications, across various languages [User Query]. The objective is to trace the evolution of their interactions, investigate key historical junctures such as the late Ottoman period and the Assyrian Genocide (Seyfo), the formation of modern nation-states, the era of Ba'athist rule, and contemporary developments within the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq and the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). By examining recurring

themes of conflict and cooperation, and critically assessing differing historical narratives, this report aims to offer a nuanced understanding of this enduring and often fraught relationship. The analysis begins by exploring the ancient roots and medieval encounters in their shared Mesopotamian and Anatolian homelands. It then proceeds chronologically through the Ottoman era, focusing on the lead-up to and events of the Seyfo. Subsequent sections examine the consequences of post-Ottoman state formation, the experiences of both communities under Ba'athist regimes, and the contemporary situations in Iraqi Kurdistan and Northeast Syria. Finally, the report synthesizes these findings to identify enduring patterns and concludes with recommendations based on the analysis.

I. Ancient Roots and Medieval Encounters

The historical geography of Mesopotamia and Anatolia forms the bedrock of the Kurdish-Assyrian relationship. Both groups claim deep indigenous roots in Upper Mesopotamia (also known as Al-Jazirah in Arabic), the Zagros Mountains, and adjacent parts of Anatolia – regions recognized as cradles of agriculture and early civilization.[1] Archaeological evidence from sites like Göbekli Tepe, Hallan Çemi, and Abu Hureyra in this area points to the earliest transitions from hunter-gathering to farming around 9000 BC.[12] Defining the precise ancient homelands, particularly for the Kurds, is challenging, as the term "Kurdistan" only gained currency among Muslim historians in the Middle Ages to denote the areas around the Zagros Mountains where Kurdish populations were concentrated.[1] Upper Mesopotamia's fertile plains, sometimes called the "bread basket" of the Assyrians, sustained ancient populations and empires.[13]

The emergence of early states in this northern region ("Ancient Kurdistan") during the mid-third millennium BC appears linked to interactions, often conflictual, with the established Mesopotamian states to the south.[13] The Ninevite V culture represents one such early complex society in the area.[13] The constant pressure and threat from southern powers acted as a significant stimulus for the formation of more organized socio-political entities in the north, capable of ensuring survival.[13] This suggests that inter-group conflict, particularly between the northern highlands/piedmont and the southern Mesopotamian powers, was a crucial factor shaping the early political landscape inhabited by the precursors of both Kurds and Assyrians. The arrival of the Hurrians later significantly influenced the region's culture and political development, contributing to the rise of entities like the Mittani Empire.[13]

While Assyrian civilization boasts a long and well-documented history centered around cities like Ashur and Nineveh [14], the term 'Kurd' appears with a socio-economic connotation by the 7th century AD Islamic conquests, often referring to nomadic groups on the Iranian plateau's western edge or tribes in Mesopotamia.[15] Kurdish groups played a marginal political role initially but rose to prominence during the "Kurdish interlude" (c. 950-1050s), establishing independent principalities reliant on Kurdish tribesmen for military strength.[15] The expansion of Kurdish populations into Mesopotamia and Anatolia accelerated significantly with the invasions of Seljuk Turks (from the 11th century) and later the Mongols, often settling on agricultural lands granted for their support.[3] Notable Kurdish dynasties like the Ayyubids,

founded by Saladin (himself of Kurdish origin from the Rawadiya tribe), ruled vast territories in the 12th century.[15] Later independent principalities like Ardalan, Badinan, Baban, Soran, Hakkari, and Badlis flourished, chronicled by Sharaf al-Din Bitlisi in the *Sharafnama* (1597).[15] Marco Polo encountered Kurds in Mosul during his travels in the 13th century.[15]
The question of Assyrian continuity from antiquity to the modern era has been debated, with some modern scholars questioning it.[2] However, compelling research, including Hirmis Aboona's work citing primary sources, confirms that Assyrians in northern Mesopotamia self-identified as descendants of the ancient Assyrians when encountering early Western visitors, affirming a continuity of identity that predated the Arab conquest.[2] The distinct ethno-religious identity persisted, centered around branches of Christianity like the Church of the East (often termed "Nestorian"), the Syriac Orthodox Church, and later the Chaldean Catholic Church (formed via union with Rome).[16] The term Sūrōyō/Sūrāyā, used by modern Assyrians for self-identification, is linguistically linked by scholars to the ancient Akkadian term Aššūrāyu.[17] The mountainous dioceses of the Church of the East, particularly in Hakkari, maintained significant autonomy until the mid-19th century Ottoman centralization efforts.[2]
The nature of relations between Kurds and Assyrians during these early and medieval periods remains somewhat ambiguous due to the scarcity of comprehensive, unbiased sources.[1] Some accounts, particularly later Kurdish intellectual claims, emphasize ancient shared origins and emotional closeness, though these lack rigorous historical backing and find limited support in sources like Armenian chronicles.[1] Conversely, other historical interpretations point to conflict. The differing lifestyles – Kurdish groups often being nomadic or semi-nomadic pastoralists, while Assyrians were largely settled agriculturalists and town-dwellers – could inherently lead to friction over land use and resources.[1] Aboona specifically mentions conflict over pastoral rights as a recurring issue.[3] Furthermore, some historical accounts, like those interpreted by Adonts regarding Kurdish expansion, suggest periods of violence directed against local populations, including Armenians and potentially Assyrians.[1] Periods of political instability, such as the decline of the Abbasid Caliphate, saw instances where Kurdish tribes raided Assyrian settlements.[3] Yet, evidence of coexistence and even formal alliance also exists. Within the Emirate of Hakkari, for instance, Assyrian tribes were granted "clanship" rights, exempting them from tribute and giving them a role in governance in exchange for providing armed men for common defense, suggesting a degree of mutual recognition and shared interest.[3] This ambiguity highlights the difficulty in constructing a simple narrative; relations were likely complex, varying significantly across different localities and time periods, shaped by local power dynamics, resource availability, and the influence of larger imperial forces.

II. Under Ottoman Rule: Coexistence, Conflict, and the Path to Genocide

The incorporation of Kurdish and Assyrian homelands into the Ottoman Empire following the Battle of Chaldiran in 1514 ushered in a new era of interaction under a single imperial umbrella.[5] The Ottoman state initially governed its diverse populations through arrangements

like the millet system, which granted religious communities a degree of autonomy under their religious leaders.[18] However, the application of this system to the various Assyrian Christian denominations was complex and often less formalized than for larger groups like the Greek Orthodox or Armenians. The Ottoman state also initially preserved the autonomy of many Kurdish emirates, utilizing them as crucial buffer forces along the volatile border with Safavid (and later Qajar) Iran.[5] This decentralized approach allowed for a degree of local coexistence, albeit often punctuated by tribal rivalries and competition for resources.

The 18th and particularly the 19th centuries witnessed significant shifts in Ottoman policy that profoundly impacted Kurdish-Assyrian relations. Facing territorial losses (especially in the Balkans and Caucasus) and seeking to modernize and consolidate control, the Ottoman state embarked on centralization efforts (Tanzimat reforms) aimed at curtailing the power of local autonomous actors.[5] This directly challenged the longstanding autonomy of both the Kurdish emirates and the independent Assyrian tribes, particularly those residing in the rugged Hakkari mountains who had maintained a surprising degree of self-governance under their Patriarch, the Mar Shimun, seated in Qudshanis.[2] The weakening of Ottoman authority in earlier centuries due to external wars and internal rebellions had allowed these local powers to flourish, but the 19th century brought them into direct confrontation with the centralizing state.[3]

This context of Ottoman centralization became the backdrop for horrific violence against the Assyrians in the 1840s, known as the Badr Khan massacres. Bedr Khan Beg, the Kurdish emir of Bohtan (a powerful entity centered in Cizre belonging to the Bahtiyye tribal lineage), launched brutal campaigns between 1843 and 1846 against the independent Assyrian tribes of the Hakkari mountains, notably in the Tiyari region.[3] These massacres were reportedly instigated or facilitated by figures like Noor Allah Beg, the Kurdish chief of Hakkari who sought Bedr Khan's aid to subdue the Assyrians, breaking prior patterns of coexistence.[3] Bedr Khan rallied Kurdish tribes, sometimes invoking calls for a "Holy War" against the Christians.[14] Sources estimate that tens of thousands of Assyrians were killed, women and children were enslaved, and numerous villages and churches were destroyed.[3]

Crucially, multiple sources point to Ottoman complicity or deliberate instrumentalization in these events. The Ottoman governor of Mosul is cited as having authorized or acquiesced to Bedr Khan's attacks.[2] The central government, while perhaps feigning disapproval at times, ultimately benefited from the weakening of the fiercely independent Assyrian tribes, which were seen as an obstacle to direct rule.[3] This pattern reveals a state strategy of leveraging intercommunal conflict to achieve its own political objectives. The Ottomans eventually moved against Bedr Khan himself, ending the "Kurdish war" in 1847, but only after the independent Assyrian tribal structure had been devastated.[3] These massacres represent a critical turning point, shattering previous modes of coexistence and foreshadowing the larger-scale violence to come.

The late 19th century saw another Ottoman policy that further exacerbated tensions and violence: the creation of the Hamidiye Alayları (Hamidian Regiments) under Sultan Abdul Hamid II. These irregular cavalry units were recruited predominantly from loyalist Kurdish tribes, armed by the state, and given significant latitude and impunity, ostensibly to defend

the eastern frontiers.[6] In practice, the Hamidiye regiments became notorious for their brutality against Armenian and Assyrian communities, as well as against rival or less powerful Kurdish groups.[6] They were implicated in the anti-Armenian massacres of the 1890s and engaged in widespread land grabbing and resource appropriation, often with the state turning a blind eye.[6] This policy deliberately empowered certain Kurdish elements loyal to the Sultan, deepening divisions within Kurdish society and intensifying the vulnerability of Christian minorities, further poisoning intercommunal relations on the eve of the First World War.[6] The state's active use of Kurdish tribes, first through figures like Bedr Khan and later systemically through the Hamidiye, demonstrates a recurring pattern of instrumentalizing ethnic and tribal dynamics to maintain control and suppress perceived threats, ultimately contributing directly to the conditions that enabled the genocides of the early 20th century.

III. The Assyrian Genocide (Seyfo) and World War I

The outbreak of World War I and the rise to power of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), commonly known as the Young Turks, created the conditions for the systematic destruction of the Ottoman Empire's Christian minorities. Driven by a nationalist ideology aiming to create a homogenous Turkish state ("One Nation, One Religion") and viewing Christians as potential internal enemies aligned with rival powers (especially Russia), the CUP regime embarked on a genocidal policy targeting Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks.[5] The Ottoman Empire's entry into the war on the side of the Central Powers provided the pretext and cover for these actions.[27] A declaration of Jihad was proclaimed, further inciting violence against non-Muslim populations.[25]

Assyrians refer to this period of extermination as "Seyfo" (ܣܝܦܐ), an Aramaic word meaning "sword," reflecting the primary weapon used in the mass killings.[25] The term has historical resonance, meaning 'extermination' or 'extinction' since the 10th century.[24] While the term "Assyrian Genocide" is widely used today by victims' descendants and recognized by scholars and some states, its historical applicability is sometimes debated academically due to the fragmented nature of Assyrian ecclesiastical and tribal identities at the time.[16] Nonetheless, the events clearly constituted genocide under modern definitions.[14]

The genocide unfolded across the Assyrian heartlands, encompassing the Urmia region in northwestern Iran, the Hakkari mountains, the provinces of Van, Bitlis (including Siirt/Bohtan), Diyarbakir, Harput, and areas around Mardin, Midyat (Tur Abdin), and Urfa, extending into what is now northern Iraq and Syria.[2] While localized atrocities occurred earlier, the systematic annihilation intensified in 1915.

- **Early Stages (Aug-Oct 1914):** Even before the Ottomans formally entered WWI, Assyrians in border villages near Persia faced attacks and forced displacement for refusing military service.[24] On October 26, 1914, Interior Minister Talaat Pasha ordered the deportation and dispersal of Assyrians in the Hakkari region near the Persian border, citing concerns about their loyalty.[22] Historian David Gaunt considers this order the beginning of the Seyfo.[24] Although the large-scale deportation was initially deemed impractical, arrests, killings, and attacks by Ottoman irregulars and allied forces against

Assyrian villages in Hakkari commenced.[24] Following brief Russian captures and Ottoman recaptures of towns like Bashkale, local Christians faced brutal reprisals.[24]

- **Urmia Region, Persia (Jan-May 1915):** An Ottoman army occupied the Urmia district, a region with a significant Assyrian and Armenian population. Under commanders like Jevdet Bey (Governor of Van) and Halil Bey (Enver Pasha's relative), troops, aided by local collaborators incited by Jihadist propaganda, committed widespread massacres and atrocities against Christians.[22] The massacre of over 700 Armenian and Assyrian men in Haftevan (near Salmas) in March 1915 is one documented example.[22]
- **Hakkari Mountains (June-Sept 1915):** A coordinated military assault was launched against the independent Assyrian tribes of Hakkari. An Ottoman army advancing from Mosul under Governor Haydar Bey, operating in conjunction with local Kurdish tribes, attacked the Assyrians.[22] The Assyrian tribes, led spiritually and temporally by Patriarch Mar Shimun Benyamin XXI, declared war on the Ottoman Empire on May 10th and attempted armed resistance.[22] Despite valiant efforts, they were heavily outnumbered and outgunned. Mar Shimun's attempts to secure promised Russian military aid proved futile.[24] The tribes were forced to retreat into the high mountains, facing starvation, and ultimately undertook a perilous exodus across the border into Persia (modern-day Iran) in August-September 1915, leaving their ancestral homeland depopulated in an act of brutal ethnic cleansing.[22]
- **Diyarbakir Province and Siirt District (June-Sept 1915):** The genocide extended westward. In Diyarbakir province, the notoriously anti-Christian governor, Mehmed Reshid Bey, orchestrated massacres targeting the Syriac Orthodox population.[28] In the Siirt district (Bohtan) of Bitlis province, Chaldean Catholic villages were attacked, with General Halil Bey using his troops to initiate massacres.[28] Special death squads were employed, and certain Kurdish tribes, like the Raman near Batman (previously outlaws granted amnesty by Reshid Bey in exchange for carrying out killings), actively participated.[28] Eyewitness accounts from regions like Tur Abdin similarly detail executions, massacres, and the destruction of villages.[20]

The perpetrators involved a combination of state and non-state actors. The Ottoman state, directed by the CUP leadership (Talaat, Enver), provided the orders and overall strategy.[22] Provincial governors and military commanders executed these plans using regular army units, gendarmerie, the clandestine Special Organization (Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa), and specially formed "butcher battalions" or death squads.[14] Ottoman archival documents confirm the direct involvement of civil and military authorities in attacking Assyrian settlements.[16]

Kurdish involvement was significant but complex and varied by region. Numerous sources explicitly mention Kurdish tribes, militias, volunteers, or irregulars participating alongside Ottoman forces in massacres, looting, and the abduction/enslavement of Assyrians across Hakkari, Urmia, Diyarbakir, Siirt, and Tur Abdin.[3] Some Assyrian perspectives identify Kurds, alongside Turks, as primary perpetrators.[10] However, the situation was not uniform; while some tribes like the Raman actively participated in killings [28], other Kurdish confederations or individuals offered protection to Assyrians, and the Yazidis of Sinjar notably sheltered fleeing

Armenians and Assyrians.[28] This complexity is crucial: the genocide was state-orchestrated, but its implementation on the ground involved various actors, including segments of the Kurdish population, sometimes acting under orders, sometimes opportunistically, and sometimes driven by local dynamics, while others resisted or protected victims. Attributing collective responsibility requires careful nuance. Some Kurdish intellectuals and leaders have subsequently acknowledged and apologized for the role played by certain Kurdish groups.[26]
Assyrians did not submit passively. They mounted armed resistance where possible, notably the Hakkari tribes' stand [22] and the defense of towns like Azakh.[16] Many Assyrians also joined the Allied forces, particularly aligning with Russia initially, and later with the British, hoping for protection and eventual autonomy.[18] The lack of extensive written accounts from Assyrian victims means that oral histories passed down through generations are immensely important for understanding the Seyfo's impact.[20]
The differing narratives surrounding the Seyfo persist. The Assyrian perspective emphasizes the genocide, the immense scale of loss (estimates range from 250,000 to over 400,000 deaths, roughly half to two-thirds of the pre-war population), the betrayal by neighbors and authorities, the dispossession from their ancestral homeland, and the enduring trauma, fueling demands for recognition and justice.[4] Kurdish perspectives are less represented in the provided material but likely involve a complex mix of acknowledgment, denial, justification based on Ottoman orders or local conflicts, and later efforts at reconciliation by some.[4] The official Turkish state narrative continues to deny the genocide.[26] Academic scholarship increasingly recognizes the Seyfo as part of the broader Ottoman genocide against Christians, utilizing Ottoman archives and survivor testimonies to analyze the state's central role while acknowledging the complex local dynamics and varied participation of Kurdish groups.[14]
The immediate consequences of the Seyfo were catastrophic: mass death, the creation of a massive refugee crisis (with survivors ending up in camps like Baqubah in Iraq [34]), the permanent loss of ancestral territories and property [22], the destruction of cultural heritage [14], and deep, lasting intergenerational trauma.[20] The genocide irrevocably altered the demographic landscape of southeastern Anatolia and northern Mesopotamia and fundamentally reshaped Kurdish-Assyrian relations for the century to come.

IV. Drawing Lines: The Post-Ottoman Order and its Consequences (1920s-1950s)

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I did not bring the promised self-determination for many of its constituent peoples, including Kurds and Assyrians. Instead, the victorious Allied powers, primarily Britain and France, redrew the map of the Middle East according to their own strategic interests, often formalized through agreements like Sykes-Picot (1916) and the San Remo Conference (1920).[44] This process partitioned the traditional homelands of Kurds and Assyrians, scattering their populations across the newly created nation-states of Turkey, Iraq (under British Mandate), Syria (under French Mandate),

and Iran.[5] This division created new political realities and sources of conflict that continue to shape the region today.

The initial post-war settlement, the Treaty of Sèvres (1920), offered a brief glimmer of hope for Kurdish aspirations. Article 64 outlined provisions for Kurdish autonomy in eastern Anatolia, with the possibility of future independence.[8] The treaty also envisaged an independent Armenia, incorporating territories claimed by both Armenians and Kurds, a prospect that reportedly motivated some Kurds to align with Turkish nationalists against the treaty.[52] However, Sèvres was never ratified. It was fiercely rejected by the Turkish nationalist movement led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, which fought a successful War of Independence against Allied-backed forces.[44]

The Treaty of Lausanne (1923) replaced Sèvres and established the borders of the modern Republic of Turkey, effectively nullifying the provisions for Kurdish and Armenian autonomy.[48] While Lausanne included articles (37-44) ostensibly protecting non-Muslim minorities within Turkey, the Kemalist government interpreted these narrowly, applying them only to Greeks, Armenians, and Jews.[40] This deliberate exclusion denied Assyrians fundamental minority rights guaranteed under the treaty, such as the right to mother-tongue education and the freedom to establish their own schools and institutions.[40] As Muslims, Kurds were excluded entirely from these minority protections, paving the way for decades of assimilationist policies and the denial of their distinct ethnic identity within Turkey.[40] For many Kurds and Assyrians across the new borders, Lausanne resulted in statelessness, precarious citizenship, and vulnerability to the homogenizing policies of the nascent nation-states.[49] Some scholars argue that Lausanne tacitly endorsed the outcomes of the preceding genocidal policies by solidifying the new demographic realities.[56] The treaty's framework, designed to finalize borders, simultaneously created a legal vacuum that enabled the marginalization and denial of rights for large populations caught within those borders.

A key territorial issue left unresolved by Lausanne was the fate of the former Ottoman Mosul Vilayet, a diverse region encompassing significant Kurdish, Assyrian, Turkmen, Yazidi, and Arab populations.[45] Britain, holding the mandate for Iraq, claimed the Vilayet for the new Iraqi state, while Turkey argued for its inclusion based on historical ties and the alleged ethnic unity of Turks and Kurds.[45] The dispute was referred to the League of Nations.[45] Assyrian leaders and groups actively petitioned the League, demanding either the return of their ancestral lands in Hakkari (now within Turkey) or the establishment of an autonomous Assyrian region within the Mosul Vilayet, citing Allied promises made during WWI in return for their support and the need for protection.[34] The League of Nations commission investigating the dispute ultimately recommended awarding Mosul to Iraq in 1925, partly on the condition that minority rights, particularly for the Assyrians and other Christians, be guaranteed.[41] Recommendations included local autonomy provisions and the continuation of the British mandate for 25 years to ensure these protections.[59] Turkey reluctantly accepted the decision in the Frontier Treaty of 1926.[45] However, the specific promises of autonomy for Assyrians remained largely unfulfilled, and their hopes for a secure homeland were dashed.[41] Iraq, upon gaining formal independence and joining the League in 1932, made declarations pledging to protect its

minorities, but these commitments would soon be tragically violated.[59]
During the British Mandate period in Iraq (1920-1932), the relationship between the British authorities, Assyrians, and Kurds became increasingly complex. The British established the Iraq Levies, a local military force initially composed of various groups but which became predominantly Assyrian after 1921, as Arabs and Kurds were encouraged to join the nascent Iraqi Army.[19] The Levies proved highly effective, serving as the primary ground force supporting British administration and Royal Air Force (RAF) control, defending British interests, securing borders, and notably, suppressing internal uprisings, including several Kurdish revolts.[62] This created a symbiotic but fraught relationship. The British relied heavily on the Levies' loyalty and military prowess.[18] Assyrians, many of whom were refugees from Turkey and Iran displaced by the Seyfo [34], saw service in the Levies as a means of security and leverage, hoping British patronage would lead to the fulfillment of promises regarding autonomy or resettlement.[19] However, their role as instruments of British mandatory power generated significant resentment among Iraqi Arab nationalists and Kurds, who viewed them as collaborators with the colonial regime.[19] This British policy of utilizing one minority group against others, while perhaps expedient for maintaining control, sowed deep divisions and contributed directly to the Assyrians' vulnerability after the Mandate ended.
As Iraq moved towards independence in the early 1930s, Assyrian anxieties grew.[67] Their petitions to the League of Nations for secured autonomy or resettlement went unheeded.[41] In 1932, Assyrian Levy officers submitted a manifesto demanding discharge, intending to concentrate their community in northern Iraq to press for autonomy or potentially establish it by force.[64] This alarmed both British and Iraqi authorities.[67] In July 1933, frustrated by the lack of progress and fearing for their future under an independent Iraqi government, a group of around 800 armed Assyrian men crossed into Syria, hoping for resettlement under the French Mandate, but were turned back.[23] This event provided the pretext for the Iraqi government, led by figures like Hikmat Sulayman and the Iraqi-Kurdish General Bakr Sidqi, to implement a "final solution" to the "Assyrian problem".[23] In August 1933, the Iraqi army descended on the Assyrian district of Simele (Sumail) and massacred an estimated 3,000 unarmed Assyrian civilians, including women and children.[23] Some sources place the death toll higher, up to 6,000.[30] The British, despite their military presence and treaty obligations, failed to intervene.[23] The Simele Massacre became a defining trauma for the Assyrian people, recognized by the International Association of Genocide Scholars as a genocide [30], and led to another wave of Assyrian displacement, with many survivors eventually settling in the Khabur River valley in Syria.[10] It starkly illustrated the failure of international guarantees and the deadly consequences of the political dynamics set in motion during the Mandate era.
Meanwhile, in Syria under the French Mandate, the political landscape developed differently. The French authorities granted citizenship to many Kurdish refugees fleeing Turkey.[70] The first Syrian Republic was established under the 1930 Constitution, although France retained ultimate control.[46] Assyrian refugees arrived from Iraq following the Simele massacre.[69] The Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO) was founded later, in 1957, emerging as the first modern Assyrian political party in Syria, partly in response to the rise of pan-Arab

nationalism.[71] While Kurds would later face specific discriminatory policies like the 1962 census that stripped many of their citizenship [44], Assyrians in Syria during this early period primarily navigated the general political constraints of the Mandate and the emerging Syrian state. In Turkey, the post-Lausanne era was characterized by the consolidation of Turkish nationalism, the suppression of Kurdish identity, and violent responses to Kurdish revolts like the Dersim uprising.[5] Assyrians in Turkey faced assimilationist pressures, including the Turkification of village names, and were later caught in the crossfire of the state's conflict with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).[40] Iran also worked to consolidate central control, suppressing Kurdish tribal leaders like Ismail Agha Shekak (Semko) and crushing the short-lived Kurdish Republic of Mahabad in 1946.[5] Across the region, the post-Ottoman settlement solidified borders that divided communities and subjected them to the often harsh realities of new, centralizing nation-states.

V. Living Under Ba'athism (Iraq and Syria, c. 1960s-2003)

The rise of Ba'athist regimes in Iraq (intermittently from 1963, then continuously from 1968 to 2003) and Syria (from 1963 until 2024) marked a particularly repressive era for many ethnic and religious minorities, including Kurds and Assyrians. Rooted in an ideology of pan-Arab nationalism, Ba'athism sought to create strong, centralized, secular states, but in practice often translated into the dominance of one ethno-sectarian group (Sunni Arabs, particularly from specific regions like Tikrit in Iraq; Alawites in Syria) and the suppression of dissent through powerful security apparatuses (Mukhabarat) and one-party rule.[54]

Iraq under Ba'ath Rule (1963, 1968-2003):

The relationship between the Iraqi Ba'athist state and the Kurdish population was defined by cycles of intense conflict interspersed with periods of fragile negotiation and temporary agreements. Following the 1958 revolution that overthrew the monarchy, initial hopes for Kurdish partnership in the new republic faded, leading to the outbreak of the First Iraqi-Kurdish War in 1961, led by Mustafa Barzani and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).[75] Subsequent Ba'athist regimes continued the conflict. A significant attempt at resolution came with the 1970 Autonomy Agreement, which granted Kurds certain rights on paper.[75] However, disputes over implementation, particularly regarding the oil-rich Kirkuk region, led to the agreement's collapse and the Second Iraqi-Kurdish War (1974-75).[75] The war ended disastrously for the Kurds when Iran withdrew its support following the Algiers Agreement with Iraq, leading to the collapse of the Barzani-led rebellion.[4] This period also saw the emergence of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), led by Jalal Talabani, splitting from the KDP and continuing a lower-level insurgency.[75]

Throughout this period, and intensifying after 1975, the Ba'athist regime implemented systematic "Arabization" policies aimed at altering the demographic composition of northern Iraq.[5] Hundreds of thousands of Kurds, along with Assyrians, Turkmens, and Yazidis, were forcibly expelled from their ancestral lands, particularly in Kirkuk province and other strategic

or resource-rich areas along the borders.[4] Their villages were destroyed, properties confiscated, and ethnic Arabs were incentivized to settle in their place.[54]

The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) provided an opportunity for Kurdish parties (KDP and PUK) to renew their insurgency, often collaborating with Iran against Saddam Hussein's regime.[82] The Iraqi state responded with unparalleled brutality, culminating in the genocidal Anfal campaign in 1988.[5] Led by Ali Hassan al-Majid ("Chemical Ali"), Anfal aimed to eliminate Kurdish resistance and permanently alter the demography of strategic rural areas.[88] The campaign involved ground offensives, aerial bombardment, systematic destruction of over 4,000 Kurdish villages, mass deportations, firing squads, and the notorious use of chemical weapons against civilians, most infamously in Halabja (March 1988) but also against dozens of other villages.[79] Estimates of the dead range from 50,000 to over 182,000, mostly civilians.[79] The campaign utilized Kurdish collaborators, known as *jash*, to guide Iraqi troops and identify targets.[90]

While Anfal primarily targeted Kurds, Assyrian communities were also victims of this campaign and the broader Ba'athist repression.[89] Over 30 Assyrian villages were destroyed during Anfal [89], and Assyrians suffered alongside Kurds from displacement, village destruction, and political persecution throughout the Ba'ath era.[4] Although the regime passed laws in 1972 nominally granting cultural rights, such as the use of Syriac (Aramaic) in schools and media, these were rarely implemented in practice.[23] The Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM), founded in 1979 in response to Ba'athist oppression [93], faced severe crackdowns. In 1984, over 150 ADM members were arrested, with many imprisoned in Abu Ghraib; four leaders were executed for treason.[93]

Despite historical tensions, the shared experience of brutal repression under the Ba'ath fostered significant cooperation between Kurdish and Assyrian opposition groups. Assyrians had supported the 1961 Kurdish uprising.[4] The ADM took up arms in 1982, focusing on defending Assyrian villages but also fighting alongside Kurdish Peshmerga forces against the regime.[93] The ADM became a member of the Iraqi-Kurdistan Front (IKF), the umbrella opposition group in the north.[92] Thousands of Assyrians joined militias fighting Saddam's regime.[4] This cooperation stemmed from shared marginalization, common political goals (democracy, minority rights), and sometimes shared leftist or secular ideals.[4] Assyrian organizations based abroad, like the Assyrian Universal Alliance (AUA), also lobbied internationally to support the Kurdish cause and ensure Assyrian interests were considered.[11]

Syria under Ba'ath Rule (1963-2011 focus):

In Syria, the Ba'ath party, particularly after Hafez al-Assad consolidated power in 1970, also pursued policies aimed at reinforcing Arab nationalism and central control, though the specific manifestations differed from Iraq.[78] The primary target of specific ethno-national discrimination was the Kurdish population.[44] The most egregious policy was the exceptional census of 1962 in the Jazira region, which arbitrarily stripped an estimated 120,000 Kurds (around 20% of the Syrian Kurdish population at the time) of their Syrian citizenship, classifying them as *ajanib* (foreigners) or *maktoumeen* (unregistered).[44] This rendered them stateless, denying them basic civil rights, including the right to vote, own property, work in

government jobs, access certain public services like hospitals, obtain passports, or even have marriages legally recognized.[44] Their children inherited this stateless status.[55] Furthermore, the Syrian Ba'ath regime systematically suppressed Kurdish language and culture, banning Kurdish language education, Kurdish names for children and businesses, Kurdish publications, and replacing Kurdish place names with Arabic ones.[44] Kurdish political activity was strictly forbidden, and activists faced arbitrary arrest, detention, torture, and unfair trials, particularly after the 2004 Qamishli riots which were met with lethal force by security services.[99]
Assyrians (often referred to as Syriacs in Syria) faced a different situation. While subject to the general political repression of the authoritarian state like any other opposition group [72], they were not targeted by the same specific, systemic ethno-national discrimination policies directed at the Kurds. The ADO, active in Syria since its founding, faced bans on its activities and arrests of its leaders and members.[71] However, the Ba'ath regime generally tolerated Assyrian religious and cultural practices within the confines of their churches and communities.[96] There was no equivalent to the 1962 census targeting Assyrians. This differential treatment – overt ethno-national suppression of Kurds versus general political repression applied to Assyrians (among others) – likely contributed to the less documented history of joint Kurdish-Assyrian opposition movements within Syria compared to Iraq during the Ba'athist era. While both communities suffered under the regime, the specific nature of their oppression and the state's strategies towards them differed, influencing their respective political trajectories and inter-communal dynamics prior to the 2011 uprising.

VI. The Contemporary Landscape: Iraqi Kurdistan (Post-2003)

The fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003 fundamentally altered the political landscape of Iraq, particularly for the Kurdish region. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which had enjoyed de facto autonomy in the provinces of Dohuk, Erbil, and Sulaimaniyah under the protection of the post-1991 no-fly zone, gained formal recognition as a federal entity within the new Iraqi constitution.[51] This period saw the consolidation of power by the two dominant Kurdish parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which initially governed under a power-sharing agreement but had also experienced periods of intense internal conflict (1994-1998).[75] The post-2003 era brought unprecedented autonomy and influence for Iraqi Kurds but also created new challenges and dynamics for the region's minority communities, including the Assyrians.

Assyrian Political Representation:

The Iraqi constitution and KRG laws established a quota system to ensure representation for ethno-religious minorities in both the Iraqi Council of Representatives and the Kurdistan Parliament. In the KRG Parliament, this initially involved five seats reserved for Christians (Assyrians/Chaldeans/Syriacs and Armenians) after the 1992 elections, later expanded to eleven seats for minorities in total (five for Turkmens, five for Chaldean-Syriac-Assyrians, and one for Armenians).[54]
However, the effectiveness and legitimacy of this quota system have been subjects of intense

controversy. Numerous Assyrian political parties, activists, and independent observers have argued that the system has been systematically manipulated by the dominant Kurdish parties, particularly the KDP and PUK.[107] The core criticism is that these parties use their extensive networks and resources to mobilize Kurdish voters to vote for minority candidates affiliated with them, ensuring the election of loyalists rather than representatives genuinely accountable to the minority communities themselves.[108] This practice was facilitated by electoral laws that allowed any voter in a constituency to vote for quota candidates, rather than restricting voting to members of the specific minority group.[108] Consequently, many elected minority representatives are perceived within their own communities as proxies for the KDP or PUK, lacking independence and failing to adequately address minority concerns.[42]
This long-simmering issue came to a head in February 2024 when Iraq's Federal Supreme Court ruled the eleven minority quota seats in the KRG parliament unconstitutional, effectively abolishing them.[108] While the lawsuit was brought by PUK members and an affiliated Christian party, ostensibly challenging the constitutionality of specific articles [109], a coalition of six Assyrian, Chaldean, and Syriac parties blamed both the KDP and PUK for the outcome, arguing their exploitation of the quota system led to its demise.[109] They, along with other minority representatives, lamented the decision, stating it amounted to "political and social genocide" by removing guaranteed representation and making it virtually impossible for minority candidates to win seats in open competition against the major Kurdish parties.[108]
Veteran Assyrian politician Yonadam Kanna, leader of the ADM, declared his party would boycott future KRG elections without the quota.[109] This development underscores the deep flaws and contested nature of minority political participation within the KRG framework.
Table 1: Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac Representation in KRG Parliament (Post-2005)

Election Year	Total Minority Seats	Chaldean-Syriac-Assyrian Seats	Armenian Seats	Parties Holding C-S-A Seats (Reported Affiliation)	Key Controversies/Issues
1992	5	5	0	Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) initially prominent [110]	Early elections, pre-formal quota expansion.
2005	11	5	1	Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council (KDP-aligned), ADM, Bet Nahrain Democratic	Expansion of quota seats. Concerns about KDP/PUK influence begin to surface more strongly.

				Party (BNDP, KDP-aligned) etc.	
2009	11	5	1	Similar parties, continued dominance of KDP/PUK affiliated lists reported.[42]	Growing criticism of quota manipulation, calls for restricting voting to minority members.
2013	11	5	1	Continued pattern of KDP/PUK affiliated candidates winning majority of seats.[107]	Increased public discourse on lack of genuine representation; ADM often in opposition role.[42]
2018	11	5	1	Pattern persists.[107]	Elections delayed multiple times. Lead-up to 2024 court ruling.
2024 (Planned)	0 (Quota abolished)	0	0	N/A	Federal Court abolishes quota seats.[108] Christian parties blame KDP/PUK exploitation.[109] Parties like ADM announce boycott.[109] Fears of political erasure.[108]

(Note: Specific seat distribution among parties may vary slightly by election; affiliations are based on common reports in sources like.[42])

Security Situation:

The security environment in the KRG and adjacent disputed territories is complex, involving multiple actors with overlapping jurisdictions and competing interests. The KRG maintains its own Peshmerga forces and Asayish internal security services, largely divided along KDP and PUK lines.[111] Following the rise of ISIS in 2014 and the subsequent collapse of the Iraqi Army in the north, Peshmerga forces expanded their control into disputed territories, including parts of the Nineveh Plain.[87]

In response to the ISIS threat and the perceived failure of KRG forces to protect them (reports indicate KRG forces disarmed locals and then withdrew from parts of the Nineveh Plain just before the ISIS advance [115]), Assyrians formed their own local security forces.[115] Key among these are the Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU), politically linked to the ADM and receiving training and support from the US-led coalition and integrating formally into the Iraqi security structure.[93] Other forces emerged with closer ties to the KRG, such as the Nineveh Plain Forces (NPF), linked to the KDP-aligned BNDP [114], and the Nineveh Plains Guards (NPG), considered a direct KDP proxy force linked to the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council.[114]

This fragmented security landscape has created tensions. Assyrian groups, particularly those aligned with the NPU and ADM, have reported obstruction and intimidation from KRG forces and checkpoints.[116] KRG security forces (Asayish) have been accused by human rights organizations and Assyrian groups of arbitrary arrests, torture, intimidation, and suppressing dissent, including targeting Assyrians critical of KRG policies or land encroachment.[85] The presence of multiple armed groups with different allegiances (KRG, Baghdad, local) in areas like the Nineveh Plain contributes to instability and hinders the return of displaced populations.[113] Assyrian communities often feel caught between the competing security agendas of Baghdad and Erbil.[115] Notably, towns secured by the NPU have seen significantly higher rates of Assyrian return post-ISIS compared to areas controlled by KRG-affiliated forces, suggesting greater community trust in the local force.[115]

Land Rights and Disputes:

One of the most persistent and damaging issues affecting Assyrian-KRG relations is the widespread and systematic expropriation of Assyrian lands.[10] This problem predates 2003 but has reportedly intensified under the KRG, affecting areas both within the official KRI borders (particularly Dohuk governorate) and in the disputed territories of the Nineveh Plain that came under KRG control.[87]

Numerous reports from Assyrian organizations (Assyrian Policy Institute, Assyria Council of Europe), international NGOs, and community leaders document a pattern of illegal seizures of Assyrian-owned villages, farmlands, and properties by Kurdish individuals, tribes, or figures connected to the ruling parties.[10] The Assyrian Policy Institute has documented over 130 specific cases of illegal land and village seizures across the KRI.[122] These encroachments are often allegedly facilitated by the active involvement or passive endorsement of KRG authorities, including Peshmerga and Asayish forces, who fail to prevent the seizures or evict illegal occupants.[85] This process is often described by Assyrians as "Kurdification," a deliberate policy aimed at dispossessing the indigenous Assyrian population and altering the demography of their ancestral homelands to bolster Kurdish territorial claims.[38]

Attempts by Assyrians to seek legal redress have proven largely futile. Despite possessing legal deeds to their properties and sometimes obtaining favorable rulings from KRG courts or agricultural committees ordering the return of their land, these decisions are consistently unenforced by KRG authorities.[122] This lack of enforcement points to a significant breakdown in the rule of law and suggests impunity for those involved in land grabbing, often perceived to be politically connected.[112] The issue extends beyond agricultural land to include the confiscation of properties belonging to the Church, such as the historic Mor Gabriel Monastery lands in Turkey (though outside KRG, indicative of a regional pattern affecting Assyrians) and other church properties within Iraq.[40] Human Rights Watch has also documented the destruction of Arab homes (and potentially other non-Kurdish properties) by KRG forces in areas retaken from ISIS, actions that could not be solely attributed to combat damage or clearing IEDs.[111]

Table 2: Reported Land Disputes and Kurdification Allegations in KRG/Disputed Territories (Post-2003 Examples)

Location/Village/Area	Nature of Dispute	Alleged Perpetrator(s)	Status/Outcome (as reported)	Source(s)
Numerous villages (KRI)	Illegal seizure/occupation of villages & farmland	Kurdish individuals/tribes, KRG officials/forces	Ongoing; >130 documented cases	[122]
Dohuk Governorate	Demographic/geographic changes impacting Assyrians	KRG policies/Kurdish settlement	Ongoing, unresolved	[123]
Nineveh Plain (general)	Kurdification policies, attempts to annex to KRI, demographic change pressure	KRG authorities, KDP/PUK	Ongoing political dispute, Assyrian resistance	[85]
Assyrian-owned lands (KRI)	Systematic expropriation	Kurdish individuals, facilitated by KRG authorities/forces	Legal rulings favoring Assyrians unenforced	[122]
Kirkuk	Disputed territory, historical Assyrian/Turkmen presence, Arabization/Kurdification	Ba'ath regime (past), KRG (post-2003 claims)	Contested, currently under Federal control	[85]
Nahla Valley (Dohuk)	Seizure of farmlands	Kurdish individuals allegedly backed	Court orders for return ignored	[122] (Implied)

		by KDP		
Villages near Zakho/Amadiya	Land encroachment	Kurdish individuals/tribes	Persistent issue, lack of KRG enforcement	[122] (Implied)

(Note: This table provides illustrative examples based on allegations in the sources. Specific village names and detailed case outcomes require further investigation beyond the scope of these snippets but are documented by organizations like API and ACE.)

Cultural & Educational Rights:

Formally, the KRG constitution recognizes Syriac (Aramaic) as an official language alongside Kurdish and Arabic in administrative units where speakers constitute a significant population density.[127] There are state-funded Syriac-language schools operating within the KRI (56 reported in 2019).[127] The KRG has also undertaken educational reforms aimed at promoting human rights and gender equity.[128]

However, Assyrian communities report significant challenges in the cultural and educational spheres. There are accusations that Assyrian history and heritage are being marginalized or appropriated within the KRG narrative, with ancient Assyrian sites sometimes presented as Kurdish heritage and Assyrian history neglected in school curricula and museums.[10] City and village names have reportedly been changed to Kurdish versions.[10] Assyrians also report discrimination against their children in schools and limited future employment prospects, contributing to emigration.[10] Many Assyrian villages within the KRI reportedly lack basic infrastructure, including adequate schools, healthcare, roads, and utilities, hindering community development.[122] While religious freedom is generally respected more than in federal Iraq [129], the confiscation of church properties [122] and societal discrimination remain concerns.[10]

This discrepancy between formal rights enshrined in law and the lived experiences reported by Assyrians and documented by NGOs is a central feature of contemporary KRG-Assyrian relations. While the KRG framework provides mechanisms for minority inclusion, persistent allegations regarding the manipulation of political representation, systematic land expropriation with impunity, security force abuses, and cultural marginalization suggest significant shortcomings in governance, rule of law, and the protection of minority rights in practice.

VII. The Contemporary Landscape: Northeast Syria (AANES/Rojava, Post-2011)

The Syrian Civil War, beginning in 2011, created a power vacuum in northeast Syria, allowing the Democratic Union Party (PYD)—a party ideologically linked to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)—and its armed wings, the People's Protection Units (YPG) and Women's Protection Units (YPJ), to establish de facto autonomy.[7] Initially focused on Kurdish-majority areas (often termed Rojava), the administration expanded through military campaigns against ISIS, eventually forming the multi-ethnic Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) alliance with Arab,

Assyrian/Syriac, Turkmen, and other groups.[133] In 2018, the governing structure was formalized as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), encompassing seven regions across a significant portion of northern and eastern Syria.[70]

The AANES project is explicitly based on the ideology of Democratic Confederalism, developed by imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and influenced by thinkers like Murray Bookchin.[7] This ideology positions itself as an alternative to the nation-state model, advocating for decentralized, grassroots democracy, secularism, ecological awareness, gender equality (including a 50% quota for women in governing bodies and male-female co-leadership structures), and the protection of rights for all ethnic and religious components.[7] The AANES Social Contract explicitly recognizes Arabs, Kurds, Syriac-Assyrians, Turkmen, Armenians, Chechens, Muslims, Christians, and Yazidis as constituent peoples.[44]

Assyrian/Syriac Role and Representation:

Assyrian and Syriac communities have participated in the AANES project through various political and military organizations, though not without internal divisions and tensions with the Kurdish leadership.

- **Political Actors:** The Syriac Union Party (SUP) has been a key partner within the AANES structure from early on.[139] Adhering to the related Dawronoye ideology, the SUP aligns closely with the PYD's political vision. In contrast, the older Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO), historically part of the mainstream Syrian opposition to the Ba'ath regime, initially maintained neutrality in the civil war before joining the Syrian National Coalition.[71] The ADO has had a more complex and sometimes adversarial relationship with the PYD/AANES, criticizing certain policies while also engaging in dialogue, sometimes under US mediation.[71] Despite these differences, in January 2025, following the fall of the Assad regime, the ADO and SUP issued a joint statement calling for an inclusive, decentralized, secular, and democratic Syria with constitutional recognition and rights for the Syriac-Assyrian people, including Syriac language rights and political representation.[142]
- **Military and Security Forces:** The Syriac Military Council (Mawtbo Fulḥoyo Suryoyo, MFS) was established in 2013 as the military wing of the SUP.[140] It became a founding component of the SDF in 2015 and has participated in major campaigns against ISIS, including in Raqqa.[134] The MFS also includes a women's unit, the Bethnahrain Women's Protection Forces (HSNB).[141] The Sutoro is an Assyrian/Syriac police and security force, primarily operating in Christian areas of the Jazira region.[141] Initially formed from local protection units, it later saw divisions, with one faction aligning with the Assad regime (known as Sootoro or Gozarto Protection Forces - GPF) and another integrating with the AANES security structure (Asayish) and working closely with the MFS.[72] The Khabour Guards were another local Assyrian militia formed to protect villages along the Khabur River, initially cooperating with MFS but later disbanded.[133]

Table 3: Key Assyrian/Syriac Political and Military Actors in AANES

Organization	Ideology/Affiliati	Primary Role	Relationship with	Key

Name	on		Kurdish Bodies (PYD/SDF/AANES)	Activities/Positions Noted in Sources
Syriac Union Party (SUP)	Dawronoye / AANES-aligned	Political Party	Alliance / Partnership	Key political partner in AANES; advocates democratic confederalism; joint statement with ADO (2025) [139]
Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO)	Assyrian Nationalism / Syrian Opposition	Political Party	Complex: Opposition / Dialogue / Cooperation	Oldest Assyrian party in Syria; member of Syrian National Coalition; critical of some AANES policies; engaged in US-mediated talks with SUP; joint statement (2025) [71]
Syriac Military Council (MFS)	Dawronoye / SUP Military Wing / SDF Component	Military Unit	Integration / Alliance	Founding member of SDF; fought against ISIS (Raqqa, Shaddadi, etc.); includes foreign fighters; HSNB women's unit [134]
Sutoro (AANES-aligned)	Dawronoye / SUP Security Wing / Asayish	Police / Security	Integration / Cooperation	Polices Christian areas (Qamishli, Malikiyah); works with MFS; involved in school closures incident [141]
Khabour Guards	Local Assyrian Defense	Militia (disbanded)	Initial Cooperation (with MFS)	Protected Khabur valley villages; worked with MFS; disbanded after commander's assassination [133]

Governance Issues & Tensions:

Despite the AANES's emphasis on multi-ethnic inclusion, significant tensions and governance challenges persist. Many observers and some constituent groups raise concerns about the continued dominance of the Kurdish PYD within the administration and the SDF's military leadership.[95] The AANES project is viewed by neighboring Turkey, and sometimes by internal critics, as a front for the PKK.[131] This dominance has led to the political marginalization of rival Kurdish groups like the Kurdish National Council (KNC), whose members have faced arrest and exclusion from governance structures.[95]

Relations with the large Arab populations, particularly in regions like Deir Ezzor and Raqqa which were incorporated into AANES after liberation from ISIS, have also been strained.[137] Arab tribes have protested alleged discrimination, inadequate resource sharing (especially oil revenues), and heavy-handed security measures, leading to clashes with SDF forces in 2023.[130] While the AANES has made efforts to decentralize power to Arab-majority areas and address grievances through consultation [149], the ongoing ISIS insurgency, which often targets Arabs collaborating with the AANES, complicates governance and security.[149]

Assyrian and Syriac communities have also experienced friction with the AANES authorities. The most prominent incident was the forced closure of private Assyrian schools run by the Syriac Orthodox Church in 2018.[145] The closures occurred because the schools refused to adopt the new AANES curriculum, which critics argued was Kurdish-nationalist in focus and unsuitable, preferring to maintain the accredited Syrian government curriculum supplemented with Syriac language/religious instruction.[145] The AANES authorities cited the schools' lack of official registration under the new administration and their unapproved curriculum as reasons for closure, deploying Sutoro forces (aligned with AANES) to enforce the decision.[145] This move sparked protests and strong condemnation from the ADO and international Assyrian groups, who saw it as an attack on their cultural autonomy and an attempt to impose PYD ideology.[145] While an agreement was reportedly reached later allowing the schools to reopen [148], the episode highlighted underlying tensions regarding educational policy and minority rights. Other grievances include reports of looting by MFS/Sutoro elements during military operations [146], the prevention of ADO leader Gabriel Gawrieh from entering the KRG via AANES territory [71], and broader concerns about authoritarian practices mirroring those seen in the KRG, sometimes described as "Kurdification".[37]

Human Rights Reporting:

International human rights organizations like Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International, as well as the US State Department, have documented human rights concerns within AANES-controlled territories. Reports highlight arbitrary arrests and detentions, particularly targeting political opponents of the PYD, violations of due process rights, unsolved disappearances and killings, suppression of dissent, and the recruitment and use of child soldiers by YPG/Asayish forces (despite internal regulations forbidding it).[103] HRW documented the use of excessive force, including lethal force, against anti-PYD demonstrators in Amuda in 2013.[103] Amnesty International has raised concerns about conditions in detention facilities holding suspected ISIS members and their families, urging

international action.[155] Reports also detail the devastating impact of conflict, including Turkish military operations, on civilians and infrastructure, leading to displacement and exacerbating humanitarian crises.[154]

These documented issues reveal a tension between the progressive, inclusive ideals espoused by the AANES's Democratic Confederalist ideology and the realities of governance in a complex, conflict-ridden environment. While the AANES framework provides unprecedented formal recognition and participation mechanisms for groups like the Syriac-Assyrians [44], concerns about Kurdish dominance, authoritarian practices, specific policy clashes like the school closures, and human rights violations indicate ongoing challenges in translating these ideals into consistent practice on the ground. The relationship between the Kurdish-led administration and the Assyrian/Syriac community, therefore, remains a work in progress, characterized by both cooperation within the SDF/AANES structure and significant points of friction.

VIII. Synthesis: Enduring Patterns of Conflict and Cooperation

The long and complex history of Kurdish-Assyrian relations reveals recurring patterns of both conflict and cooperation, shaped by internal dynamics, state policies, and regional geopolitics. Understanding these enduring themes is crucial for contextualizing the present and anticipating future trajectories.

Recurring Themes of Conflict:

1. **Land and Resource Competition:** From ancient pastoral rights disputes [3] to 19th-century appropriations facilitated by the Hamidiye system [6], and into the contemporary era with systematic land expropriation allegations ("Kurdification") in the KRG and disputed territories of Iraq [10], competition over land, water, and resources has been a persistent driver of tension. The strategic and economic value of areas like Kirkuk and the Nineveh Plain, rich in oil and historically inhabited by multiple groups, makes them focal points of contention between Kurdish aspirations and the rights of other indigenous communities like Assyrians, Turkmens, and Yazidis.[87]
2. **Political Dominance vs. Autonomy:** A central theme revolves around struggles for political power and self-governance. Historically, this manifested in Ottoman strategies using Kurdish forces against independent Assyrian tribes [3] and Assyrian anxieties about being subsumed into larger political entities after WWI.[34] In the contemporary period, this pattern continues with Assyrian concerns about genuine representation within Kurdish-dominated structures in both the KRG (quota manipulation issues [107]) and AANES (PYD dominance, policy imposition like school closures [95]). Assyrian demands for local autonomy (e.g., a Nineveh Plain province) often clash with Kurdish regional ambitions.[115]
3. **Historical Grievances and Contested Narratives:** The memory of violence, particularly the Seyfo and earlier events like the Badr Khan massacres, casts a long

shadow over the relationship.[4] Assyrian collective memory often emphasizes Kurdish participation in these atrocities alongside the Ottoman state, fostering deep-seated mistrust, especially within the diaspora.[10] Differing interpretations of these historical events, coupled with denial or minimization by some parties, hinder reconciliation and perpetuate suspicion.

4. **Security Dilemmas and Mistrust:** Security measures taken by one group are frequently perceived as threatening by the other. The British use of Assyrian Levies against Kurdish revolts created lasting enmity.[62] Conversely, the expansion of Peshmerga control into disputed territories, the alleged disarming of Assyrians before the ISIS attack, and the actions of KRG security forces generate fear and mistrust among Assyrians.[115] The presence of multiple, often rival, security actors (Kurdish, Assyrian, Iraqi federal, PMF) in contested areas like the Nineveh Plain creates a volatile environment.[113]
5. **Instrumentalization by External Powers:** Throughout history, ruling states and external powers have often exploited or exacerbated Kurdish-Assyrian tensions for strategic gain. The Ottomans used Kurdish forces to subdue Assyrians.[2] The British employed Assyrian Levies partly to control Kurdish areas.[63] Ba'athist Iraq pitted groups against each other and used collaborators (*jash*).[90] Contemporary regional powers like Turkey and Iran also play a role in shaping dynamics within the KRG and AANES, often viewing Kurdish autonomy with suspicion and potentially impacting minority groups caught in the middle.[79]

Recurring Themes of Cooperation:

1. **Shared Minority Status and Joint Advocacy:** As non-state peoples often marginalized within larger nation-states, Kurds and Assyrians have sometimes found common cause in advocating for minority rights or opposing oppressive regimes.[4] This was evident in joint petitions to the League of Nations [41] and participation in broader opposition movements. The Kurdo-Armenian accord at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, facilitated by Şerif Pasha, suggests potential for similar inter-minority cooperation.[50]
2. **Alliances Against Common Enemies:** The most significant instances of cooperation have occurred when facing a powerful common adversary. The alliance between Assyrian groups (notably ADM) and Kurdish parties (KDP, PUK) within the Iraqi opposition against Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime is a prime example, involving joint military struggle and political coordination within the Iraqi-Kurdistan Front.[4] Shared political ideologies, such as secularism or leftist principles, sometimes facilitated these alliances.[4] More controversially, some Assyrian nationalist groups have cooperated with the PKK against Turkey, viewing the Turkish state as a common enemy due to its denial of the Seyfo and suppression of minority rights.[42]
3. **Joint Security Efforts:** Beyond broad alliances, specific instances of tactical or structural military cooperation exist. The integration of the Syriac Military Council (MFS) into the SDF alongside the YPG in Syria is a key contemporary example.[134] During the

fight against ISIS in Iraq, NPU forces cooperated with both Peshmerga and Iraqi Security Forces.[114] The historical precedent of the Hakkari emirate, where Assyrians provided military service in exchange for rights, also points to possibilities for shared security arrangements.[3]

4. **Formal Recognition and Cultural Initiatives (Limited):** In recent decades, some Kurdish political entities have formally recognized Assyrian identity and granted certain cultural rights, representing a departure from previous assimilationist state policies. Examples include the KRG constitution's recognition of Syriac [107], the establishment of Syriac schools in the KRI [127], Kurdish-run municipalities in Turkey publishing materials in Aramaic [39], and the AANES adopting Syriac as an official language and guaranteeing representation for components.[44] However, as noted previously, the implementation and sincerity of these measures are often questioned by Assyrians due to contradictory actions like land grabbing or school closures.[10]

Analysis of Patterns:

Conflict appears most prevalent during periods of state formation or transformation (Ottoman centralization, post-WWI nation-building, post-2003 Iraq, Syrian Civil War) when competition for power, territory, and resources intensifies, and when central authorities actively manipulate intercommunal relations. Competing nationalisms – Kurdish aspirations for autonomy or independence versus Assyrian desires for security and self-governance in their historic areas, often within existing state frameworks – frequently clash, particularly over land and political control in shared territories.

Cooperation tends to emerge in response to overwhelming external threats, particularly from highly repressive state actors like Ba'athist Iraq. Shared political ideologies or pragmatic military necessity can also foster alliances, as seen in the Iraqi opposition or the formation of the SDF. However, these alliances are often tactical and fragile, susceptible to breakdown once the common threat recedes or when underlying conflicts over resources, power, and historical grievances resurface.

A persistent feature across different periods and regions is the asymmetry in the relationship. Due to larger population numbers and more developed political and military movements, Kurdish groups have often set the agenda, particularly in the modern era.[4] Assyrians frequently find themselves in a reactive position, needing to negotiate their security, rights, and political space in relation to Kurdish ambitions and power structures, whether in the KRG or AANES. This inherent imbalance shapes the dynamics of both conflict and cooperation, often placing Assyrians in a more vulnerable position and requiring them to make difficult strategic choices between alignment, resistance, or seeking support from other actors (Baghdad, international community).

IX. Conclusion and Recommendations

The relationship between Kurds and Assyrians is a microcosm of the Middle East's intricate ethnic and political landscape, characterized by deep historical roots, shared geography, and a complex interplay of coexistence and conflict spanning millennia. From ancient Mesopotamia through Ottoman rule, the trauma of the Seyfo genocide, the divisions imposed

by modern nation-states, the repression under Ba'athist regimes, and the turbulent contemporary era in Iraq and Syria, their interactions have been shaped by both internal dynamics and the heavy hand of external powers and state policies.

Key findings underscore the persistent nature of certain conflict drivers: competition over land and resources, struggles for political dominance versus minority autonomy, the toxic legacy of historical violence (particularly the Seyfo), and the manipulation of intercommunal tensions by state actors seeking to consolidate control. Simultaneously, cooperation has emerged, often driven by shared experiences of marginalization, alliances against common oppressors (like Ba'athist Iraq), pragmatic security needs (as in the fight against ISIS), and occasionally, shared political ideals. However, the relationship remains fundamentally asymmetrical, with larger Kurdish populations and political movements often creating contexts to which Assyrians must react, navigating difficult choices regarding security, political alignment, and cultural survival.

The analysis reveals significant divergences between the situations in Iraqi Kurdistan and Northeast Syria. While the KRG offers formal recognition and representation mechanisms, these are widely criticized by Assyrians as ineffective or manipulated, overshadowed by pervasive issues of land expropriation ("Kurdification"), security force intimidation, and lack of rule of law enforcement. In Northeast Syria, the AANES project espouses a more explicitly inclusive, multi-ethnic ideology based on Democratic Confederalism, integrating Syriac-Assyrian political and military groups into its structure. Yet, concerns about Kurdish dominance, authoritarian tendencies, and specific policy clashes (like the 2018 school closures) demonstrate a gap between ideals and practice, highlighting ongoing challenges in realizing genuine power-sharing and minority rights protection. The legacy of British Mandate policies in Iraq, particularly the use of Assyrian Levies and unfulfilled promises of autonomy, demonstrably contributed to post-independence vulnerability culminating in the Simele Massacre. Similarly, the framework of the Treaty of Lausanne enabled decades of state-sponsored assimilation and denial of rights for both Kurds and Assyrians across the region.

The future outlook remains uncertain. Regional instability, the agendas of state actors (Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Iran), the potential withdrawal or shifting priorities of international powers (US, Russia), and unresolved internal issues (KRG land disputes, AANES governance challenges, KDP-PUK rivalry) will continue to impact Kurdish-Assyrian relations. Building a more stable and just future requires addressing the root causes of conflict and strengthening mechanisms for cooperation and mutual respect.

Based on the findings of this report, the following recommendations are proposed:

For the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Iraqi Federal Government:

1. **Address Land Disputes and Enforce Rule of Law:** Establish transparent, independent mechanisms with representation from affected communities to adjudicate land disputes in the KRI and disputed territories. Crucially, ensure that legal rulings and official decrees confirming Assyrian (and other minority) land ownership are consistently enforced, holding accountable those engaged in illegal occupation or facilitation thereof.[122]
2. **Reform Minority Political Representation:** Revise electoral laws for the KRG

parliament (if quotas are reinstated) and potentially provincial councils to ensure genuine representation, possibly by restricting voting for quota seats to members of the respective minority communities, thereby reducing the influence of major parties over minority seats.[107] Foster independent minority political participation.

3. **Ensure Equitable Resource Distribution and Services:** Guarantee fair allocation of government budgets and public services (infrastructure, healthcare, education) to minority-populated areas within the KRI and disputed territories, addressing reports of neglect.[122]
4. **Support Local Security and Governance:** Recognize and support legitimate, locally-rooted security forces trusted by minority communities, such as the NPU in the Nineveh Plain, integrating them effectively into the state security structure while respecting local command where appropriate.[115] Empower local administrations in minority areas as constitutionally permitted.
5. **Promote Inclusive Education and Historical Narratives:** Revise educational curricula to accurately reflect the history and contributions of all Iraq's constituent peoples, including Assyrians, Yazidis, and Turkmens, countering narratives that marginalize or appropriate minority heritage.[10]

For the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) / Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF):

6. **Strengthen Multi-Ethnic Governance in Practice:** Translate the ideals of the Social Contract into tangible power-sharing by ensuring meaningful participation and decision-making authority for non-Kurdish components (Arabs, Syriac-Assyrians, etc.) at all levels of administration.[94]
7. **Protect Cultural and Educational Autonomy:** Engage in genuine dialogue with community representatives (including ADO, SUP, church leaders) to resolve disputes over educational policies and curricula, respecting the right of communities to maintain their distinct cultural and linguistic heritage.[142]
8. **Uphold Human Rights and Ensure Accountability:** Implement robust mechanisms for investigating and ensuring accountability for human rights abuses committed by SDF, Asayish, or affiliated forces, including arbitrary detention, mistreatment, and suppression of dissent. Adhere strictly to international standards regarding due process and the prohibition of child soldiers.[103]
9. **Foster Inter-Communal Trust:** Actively work to address grievances and build trust with Arab tribal communities and Assyrian/Syriac groups through consistent dialogue, equitable resource management, and transparent governance.

For the International Community (UN, US, EU, Relevant States):

10. **Support Minority Security and Governance:** Provide technical and financial support for the development of effective local governance and trusted, vetted local security forces in minority homelands like the Nineveh Plain (Iraq) and the Khabur Valley (Syria), conditioning support on adherence to human rights standards.[115]
11. **Monitor and Advocate for Minority Rights:** Consistently monitor the human rights situation for Assyrians and other minorities in both the KRG and AANES territories,

publicly reporting on violations and engaging KRG and AANES authorities to address abuses and discriminatory practices.[111]

12. **Condition Aid and Political Engagement:** Link diplomatic engagement, security assistance, and development aid to the KRG and AANES with demonstrable progress on protecting minority rights, enforcing the rule of law (especially regarding land disputes), ensuring genuine political participation, and accountability for abuses.
13. **Facilitate Dialogue and Reconciliation:** Support initiatives aimed at fostering inter-communal dialogue, reconciliation, and mutual understanding between Kurdish, Assyrian, Arab, Yazidi, and other communities in northern Iraq and northeast Syria.
14. **Promote Transitional Justice and Historical Recognition:** Support efforts towards transitional justice, including accountability for past atrocities (Seyfo, Simele, Anfal) and promoting historical recognition and education as a basis for preventing future violence.

For Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society:

15. **Document and Report:** Continue rigorous documentation of human rights violations, land disputes, and discriminatory practices affecting minorities in the region.[122]
16. **Support Cultural Preservation:** Aid local efforts focused on Assyrian/Syriac language revitalization, mother-tongue education, and the preservation of cultural heritage sites.[124]
17. **Promote Inter-Communal Dialogue:** Create platforms and support initiatives that bring together representatives from different ethnic and religious communities to foster understanding and address shared challenges.

Addressing the deep-seated issues underpinning Kurdish-Assyrian relations requires sustained commitment from local actors, national governments, and the international community. Only through genuine efforts to uphold human rights, ensure equitable governance, address historical grievances, and enforce the rule of law can a foundation for more peaceful and just coexistence be built in this historically contested region.

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(Note: A full bibliography listing all sources [1] would be compiled here in a standard academic format, such as Chicago or APA, based on the full details of each source if available beyond the provided snippets. The snippets themselves provide URLs which could form the basis of this list.)

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