

## CHAPTER SIX

### DEATH THROES FOR INDIGENOUS CHRISTIANS IN THE MIDDLE EAST: ASSYRIANS LIVING UNDER THE ISLAMIC STATE (IS)

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Christianity emerged in the Middle East, became a majority religion, and thereafter expanded into various geographical directions. Although the faith suffered a decline under Arab Muslim rule already in the eleventh century, the region nonetheless remained an important spiritual centre of Christianity until about the thirteenth century. Today, however, local Christians express fear about the end of their existence in this region, their ancestral home. This fear is also shared by scholars and experts who ask whether Christianity has a future in the Middle East (Jenkins 2004, Tamcke 2016).

In the collective memory of Assyrians<sup>1</sup>, their traumatic past – transmitted through generations – continues to play a central role in their life (Atto 2017). One could say that each generation has experienced a form of continued dispossession, accumulated in the inherited memory of individuals. For example, together with Armenians and Greeks, Assyrians worldwide began 2014 with preparations for the commemoration of the centennial of the 1915 genocide of the Christians in Ottoman Turkey. Yet in 2014 they were confronted with yet another genocide; another systematic and intentional attempt to destroy their people, this time occurring in the present. Today, Christian communities in the Middle East are targeted by the Islamic State (IS) and other radical militant Islamist groups. Areas occupied by IS in Syria and

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<sup>1</sup> Assyrians is used here as a cross-denominational name for the various oriental churches in the Syriac tradition; it can be used synonymous with Syriacs and Arameans.

Iraq have now been entirely cleansed of Christians, while those living in Lebanon and Turkey along the border with Syria and Iraq follow unfolding developments with great fear. Hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced from what they consider to be their homeland.<sup>2</sup> Until recently the genocide of 1915 may have been experienced as an abstract event in history for the youngest generations of Assyrians who were born in the Western diaspora. Witnessing what is happening to their people now, Assyrians also invoke deep-rooted inherited memories of the 1915 genocide. The current genocide by IS has served to increase their awareness both of a persecuted past and of an unknown future, both in the Middle East and in the diaspora.

This chapter examines the predicament of Christians in the Middle East, specifically focusing on the Assyrian community who have been forcibly displaced into extensive patterns of migration and asylum-seeking. It discusses how members of the world's first Christian communities feel their existence to be threatened in their historical homeland and how they deal with the dilemma over 'leaving' or 'staying' in the region in an attempt to save not only their individual lives but also their existence as a people with historical roots in the Middle East. After a short account of the position of Christians in the modern history of Turkey, Syria and Iraq, the chapter discusses the consequences of the rise of IS for local Christians in Syria and Iraq. The last part of the chapter addresses some popular and prevalent discourses surrounding Christians' strategies for survival. This chapter is based on the analysis of newspaper articles, television reports and individual interviews conducted by myself, either by phone or during fieldwork conducted until February 2017. Born into the group under study as

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<sup>2</sup> Assyrians do not define their homeland in terms of the modern national borders of the Middle East which were decided after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, but rather in terms of the historical rootedness of their people in the whole Syro-Mesopotamian region and beyond, while simultaneously stressing northern Mesopotamia to be the centre of their homeland today (Atto, forthcoming).

well as raised in a European diaspora context as the child of refugees, I am undoubtedly writing from an engaged insider's perspective. This closeness has required a reflexive approach regarding my own position as well as to the sources studied in the media, especially those generated by protagonists battling for survival.

### **Post 1915: Persecution Continues**

As traumatised survivors of a genocide who had lost more than half of their people, in the post -WWI period, Assyrians' most urgent need was sheer physical survival. Their property and their cultural heritage had been destroyed or re-appropriated and they consequently became increasingly less visible in society (Gaunt, Atto and Barthoma, 2017). Characteristic of the attitude of survivors in the decades thereafter has been their attempt to remain anonymous and live a more isolated life; these are classic survival mechanisms of a minority living with a prevalent mistrust on the part of the majority society. Their religious leaders have often tried to convince community members to obey the ruling governments and regimes, which often meant succumbing to assimilation policies of Turkification, Arabisation and more recently the Kurdification of their collective identity. These threats to their survival in Muslim majority societies have often made Assyrians living in these countries more conscious of their Christian identity and determined to self-consciously maintain it. In practice, this often meant explicitly supporting dictatorial regimes in return for being tolerated as Christians. This can be seen as a continuation of their position as *millet* (religious community) in the Ottoman Empire and under earlier Arab Muslim rulers where Christians had to pay the *jizya* tax and live according to certain regulations in exchange for 'protection' (toleration), meaning living as second or third class loyal citizens.

From the late nineteenth century onwards, Assyrian families also emigrated to North America in search of safety and survival. It is common that members of successive generations were all born in different countries. For example, this is the case for the family of Samer Kefargis, an Assyrian from the village Tel Goran on the Khabur river in Syria who escaped IS (Henk and Susebach 2016). His grandfather was born in the Ottoman Empire, his father in today's Iraq, he himself in Syria, and now he has fled to Australia where the next generation will be born. Samer says: 'You can't get farther away than this. With the next expulsion we will have to go to the moon.' Assyrians often lament the number of times they have had to flee and start life afresh elsewhere.

Until the 1960s, the migration of Assyrians from the Middle East was mostly directed towards North and South America. This changed in the 1960s when the first Assyrians made use of the *Gastarbeiter* system to settle in Germany and in 1967 the first group of Assyrians from Lebanon was invited to settle in Sweden as stateless refugees (Atto 2011). Thereafter, more than 300,000 Assyrians settled in Europe, arriving from Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Iran. Hundreds of thousands of others went to Australia and America. They chose to emigrate to Western countries which they considered 'Christian' and by whom they expected to be welcomed with open arms as co-religionists, based on their assumption that religion in the West had the same role in society as in the Middle East. However, after their settlement they came to understand that religion in the West played a profoundly different role in society and that policy makers in particular did not favour them more than any other immigrant group just because they were Christians. And in Europe their oppression in the Middle East was not recognized in juridical terms, reflected in the fact that only very few received the political refugee status and were mostly allowed to stay for 'humanitarian reasons' (Atto 2011). All this has resulted in a situation whereby the majority of Assyrians have

established themselves in the West, while only a tiny minority remain in the Middle East.

### **Christians as Scapegoats in Society**

Being among the most vulnerable groups in society, any situation of crisis in the Middle East has had dire consequences for the local Christians. To mention only a few recent examples, the situation of the Christians deteriorated drastically after the two Iraqi wars (1991 and 2003), the war in Syria (since 2011), and especially after the rise of IS. However, even before the rise of IS, the wars in Iraq and Syria had driven out many Christians from their homes, either through direct or indirect threats and fear. After the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, local Christians began to be targeted, being blamed in particular for aiding the Americans. On the Sunday of 1 August 2004 six churches were simultaneously bombed in Baghdad and Mosul and nearly thirty other churches throughout the country. In Iraq alone, between June 2004 and August 2013, 118 churches were bombed or attacked (*Genocide against Christians in the Middle East*, 2016: 194-199). While the Christian population in Iraq was estimated to stand at 1.4 million in 2003, in 2015 this figure had dropped to 275,000 (ibid. 223). In Syria the number of Christians drastically decreased from 1.5 million in 2011 to 500,000 in 2016. I now discuss three geographical areas where Assyrians fell victim to IS and/or to majority groups involved in the on-going wars in the Middle East.

#### *Mosul and Nineveh Plain*

In June 2014 the local Christians in the Nineveh Plain and Mosul as well as newly-settled refugees from elsewhere were overwhelmed by the destructive occupation of the city of Mosul. The Iraqi army had abandoned its positions as soon as IS overrun the

city and on 29 June 2014, Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi declared the existence of a caliphate, an Islamic State with himself as the reigning caliph. The emergence and development of IS is often explained in relation to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the marginalization of Sunnis from power which in turn led to the radicalization of this group as well as developing a policy vacuum in which IS seized the chance to flourish (Haykel 2015, USCIRF Annual Report 2015). While the initial aims of IS were to topple the regimes in Iraq and Syria, world conquest and the establishment of Islamic rule everywhere became its ultimate goals (Haykel 2015).

Ordinary people were not ready for the rapid military successes of IS and nor were they prepared to take speedy action needed to save their lives and belongings. The manner in which people fell victim to jihadi warfare depended mostly on their religious affiliation and their interpretation of Islam. In the newly conquered areas IS forced all people to live under the rule of a Salafist interpretation of Islamic law dating to the seventh century. The Jihadists painted the Arabic letter 'n' for Nasrani (Christian) in red paint on homes and other property of Christians and announced on 14 July 2014, in mosques and on the radio in Mosul, that if Christians wanted to continue their life in the caliphate, they would have to convert to Islam, pay the special tax the Jizya (as instructed in Chapter 9 'al-Tawba' verse 29 in the Koran) and consider themselves altogether subdued.<sup>3</sup> Otherwise they should leave the area five days later – by 19 July at noon - or else be killed by the sword (AINA, 17.07.2014).

Following this declaration, Christians fled en masse with nothing more than their clothes to the Assyrian villages in the Nineveh Plain (north east of Mosul), later

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<sup>3</sup> In reality, IS was not interested in the Jizya but aimed at the elimination of non-Muslims. See: *Genocide against Christians in the Middle East*, pp. 12-13. See also: 'An open letter to John Kerry: Genocide against Assyrian and other Iraqi and Syrian Christians in ISIS-controlled territory', pp. 17-21, *Philos Project*.

spreading further into the Kurdish-governed area in northern Iraq, finding shelter in churches, community centres, unoccupied buildings, or living outside until tents could be provided. They lost everything in a matter of days and in some cases, of hours.

Patriarch Louis Sako of the Chaldean Church reminded the world in an interview: 'For the first time in the history of Iraq, Mosul is now empty of Christians' (*RT*, 19.07.2014). The 30,000 Assyrians still living in Mosul after the American invasion in 2003 were expelled; it was the first time in recorded Christian history that no masses were held in Mosul.

After Mosul, IS also captured Qaraqosh, the largest Christian city in Iraq on 6 August 2014, followed by other towns and villages in the Nineveh Plain. The Kurdish peshmerga who were in charge of defending Qaraqosh and the Nineveh Plain had retreated, as the Iraqi army had done earlier in Mosul. Expelled Christians from Mosul were followed by about 200,000 more Christians from Qaraqosh and the villages in the Nineveh Plain east and north of Mosul in early August, without being able to defend themselves as they were not allowed to establish their own militias. On 14 July 2014, the inhabitants of Baghdeda (Qaraqosh), Karamles and Bertella (all inhabited by Christians) had been requested by the security committee in Al-Hamdaniyya [Baghdede/Qaraqosh] to surrender their weapons (*AINA*, 14.08.2014). If they had failed to cooperate, they would be 'subjected to the harshest disciplinary actions'. Their disarmament happened only weeks before IS attacked them.

Assyrians worldwide received this news with great sadness and consternation. In the social media, the Arabic letter for 'n' (*Nasrani*, Arabic for 'Christian') became the profile of many Facebook-users as well as used as a hashtag on Twitter to express solidarity with the expelled Christians. In further acts of solidarity with their people in the Middle East, Assyrians organised demonstrations and flash mobs in order to call for

the attention of the international community to the acts of IS. And to meet the refugees' immediate needs after fleeing, existing<sup>4</sup> and newly established<sup>5</sup> Assyrian foundations in the diaspora initiated humanitarian actions such as sending clothes, food and medical aid to the displaced refugees. But solidarity and the provided material help did not change the bitter reality of the victims. Displaced individuals interviewed six weeks after they were expelled from their homes expressed anger and disbelief about what had befallen them as the indigenous population of Mosul. An expelled woman said:

Yes, they expelled us from our original land, from our original land! They told us: "Go away! This is not your land. Go to your Christian people and to your pastors. Let them feed you, shelter you and give you homes." He said to me and my sister: "Bring your money and give it to us. If not, each one of you will be shot in the head"... Why this injustice? What have we done to you? What have all these Christians done?... This is just like the Lord Jesus said: "I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves." ... (Ishtar TV, 23.04.2014)

This reference to Jesus words is very common among Christians in the Middle East when discussing their socio-political situation. This expresses both their vulnerability amidst the socio-political context in the Middle East and simultaneously stress their faith as followers of Jesus.

### *Villages on the Khabur River*

IS also targeted 35 Assyrian villages along the Khabur river in Syria, which were built by Assyrians who originate from the Hakkari mountains in southeast Turkey, survivors of the 1915 genocide. First they had fled to Iraq when in August 1933, a year after the British handed over the rule to the Iraqis, 600 Assyrians were massacred and about 60

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<sup>4</sup> *Christian Aid Program Northern Iraq* (CAPNI, <http://www.capni-iraq.org/index.php/en/>), *Hatune Foundation* (<http://hatunefoundation.com/international/>), *Assyrier Utan Gränser* (<http://assyrierutangranser.se>), *Assyrian Aid Society* (<http://www.assyrianaid.org>), (all viewed 18.3.2016).

<sup>5</sup> Among them: *A Demand For Action* (<http://www.ademandforaction.com>), *We are Christians* (<http://wearechristians.de/we-are-n/>), *Save our Souls* ([https://www.facebook.com/1915.de/info/?tab=page\\_info](https://www.facebook.com/1915.de/info/?tab=page_info)), (all viewed 18.3.2016).



Assyrian villages north of Mosul were pillaged by the Iraqi army in what has become known as the Simele massacre (Joseph 2000, 196-197).<sup>6</sup> This massacre caused many Assyrians to leave Iraq and establish settlements for the victimized Assyrians at the Khabur river in French mandated Syria. Eight decades after their settlement, IS overran their villages in February 2015. IS forces killed nine of the Assyrians who were defending their villages and took 253 people hostage. Of the abducted, 3 men were killed; their deaths were recorded on a video distributed in the media on 23 September 2015 (*AINA*, 08.10.2015). In the same video the jihadists requested ransom money for the release of the remaining hostages. Since then, most of the Khabur hostages have been released in exchange for paying millions of dollars collected by the Assyrian community worldwide.

In their long article, Henk and Susebach (2016), journalists of the German magazine *Der Zeit* followed the routes and the stories of the people who managed to flee IS from the village Tel Goran on the Khabur, illustrating what IS jihadist war has meant for a community in a small village, for Christianity in the region, and for their future as a people. The inhabitants of this village can now be found in the four corners of the world. This dispersion is representative of these people's situation and will therefore have long term effects on their future.

### *Kamishli*

Another location where Christians have been specifically targeted is the city of Kamishli in the Al-Hasakah province in north Syria. The people had not felt the IS threat as much as in other areas of the war-torn country. This is largely because alongside the Syrian

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<sup>6</sup> Assyrian sources mention 3000 victims of the Simele massacre. The lawyer Raphael Lemkin coined the term 'genocide' and initiated the genocide convention after he became informed of the Christian genocide in 1915 and the Simele massacre in 1933.

army, the Kurdish YPG (People's Protection Units) has been defending the area in great numbers with the aim of forming a Kurdish autonomous region.

After WWI, Assyrians in Turkey who had survived the 1915 genocide crossed the border into Syria to live under French mandate as a Christian power. Kamishli was then a desert-like area. Assyrians consider themselves to be the founders of Kamishli and to have shaped its twentieth-century history. Although many had already emigrated before the war started in 2011, from the around 35,000 remaining Assyrians in Kamishli before the war, only 7,000 continued to live there at the beginning of 2016, of which about 80 per cent are over the age of 50. For the remaining Christians in this city, fear for their lives increased when on the evening of 30 December 2015 three bombs exploded at the same time in the centre of their neighbourhood *Al Wusta*, where 90 per cent of the inhabitants are Christians of different denominations. The explosions caused 16 deaths and left more than 30 badly injured. The media reported IS responsibility but the local Christians themselves doubted this and several speculations about other motives and possible scenarios began to circulate. Two more bombs exploded in the same neighbourhood on 12 January 2016 and killed another four Christians. On 7 March 2016, another bomb exploded outside the Mor Gabriel school, a few minutes before 300 Christian pupils were about to leave for home (*Assyria TV*, 07.03.2016). Although the blast caused injuries to only five people, fear within the community increased. Souleman Youssef, who was interviewed by Assyria TV, said that these events should be understood in line with the earlier explosions; as a message to his people [‘that you should leave this place’]. He also asked why their [Christian] neighbourhood and not the other neighbourhoods of Kamishli were under attack, and expressed his alarm that not one ambulance showed up after any of the explosions in the Al Wusta neighbourhood. The crimes committed by IS against religious minorities in Iraq and Syria have been

recognized as an act of genocide by different international institutions and governments, among them: US Government (*CNN Politics*, 17.03.2016), US House of Representatives (*The Washington Post*, 15.03.2016) and the European Parliament (2016/2529 RSP, 04.02.2016). But what does this recognition mean for the future of Assyrians in the homeland? So far, no specific action has been taken regarding any of the victim groups.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Future**

Assyrians greeted the rise of IS with a bitter surprise. Considering themselves a 'stateless people', Assyrians in the homeland and in the diaspora have provided immediate help to the displaced; a population which is exhausted, terrified and concerned about its future existence. The forcibly displaced Assyrians in the Nineveh Plain 'fear that they will never return to their ancestral lands, and that the Christian presence in the region might disappear' (Windsor 2015). In Tur Abdin (south eastern Turkey) the local Christians saw the latest developments as part of a seamless history of persecution since 1915, fearing that the persecution by IS would become the last Sayfo (literally: 'sword') genocide, which brings to an end 2000 years of Christianity in the region.<sup>8</sup> In a 2013 documentary Chaldean Patriarch Louis Sako answered the reporter's question: 'Do you see any future in Iraq' with: 'I am very afraid about the future; it is not clear...' Below I shall discuss several options facing Assyrians regarding their struggle for continued existence in the Middle East.

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<sup>7</sup> Ewelina Ochab, author of *Never Again* (2016) has documented the ongoing genocide of Christians and other religious minorities in Syria and Iraq and highlights the failing of the international community to end the carnage. It provides a blueprint for adapting international laws on genocide to become an adequate response to terrorist groups like ISIS.

<sup>8</sup> Communication with people in Tur Abdin (2015).

## *Stay and Resist*

A small number of people, whom I shall dub the idealists, aim at staying and resisting IS' efforts to erase them. This stance is also shared by their religious leaders who invoke potent discourses of ancient indigeneity of Christianity in the Middle East. They back this up by appealing to the international community, and especially to Christians worldwide, to aid them both with humanitarian and political support in order to ensure this. Assyrian organisations have, for example, lobbied their governments in the West to recognise IS acts as 'genocide' and to empower their people politically to sustain themselves in the homeland.<sup>9</sup> They prefer to risk being attacked themselves while defending their homeland than leave without having tried to defend it. Emarceen Youssef, a young victim of the Kamishli bomb blast of 30 December 2015 said in an interview four days after he lost one of his legs that 'the message of the perpetrators ... is very clear: they want us to leave so they can take over our land and property. But what has happened has strengthened us and not weakened us.' (*Assyria TV*, 03.01.2016). Emarceen's father, Souleman Youssef, expressed his opinion in the same interview:

... our people in Kamishli were those who built and developed Kamishli after a genocide [1915 in Ottoman Turkey] ... We as a people should be proud that these survivors did not stay in Turkey to only mourn their deaths but they came and built up Kamishli together with the Armenian survivors. ... and we should do the same [now]; we should stay and continue developing it. And keep hope for the future ... and not only cry.

Mr Youssef was well aware that his message was being heard by community members worldwide, from whom he received many phone calls after the bomb blasts, and explained that 'their reaction showed that they are with us here in the homeland'.

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<sup>9</sup> One such initiative is the letter sent on behalf of several organizations to United States Secretary of State John Kerry in support of the Department of State's investigation of IS's treatment of Assyrian Christians in Syria and Iraq can be considered 'genocide', 'An open letter to John Kerry: genocide against Assyrian and other Iraqi and Syrian Christians in ISIS-controlled territory', *Philos Project*.

Referring to the strength of earlier ancestral genocide survivors and the possibility of yet again establishing a new life in a desert-like place, he was consciously transmitting an inspiring message of hope. Such messages are also posted on Facebook by displaced Assyrians from their places of refuge, sometimes only a few kilometres away from IS; they make music and joyously celebrate their secular and Christian holidays and develop educative projects for displaced children and students.<sup>10</sup>

Christian leaders have also strongly supported their members in attempts to stay in the region by visiting them at times of urgent crises, by addressing their problems in the media and offering financial help. Patriarch Ephrem II declared in his Christmas message (*Assyria TV*, 23.12.2015) that ‘despite the deaths and the killings which are taking place everywhere we should keep our faith and hope in the ancestral homeland’. A week thereafter, in his statement after the December Kamishli bomb blasts, he specifically addressed his church members in Kamishli:

You refused humiliation and submission [conversion to Islam] and you did not accept a substitute for your land [emigration]. We believe that these terrorist attacks will not separate you from your land; these explosions, however violent and bloody they may be, will not uproot you from your country. (*Syriac Patriarchate*, 31.12.2015)

Before IS attacked in 2013, Patriarch Louis Sako of the Chaldean Church answered the question of a reporter ‘then why do you stay?’ with ‘I think we should be courageous to persist, to persevere... to give up our life, to be martyred. We are ready’ (*Iraqi Christians in Peril; Faith Matters*, 5.2.2013). Interviewed three years later, he remained as persistent, avowing that ‘nothing can ever expel Christianity from the Middle East,

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<sup>10</sup> See for example a picture posted by *Shlama Foundation*: <https://www.facebook.com/shlamafoundation/posts/867327006711726:0> (viewed 19.3.2016); and Assyrians singing a secular song about Alqosh during Palm Sunday celebrations in Alqosh (2016), which was shared more than 800 times within two days: <https://www.facebook.com/page.khoranat.alqosh/videos/1721931478028634/?pnref=story> (viewed 21.3.2016). See Etuti.org for educational projects by Etuti Institute: <http://www.etuti.org/education/> (viewed 30.01.2017)

despite all the difficulties, as long as there are Christians determined to stay in the land of their birth, proud of their identity and their mission in this part of the world.' (*Official Vatican Network* 2016).

While enduring the challenges of survival in the Middle East, many Christians in this region, including their religious leaders, express their disappointment with Western governments who have not supported them politically in their attempts to stay in the homeland. A frequent criticism made by Assyrians is that political debates about the Middle East typically ignore Christians. They view mainstream Western politicians as having a 'politically correct' when avoiding the use of religious categories as is thought befitting to a secular modern state. Moreover, Assyrians observe that when Western politicians do intervene in the Middle East for the sake of their own geopolitical interests, they nonetheless avoid speaking about persecuted Christians, even if the fact is that they are persecuted because of their religion (CRUX, 02.02.2017). The expelled Archbishop of Mosul lamented in an interview:

The people are just being thrown out, as if they do not belong anywhere. There is no more humanity in this world. ... And all those [countries] who say they have human rights, they are all liars! ... They were all watching what was happening to this people for the last three months and no one came to help. ... we are screaming that the people are lying in the streets, help us before winter and rain arrive, ... (*Suroyo TV*, 03.11.2014)

While the involvement of the West is more at economic and political level with the majority groups in the Middle East, local Christians believe that the negative consequences of these politics bounce back on the local Christians. This is one of the reasons why Patriarch Louis Sako of the Chaldean Church has expressed himself negatively<sup>11</sup> against the US's President Donald Trump's policy to ban nationals of seven

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<sup>11</sup> See for a slightly different voice from Chaldean Archbishop Bashar Matti Warda in Erbil (CRUX, 2017) and Samuel Tadros (2017).

Muslim-majority countries from entering the United States for at least 90 days (*CNN Politics*, 28.01.2017) and the leeway for the Department of Homeland Security to prioritize refugee claims "on the basis of religious based persecution" as long as the person applying for refugee status is "a minority religion in the individual's country of nationality." (Radio Vatican, 2017; *CNN Politics*, 30.01.2017).

### *Unity in Defense*

Christian leaders have expressed their view on several occasions that they need to unite as Christians in order to increase the chances of survival in the Middle East. In August 2014, Patriarch Louis Sako of the Chaldean Church (visiting the region during the historical meeting of the Five Patriarchs) addressed displaced community members in north Iraq:

Today, what is required for us is that wherever we are we must have one voice, one stand, one feeling. In the end we are one church. As much as we are one church we will be a stronger church and we will have a future. (*AINA*, 26.04.2014)

The same Patriarchs also met with President Obama in the United States, thereby aiming to raise awareness of the dangers Christian communities are facing in the Middle East (*The Catholic World Report*, 2016). A symbolic show of unity took place after the Kamishli bomb blasts (December 2015): the seven Christian denominations in Kamishli organised one service for all the victims and buried them in a single grave.

### *Emigration*

The mass emigration of Assyrians is discussed less openly than their persecution on their media platforms. Often, emigration is discussed in relation to other alternatives, but always with an undertone of fear for the impending worst-case scenario. While

Patriarch Ephrem II of the Syriac Orthodox Church has shown great support for attempts to remain in the homeland, in his latest Patriarchal Encyclical he discussed leaving as a realistic and a viable alternative to staying :

Though we urge all to hold firm to the land of our forefathers, under such persecution, we have the duty to help them [refugees]. ... emigration is an action expressing the refusal of submission and giving up to the conditions imposed on us. It reflects the desire to lead a dignified life, preserve the basic elements of life and keep one's rights and freedoms. (Patriarchal Encyclical of the Great Lent 2016)

Here, the Patriarch explains emigration as a necessary solution in the face of threatened subjugation to IS and the associated hardships. This change of discourse is only a few months after his December 2015 statement in which he expressed great hope that despite the violence his community members would be able to resist and stay in the homeland. The Patriarch's Archbishop, Dawud Sharaf said after being expelled from Mosul in August 2014:

So here we are, dying before the eyes of the world. We will never agree to live as *dhimmi*... A *dhimmi* is a slave. We are not, and will never agree to be *dhimmi*. Anyone who agrees to be a *dhimmi* is better off dead. ... God created us free, and free we shall die.

If emigration is the only alternative to a *dhimmi* position (living in a subordinated position in relation to Muslims), the immediate consequent of this will be that Assyrians are uprooted from the Middle East. Certainly, not all Christian religious leaders in the Middle East are happy with the initiatives of some Western institutions to support the immigration of Christians from the Middle East. In an interview with Agence France Presse Archbishop Antoine Audo of the Chaldean Church in Aleppo stated that 'No one cares about whether we stay or leave... The priority for the West is economic power... It does not see the historic importance of our presence' (*Naharnet*, 26.02.2016).<sup>12</sup> He

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<sup>12</sup> See further about the wish of religious leaders to keep the presence of Christians in Syria: Miles Windsor, 'Syria's Christian Refugees: Four Wrong Assumptions', 19.12.2015,



mourned the decline of the number of Christians in his city Aleppo from 150,000 before the war to 50,000 in the beginning of 2016 and stated that Europe should have kept its borders closed (*The Daily Caller News Foundation*, 24.02.2016).

However, despite these protests from their local religious leaders, the great majority of Assyrians in fact want to leave because they have lost hope in a future for Christians in the Middle East. Reporting from north Iraq, Miles Windsor (2015) observes that it is young adults in particular who want to leave for the West. This is also the case for Syria.<sup>13</sup> And only the very poor, those who lack transnational connections, the elderly and the idealists choose or are obliged to stay. The first visits to areas liberated from IS since October 2016 have only increased the general tendency that Christians have lost their hope for a future in the Middle East, despite the fact that the first videos distributed express strong symbolism of hope by those who first witnessed the extent of the destruction; often a priest, some local Christian militiamen and community members. Together they make a provisional cross (made from any material available to them in their surroundings) to be placed on top of the local destructed church, hallulate, cry, ring the church bells, and say a prayer to bless the church (again) after being desecrated and destructed by IS during a period of occupation that took more than two years. Although these rituals are expressions of hope to return to their homes after liberation, in reality for most displaced Christians they can also be understood as rituals of a last farewell before leaving for good, because of experiencing a great sense of being helpless in a situation of total devastation. Not only have all their churches been destroyed and burned down, but also the houses of the Christians have

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[http://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/12/19/syrias-christian-refugees-four-wrong-assumptions/?\\_r=1](http://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/12/19/syrias-christian-refugees-four-wrong-assumptions/?_r=1) (viewed 24.3.2016).

<sup>13</sup> My communication with Assyrians in Syria, March 2016.

all been looted and either occupied by local Muslim neighbours or burned down (Ochab 2017; Jeffrey 2017; Chick 2017) with so far no help in sight from the international community or from the local governments (in Bagdad and the KRG). And even more than the material damage, the victims and their community leaders urge for the need to ensure security by the international community through an international protection force in order to develop some hope that it is possible to build up everything again. The displaced express strong distrust in any effective security measures to be taken by the local governments in order to protect them for similar atrocities in the future (Farley 2017; World Watch Monitor 03.02.2017; Ochab 2017; Shamon 2017). A young woman expressed her traumatic experience after witnessing how her birthplace had been turned into a ghost town: 'they destroyed our dreams and our memories' (Chick 2017). Another woman who also decided to not stay despite the urge from her religious leaders asked the question: 'What if something even worse than ISIS comes?' (World Watch Monitor, 03.02.2017). In line with these existential concerns, the report *Ensuring Equality* written by several smaller NGOs expresses its concern about the exclusion of Christians and other religious minorities from the national settlement plan being put together by Iraq and other regional powers and presented to the UN (World Watch Monitor 16.01.2017). The report warns that this will make it even more likely that the internally displaced will not return to their former homes after IS is defeated.

This alarming situation regarding continuous emigration has increased fear among Assyrians for becoming uprooted from the ancestral homeland. What matters to them is their survival as a people, which they believe is impossible without maintaining connections to the homeland. Assyrians embed their Christianity within a specific tradition, history and region. Fears for the end of their existence in what they consider to be their historical homeland therefore goes together with anxiety over their survival

as churches and a people in the diaspora. Becoming disconnected from this heritage will have consequences for how they will live both their Christianity and their ethnic identity. Metaphorically, the homeland can be seen as a type of soil within which culture develops and flourishes. The homeland is where Assyrians' pre-Christian and Christian heritage is embedded in tangible and intangible culture. And the ancestral homeland has the function of connecting and re-connecting the members of its imagined community in the diaspora. From this essentialist perspective of the role of the ancestral homeland as the necessary soil of their culture, Assyrian Christians believe that losing their connections to the middle-east means that their culture will wither. They consider that the rate of assimilation in the west is too rapid to sustain its life. Having witnessed the assimilation experienced by earlier generations (especially in North America), activists and church leaders fear that life in the diaspora, and concomitant experiences of freedom of expression, will not necessarily result in a distinct communal identity, a strong church and in the survival of this people.<sup>14</sup> The threat of assimilation was also addressed by Patriarch Ephrem II in his Lent Encyclical 2016 (ibid.):

We, therefore, impress upon our faithful who are resettling in the west to hold on to certain aspects of our culture that we do not want to change our identity which we have to preserve and our Oriental Christian heritage which may be compromised in the West. We also need to work on reconciling many aspects of our culture with that of the Western society without being affected by western atheism and secularism which may clash with our Christian values. Most importantly, we need to find ways to create harmony between the cultures of the East and the West so that emigration does not become a reason for the extinction of our cultures.

The patriarch, like other community members, discusses identity as a rational process that can be steered and managed. Of course, in reality changes take place imperceptibly

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<sup>14</sup> See for instance paper by Polycarpus Augin Aydin 'The Syriac-Orthodox Church in the Diaspora: Challenges and Opportunities', paper presentation, University of Cambridge, 5 March 2014.

without explicit reflection. In the process of acculturation, Assyrians naturally begin to include new practices in their (new) collective identities, while excluding others. The last five decades have clearly shown that Assyrians in the diaspora have flourished within a relatively short period of time, but they have also witnessed changes which have greatly unsettled the identity of the community, such as the second and third generations losing their mother tongue Aramaic, and a loss of faith reflected in declining church attendance.

A dominant discourse among Assyrians is therefore that if emigration is a necessary evil then one should take every measure possible to ensure cultural, and religious survival in the diaspora.<sup>15</sup> Activists and educators aim at developing new initiatives in order to help Assyrians sustain central elements of their traditions, such as their classical Syriac and modern Aramaic languages.<sup>16</sup> The use of internet platforms and telecommunication have been instrumental in maintaining and developing new networks among the people, networks which were tellingly largely absent before their dispersal. After emigration, very local, isolated and agrarian based ethno-religious identities in the Middle East have largely broken down while new transnational networks, predicated upon new social media, have been developed. These new technologies are today central and driving forces in the dynamics between community members. Modern technology has been used to remain in touch with each other at social level as well as more actively as a medium used by activists to express their views and to influence and mobilise people for their political aims. The Internet has also

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<sup>15</sup> When explaining the migration experiences of the ‘formerly missionized’ communities from the post-colonial world, Afe Adogame and Shobana Shankar (2013: 1-2) use the concept of ‘reverse mission’ and discuss various dynamics of ‘religious expansion’ in a global world. The case of Assyrians differs from this conceptualization as the main reasons for their mass emigration to the West is their survival both physically and culturally, rather than having a missionary zeal in the sense of ‘reawakening’ the Western societies.

<sup>16</sup> Examples of such project are the Aramaic Online Project aiming at teaching modern Surayt Aramaic to adult learners. The American based *Rinyo* is developing online games and songs for children to learn Surayt.

allowed space for development at cultural level, where Assyrians artists present their works and where educators make use of the new technology to teach modern Aramaic dialects and Syriac, which were often not allowed to be taught at educational institutions in the homeland. At more local levels in the diaspora, too, the establishment of churches and secular institutions wherever Assyrians have settled has been the most important reason for retaining stronger connections among community members.

Newly-arrived refugees who settle among their community members in the diaspora are soon confronted with these complex dynamics in their host countries. They arrived in anticipation of connecting with Assyrians who share similar norms and values but in reality they often find that the first newcomers from a few decades ago have entirely adapted themselves to their new societies, creating a gap between the lifestyle of the established Assyrian diaspora and the newly arrived refugees. An example of this dynamic is Samer Kefarkis who settled in Australia a few months before IS attacked his village in the Khabur area in Syria in July 2014 (Henk and Susebach 2016). He has now come to believe that his culture will not survive in Australia, especially when observing the norms, values and lifestyle of his teenage niece. He is still grappling with the shocking aftermath of the loss of his cultural identity, his house and his entire village. Samer has not lived long enough in Australia to grasp how others in the Assyrian Diaspora can help him retain his cultural heritage.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed how the latest wars in Syria and Iraq, and especially the rise of IS, have led to tensions between Christians and Muslims in these countries, resulting in the forced displacement and worldwide dispersal of the former group. The tendency to seek refuge especially outside the Middle East (when they can) has only increased

after witnessing the total intentional destruction of their homes and towns by IS; for them, signs that IS wanted to exterminate their total presence in the Middle East. With the absence of international protection and material help to rebuild their homes and towns they too do not see a place for themselves any longer in their historical homeland and aim at settling in Western countries. Initiatives among Assyrians both in the Middle East and in the diaspora have not been successful in ending their plight. What is now greatly feared by Assyrians is that their extinction as a people in the Middle East is near as well as the loss of their ancestral homeland to the majority groups in the Middle East. Christians in the Middle East have had disappointed expectations that Western political powers would enable them to remain in their homeland. Some Christians in the Middle East see themselves as the local victims of international western political involvement in the Middle East, and at the same time ignored by these powers and left to their own fate. Not finding any viable solutions, they have come to perceive themselves as latter-day Christian martyrs.

Assyrians' settlement in mainly Western countries has on the one hand given them the chance to establish themselves in what they perceive as democratic and Christian societies in which they are able to live their religious and ethnic identity freely and where they have flourished. Based on experiences in the last few decades, Assyrians have also been confronted with a situation where assimilation to the host societies in the West is perceived as a great threat to their cultural existence, especially in relation to their fast disappearing in the Middle East. Nevertheless, an essentialised ideal of their homeland, powerful cultural traditions and the courage of those who remain in the homeland are important means for challenging these existential difficulties and for keeping the hope for their existence in the homeland alive.

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