



August 7, 2020

Joint NGO Statement on Assyrian Genocide Remembrance Day

Since 1933, the site of Simele in Iraq is a hallowed site of mourning and remembrance for the Assyrian community of Iraq and Assyrians worldwide. Located in Duhok Governorate, in today's Iraqi Kurdistan Region, the site has both ancient and modern significance for the Assyrian people. It is believed that the town was an ancient Assyrian settlement, at the same time, it is a site of massacre related to historic atrocities and injustices against an indigenous people native to modern-day Iraq and one of the oldest living cultures. This site, as well as a number of others in the area, are believed to contain the remains of Assyrian victims of systematic, large-scale killings when Iraq launched its genocidal campaign targeting Assyrians across northern Iraq in 1933.

The Simele Massacre was a massacre committed by the armed forces of the nascent Iraqi state, with participation from Arab and Kurdish irregulars, systematically targeting the indigenous Assyrian population in August 1933. The term is not only used to describe the massacre in Simele, but the wider campaign that took place across more than 65 Assyrian villages in northern Iraq. As many as 6,000 Assyrian men, women, and children were killed, while tens of thousands more were forcibly displaced and barred from returning. Assyrian Genocide Remembrance Day (also called "Assyrian Martyrs Day")—which honors the victims of all genocidal campaigns targeting Assyrians in their modern history—is observed annually on the anniversary of this crime.

The 1933 Simele Massacre was one of two events that inspired the coinage of the word 'genocide' by lawyer and international legal scholar Raphael Lemkin in his *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*. Lemkin's definition would later serve as the basis for the definition and codification in international customary law the crime of genocide in the United Nation's Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide of 1948, to which Iraq became a signatory in January 1959.

Indeed, the Simele Massacre, which took place less than a year after Iraq's founding, laid the precedent for the decades that followed which saw terrible crimes committed against the various Iraqi communities. More recently, the Assyrians, along with Yazidis, were specifically and systematically targeted by the so-called Islamic State as part of its policy of genocide and ethnic cleansing. This has not only threatened their life and culture but their very existence in the region.

Mass tragedies take place all too often, and equally tragic is their erasure. The Iraqi Government has yet to recognize and accept responsibility for the Simele Massacre. Further, the aforementioned sites in Simele contain exposed skeletal remains consistent with their designation as possible mass grave sites and warrant investigation. The sites have not been properly maintained and remain unprotected, leaving them vulnerable to disturbance and contamination, compromising the right of the Assyrian community to truth and justice. Reports of preliminary excavations recently conducted at these sites are especially troubling. The ongoing

mismanagement of these sites jeopardizes critical evidence necessary for any future accountability efforts.

An investigation of sites related to the Simele Massacre may yield critical evidence for future justice processes and will create a historical record. Moreover, the process of investigation and documentation reconfirm the dignity of the victims.

The denial of historical injustices threatens the democratization of the Iraqi state and prolong strained relations between different ethnic and religious groups. Proper recognition acknowledges the gravity of the offenses perpetrated and will help promote Iraq's transition into a pluralist and tolerant society.

Thus, we the undersigned non-governmental organizations recommend the following:

1. Federal and regional authorities must take urgent steps to shield these sites against further degradation and preserve evidence;
2. An impartial survey of the Simele Massacre of 1933 and related sites should be vigorously pursued by the Iraqi Government with assistance from Iraqi and international scholars and any plans for future excavations of the ancient sites that lie beneath must be suspended until a thorough investigation is completed;
3. To avoid the mishandling of these remains, the relevant authorities must commit to protecting the integrity of the sites. We therefore urge the Iraqi Government and the Kurdistan Regional Government to allow neutral forensic experts, who will work with community scholars, to help preserve and analyze the evidence by granting them uninhibited access in conducting a thorough investigation of the sites. Exhumations conducted without forensic experts can tamper with the site, run the risk of desecrating this sacred space for Iraq's Assyrian community, and can lead to the destruction of critical material required for addressing this historic atrocity;
4. Authorities should make all efforts to pursue genetic identification of the dead and to provide dignified reburials. The site should be designated a permanent memorial space for the victims of the 1933 massacre and be memorialized as such;
5. The Iraqi Government must confront its past and formally recognize the Simele Massacre of 1933 in its Constitution. Further, the Iraqi Government should offer appropriate compensation for the victims and their descendants. Legislation should be enacted restoring the citizenship of Assyrians who were citizens of Iraq by birth or by descent who lost Iraqi citizenship as a result of the Simele Massacre.

Signatories:

1. Armenian Assembly of America (United States)
2. Association des Assyro-Chaldéens en France (France)
3. Assyrian Aid Society of America (United States)
4. Assyrian Aid Society—Iraq (Iraq)
5. Assyrian American Association of North Texas (United States)
6. Assyrian American Association of Massachusetts (United States)
7. Assyrian American Association of San Jose (United States)
8. Assyrian American Association of Southern California (United States)
9. Assyrian American Cultural Organization of Arizona (United States)
10. Assyrian Chaldean Syriac Student Union (Canada)
11. Assyrian Cultural and Social Youth Association (Australia)
12. Assyrian Federation of Belgium (Belgium)

13. Assyrian Federation of the Netherlands (The Netherlands)
14. Assyrian National Council of Illinois (United States)
15. Assyrian Policy Institute (United States)
16. Assyrian Studies Association (United States)
17. Assyrian Youth Federation of America (United States)
18. Assyrian Youth Federation of Central Europe—AJM e.V. (Germany, Switzerland, Austria)
19. Assyrians Without Borders (Sweden)
20. Bet Nahrain Assyrian Cultural Heritage Centre (Canada)
21. Centre for Canadian-Assyrian Relations (Canada)
22. Chaldo-Assyrian Student and Youth Union (Iraq)
23. E'rootha (United States)
24. Etuti Institute (Iraq/United States)
25. GISHRU (United States/Iraq)
26. Greek Genocide Resource Center (United States)
27. Hammurabi Human Rights Organization (Iraq)
28. International Christian Concern (United States)
29. Iraqi Christian Relief Council (United States)
30. Montreal Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies (Canada)
31. Nineveh Center for Minority Rights (Iraq)
32. Nobody's Listening (United Kingdom)
33. Shlama Foundation (Iraq)
34. Seyfo Center (United States)
35. Yazda (United States)

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