

Assyrian Christians face attacks from Islamic State

by [Michael Holtz](#) in the [April 1, 2015](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Assyrian Christians who live in Syria and Iraq have faced religious persecution for much of their modern history.

The world was reminded of that stark reality in late February when militants from the self-described Islamic State reportedly captured dozens of Assyrians—estimates range from 70 to 150—living in villages along the Khabur River in northeastern Syria. Their fate remains unclear but fits a pattern of IS persecution of minorities in areas it seeks to subjugate.

“We are watching a living history and all that comprises disappear,” wrote Mardean Isaac of A Demand for Action, a group that focuses on religious minorities in the Middle East.

So who are the Assyrians? Alternatively known as Syriac, Nestorian, or Chaldean Christians, they trace their roots back more than 6,500 years to ancient Mesopotamia, predating the Abrahamic religions. For 1,800 years the Assyrian empire dominated the region, establishing one of most advanced civilizations in the ancient world. An example of this is the city of Arbel, one of the earliest permanent agricultural settlements.

The Assyrian empire collapsed in 612 BC with the rise of the Persians. Six hundred years later, Assyrians became among the earliest converts to Christianity. They still speak a form of Aramaic, the language of Jesus Christ, and consider themselves the last indigenous people of Syria and Iraq.

Following the birth of Christianity, Assyrian missionaries spread across Asia from the Mediterranean to the Pacific and built a new empire that lasted until Arab Muslims swept through the Middle East in 630.

Eden Naby, an Assyrian researcher and Middle East historian, said their modern history has been marred by violence and persecution. Between 1914 and 1918 more than 500,000 Assyrians were killed during the Armenian genocide in present-day Turkey.

More recently the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, a secular dictator, has exposed Assyrians and other minorities to sectarian strife. Emigration has shrunk the community of Assyrians in Iraq from about 1.4 million in 1987 to 400,000 at last count, according to Al Jazeera. Others live in Turkey and Iran.

About 40,000 Assyrians remain in Syria, according to an estimate from the BBC—a number that experts say is likely to decline. Christians are estimated to have constituted about 10 percent of Syria's 22 million people before civil war erupted in 2011. Many Assyrians have since fled to escape the ongoing conflict and violent attacks by Islamic extremist groups such as IS.

"These people along the river are refugees," Naby said in a phone interview. "They've experienced a hundred years of this."

A majority of Assyrians now live among the diaspora in the United States and Europe, with sizable populations in Germany and Sweden.

The Assyrians who stayed in Syria are concentrated in al-Hasakah province in the sparsely populated northeast. Some have joined a militia, the Syriac Military Council, which recently fought alongside Syrian Kurds.

Activists say IS, also known as ISIS or ISIL, has forced Christians living in the territory it controls to convert to Islam, pay a religious tax (*jizya*), or face death. A few weeks ago, the group ordered Assyrians in the area to remove crosses from churches, according to the Assyrian International News Agency.

The Assyrians are not the only religious or ethnic minority group who face such threats from IS. Shi'a Shabaks, Turkmen, and Yazidis have all been targeted as part of the extremist group's campaign in Syria and Iraq, where it has declared a caliphate.

"These groups have a long history of marginalization," said Sarah Margon of Human Rights Watch in a testimony to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, a congressional caucus, in December, referring to Assyrians and other minorities. "But ISIS has intensified this ostracism, labeling them as crusaders, heretics, and devil worshipers and then threatening them with death if they don't convert to Islam."

Experts fear that captured Assyrians; could face a similar fate to that of the Egyptian Christians in Libya. But IS could also use the captives to try to arrange a prisoner swap with Kurdish militias. The extremists are reportedly holding them in al-Shaddadeh, south of the city of al-Hasakah.

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