



## Assyria Council of Europe

### Press Release: The Need for an Assyrian-Iraqi Defence Force

On Monday evening, President Massoud Barzani of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region announced that his government is ready to accept “Christian” volunteers for the *Peshmerga* (Kurdish armed forces), “so that they may protect their homes and villages from the ‘Islamic State’ (‘IS’).” This comes after a recent visit from Lebanon’s Foreign Minister, Gibran Basil, who met with both Kurdish and Assyrian leaders in north Iraq. It is also simultaneous to recruitment efforts currently being undertaken by the Assyrian Democratic Movement and other parties. It appears, therefore, that the international call for an Assyrian defence force has caught the attention of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), which is now attempting to manipulate it to suit its own purposes. Thus, while Mr. Barzani supports the idea of training and arming “Christians,” he makes it quite clear that this is a volunteer force (which suggests it will be temporary in nature), and that it will be part of a greater “Kurdistani” political agenda. The statement published by the presidency of the region, says the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) will do “everything in its power” for the displaced “Christians” who have fled from “IS” attacks, and asks them “not to think of emigration and leaving the country because the threat of terrorism is temporary and the terrorists will be defeated.” Furthermore, Mr. Barzani added that “the people of Kurdistan, with all of its components/diversity, either will live freely and safely or will be annihilated together.”

The Assyrians (including Chaldeans and Syriacs), who are being alluded to in this statement, surely appreciate this offer from President Barzani, even though he ignores their ethnicity and instead calls them “Christians.” Furthermore, they neither see themselves as “people of Kurdistan,” nor do they consider their settlements in the Nineveh Plain as even being part of “Kurdistan” – such a state that has never existed, hence there are no accepted boundaries for what constitutes “Kurdistan.” While some settlements of indigenous Assyrians have fallen under the jurisdiction of the KRG since 1991, those of the Nineveh Plain do not anticipate such a future. This is because they have observed the discrimination suffered by their people under Kurdish hegemony, particularly since the removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003. Abuses by the Kurdish authorities have thus included the following:

- Confiscation of Assyrian-owned lands without proper compensation and allowing the permanent settlement of Kurds in Assyrian villages to change their demography;
- Neglect of justice in cases where Assyrians have been murdered or victimised by Kurds;
- Stifling Syriac language education and deliberately underfunding and marginalising Assyrian schools that are part of the government system;
- Changing the names of Assyrian villages to Kurdish equivalents, flying the Kurdish flag in Assyrian settlements and forbidding them to fly the Assyrian flag;
- Refusing to provide aid or job opportunities to Assyrians who either do not learn Kurdish or refuse to join Kurdish and Kurd-affiliated political parties;
- Teaching in the region’s official curricula that historic Kurdish personalities who were responsible for the massacre of thousands of Assyrians are national heroes;
- Forcing displaced Assyrians from elsewhere in Iraq, who had returned to their native villages, to apply for residency in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, which is impossible without a local sponsor; and,

- Requiring Assyrians to have a Kurdish partner for them to open their own businesses.

Since 2003, the KRG has turned its attention on the Nineveh Plain, with its vast agricultural lands and untapped resources such as oil and natural gas. They thus illegally occupied it with their own *Peshmerga* forces, snuffing out local dissent by indigenous ethnic groups through intimidation and political persecution through their *Asayish* (Kurdish intelligence apparatus). In addition, they employed a system of patronage, investing hundreds of thousands of dollars in religious institutions for local bishops. Nothing, however, has been contributed to developing the local infrastructure, which is insufficient and has been deliberately ignored. More disturbingly, the KRG has been the primary impediment to the creation of a police force in the Nineveh Plain since 2006, namely through the efforts of Mr. Khisro Goran, head of the KDP Political Bureau and Nineveh Provincial Deputy Governor. The KRG understands that once such a force is functional, it will remove the basis for their continued occupation of the area. The KRG has been so determined in this respect that, while frustrating and blocking any attempt to establish a local police force, they also established an informal “Christian Militia” paid for by their Ministry of Finance, rather than allow for the fulfilment of an order from the Iraqi Government on 14 March 2006 to establish the local police force.

Hitherto, the *Peshmerga* have included a limited number of Assyrians among their ranks. Not only are they very few, they are also expected to be members of the KDP or other affiliated political parties. Often these people are working solely for the benefit and goals of the KDP and are actually doing harm to their own ethnic group, as well as damaging their future within a united and free Iraq. Moreover, there are currently no Assyrian officers among the *Peshmerga*, which is widely viewed as an army of Kurds fighting for the Kurdish nation and its territorial aspirations. These are in direct conflict with the claims of marginalised indigenous groups such as the Assyrians. Moreover, the *Peshmerga* are identified as being singularly responsible for electoral fraud and the disenfranchisement of Assyrians, Shabaks, and Yazidis in the Nineveh Plain during the vital 2005 national elections, leading to KDP dominance of the Nineveh Provincial Council. This one single act, for which they were never held accountable, ensured that these ethnic groups lacked the political means to defend their collective interests and is arguably one of the primary reasons they lacked the means to secure themselves economically and physically. Earlier this month, the same *Peshmerga* abandoned their positions and withdrew from Assyrian and Yazidi areas, leaving their inhabitants defenceless. Hence, they cannot depend on Kurdish forces in the future.

Therefore, we recommend the following:

- Not only should the Assyrians not be part of the *Peshmerga*, but neither should the Shabaks, Turkmen and Yazidis who are also interested in joining a force that would liberate and police their lands in Nineveh Governorate.
- These groups should be organised into their own military units, taking the example of the *Peshmerga*, which are part of the Iraqi armed forces yet a separate entity.
- These units should be commanded by people from these ethnic groups, and not Arabs or Kurds.
- The Assyrian fighters or *Dwikh-Nawsha* (volunteers), for example, should spearhead what will be known as the Nineveh Plain Defence Force (NPDF).
- Units such as these will help guard, defend and police any safe havens created for the Assyrians and other ethnic groups in the Nineveh Plain and other areas.

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