

# Destruction of Syriac Cultural Heritage in the Contemporary Middle East

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## Executive Summary

As a result of ongoing strife, particularly in Syria and Iraq, the Syriac and Aramaic-heritage communities of the Middle East are under unprecedented pressure. Faced with civil war, violence against civilians, and political and economic instability, many have been killed or forced to emigrate. As a result, these unique communities which have survived in the region for nearly two millennia faces extinction. In addition to this terrible human cost, Syriac and Aramaic physical and cultural heritage are also gravely threatened. [Syriaca.org](http://Syriaca.org) exists to address this challenge by preserving and recording the collective cultural heritage of Syriac heritage communities around the globe.

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## What is Syriaca.org?

[Syriaca.org: The Syriac Reference Portal](http://Syriaca.org) is a collaborative research project undertaken by an international group of scholars from five universities to preserve and document the endangered cultures and literature produced by Syriac heritage communities from antiquity to the present. The online publications of [Syriaca.org](http://Syriaca.org) serve a broad audience including students of Middle Eastern studies, classics, medieval history, religious studies, biblical studies, and comparative linguistics. In addition, [Syriaca.org](http://Syriaca.org) exists to provide both Syriac heritage communities and the interested general public with access to well documented information about Syriac cultures and history. The loss of cultural diversity in the Middle East in the present era is a serious threat to human flourishing both in the region and

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worldwide. Accordingly, [Syriaca.org](http://Syriaca.org) understands its effort to preserve these minority cultures as an essential contribution to the diversity of both Middle Eastern and global culture.

## **What is Syriac?**

Syriac is a language which once flourished on the Mesopotamian borders of the Roman empire. A late dialect of Aramaic, Syriac was widely used in trade, travel, and religious missionary activity. Jesus and many early Christians were Aramaic speakers and the spread of Christianity across the Middle East and Asia followed Syriac speaking communities. By the time of the emperor Justinian, Syriac speaking communities could be found in what today would be Syria, Iraq, the Arabian peninsula, Iran, India, and Central Asia. In the Middle Ages, Syriac culture and literature continued to flourish even after Arabic began to replace Syriac as the dominant language of religion and culture in the Middle East. Syriac Christian communities served as a cultural bridge between the Byzantine Empire and the Islamic states of the Middle East.

Although Syriac heritage communities have survived as minority enclaves in the Middle East to the present, these communities and their religious and cultural heritage remain relatively unknown in the West. For this reason, the study of Syriac has received little attention until now. Today, however, scholars are realizing that sources in Syriac hold immense value for increasing our understanding of the Middle East and Asia, particularly for the historical relationship between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Perhaps more than ten thousand manuscripts or manuscript fragments written in Syriac survive today. These manuscripts are firsthand evidence for documenting history over a wide geographic range. The oldest of these manuscripts was written over 1500 years ago, and more continue to be produced today; many are unique sources for the events they describe.

Unfortunately, at the same time as scholars have finally begun to turn their attention to study the riches of the Syriac traditions, the Syriac cultures of the Middle East have become increasingly threatened by the volatility of war and political instability in the Middle East.<sup>2</sup> For much of the twentieth century, Syria and Iraq were home to some of the largest Syriac heritage communities in the region. In the last decade, the populations in these countries have experienced significant displacement and destruction of their cultural heritage. While Syriac communities have suffered tragic decline in many counties across the Middle East over the twentieth century, this report will specifically consider the cases of Syria and Iraq as the two most recent and ongoing sites of cultural catastrophe for the Syriac heritage communities.

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<sup>2</sup> In this report we will use “Syriac heritage communities” as an umbrella term for a number of different Aramaic minority groups who self-identify using a variety of ethnic, national, ecclesiastical or religious terms including Syriac, Assyrian, Aramean, Church of the East, Chaldean Catholic Church, Ancient Church of the East, Assyrian Evangelical Church, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic Church, Greek Orthodox, and Maronite. Although Neo-Aramaic dialects are distinct in their historical development from the earlier classical Syriac dialects, we also include in this broad group of “Syriac heritage communities”, the Neo-Aramaic speakers of Maaloula, Iraq and elsewhere whose culture often overlaps or intersects with the list above.

## Syriac Heritage Communities of Syria

The current civil war in Syria has had a catastrophic toll on the population. As of April, 2014, several international organizations have estimated that the death toll stands at between 150,000 and 200,000 casualties with as many as 50,000 of these being civilian deaths.<sup>3</sup> In Syria, the Syriac and Aramaic heritage communities are largely Christian (although there are a small number of Neo-Aramaic speaking Muslims as well) and have suffered the same fate as all minority groups within the population of Syria during the civil conflict. In 2010, there were an estimated 1,060,000 Christians living in Syria, which made up approximately 5.2% of the entire population.<sup>4</sup>

Since the war began about three years ago in Syria, the plight of Christians and other religious minorities has worsened. Many in Christian-majority areas (including neo-Aramaic speaking regions) have been forced to evacuate their homes in fear for the lives of their families. According to the BBC, “Syria's civil conflict has claimed more than 100,000 lives since 2011 and has driven 9.5 million people from their homes.”<sup>5</sup> In one of the few majority neo-Aramaic-speaking villages, Maaloula, as many as 3,300 residents have evacuated the city.<sup>6</sup> In a much larger city, Homs, an estimated 700,000 citizens have been forced to flee as of January, 2014.<sup>7</sup> Cultural and religious minority communities have often been specifically targeted. The Syriac Orthodox Bishop Yuhanna Ibrahim and Greek Orthodox Archbishop Boulous Yazigi were abducted in early 2013 and are presumed dead. Additionally, twelve neo-Aramaic-speaking Orthodox nuns were abducted from Maaloula in December 2013 and held captive until March 2014.<sup>8</sup>

Not only has the country suffered great loss of life, but the cultural heritage of Syria is being destroyed in the conflict. According to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), “Along with the violence, destruction and deaths experienced throughout Syrian (sic) and by members of religious minority communities, NGOs report that over 1,000 mosques have been destroyed, with many more vandalized. Over 90 Christian churches, monasteries, shrines and buildings also have been destroyed or severely damaged.”<sup>9</sup> It is clear that some factions in the Syrian civil war hope to turn the war into an inter-religious sectarian conflict. Recent reports concerning the city of Raqqa (where Greek and Armenian churches have been attacked) reveal that a militant group (ISIS) holding the region has attempted to implement a “jizya” head tax on the city’s religious minorities. Those who refuse to pay the

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/04/01/us-syria-crisis-toll-idUSBREA300YX20140401>.

<sup>4</sup>

[http://features.pewforum.org/global-christianity/map.php?utm\\_content=bufferda449&utm\\_source=buffer&utm\\_medium=twitter&utm\\_campaign=Buffer#/Syria.ALL](http://features.pewforum.org/global-christianity/map.php?utm_content=bufferda449&utm_source=buffer&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=Buffer#/Syria.ALL). These numbers are rather difficult to determine. Another source asserts that, “As of 2006, the U.S. State Department estimated that about 10 percent of the Syrian population--or 1.7 million people--was Christian; by 2012 the department estimates that the figure had fallen to eight percent due to emigration, though there is no reliable new population data available due to the ongoing conflict” (<http://www.ibtimes.com/syrian-christians-face-difficult-decisions-refugee-crisis-grows-1416012>).

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-26114068>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-24051440>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-25916804>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/syrian-bishop-we-ve-reached-the-point-where-even-nuns-are-being-abducted>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.uscirf.gov/news-room/press-releases/syria-religious-minorities-need-voice-geneva-ii-peace-conference>

tax are given an ultimatum to convert to Islam or face the death penalty.<sup>10</sup>

The city Qusayr, which is located in western Syria, suffered devastating damage in the summer of 2013. As the two forces battled for the city, nearly all of the 50,000 inhabitants were forced to flee for their lives. The devastation affected the Greek Catholic Mar Elias Church and the Sunni Muslim Grand Mosque, both of which were nearly destroyed. One source reported: “The golden dome of Mar Elias Church is riddled with holes now, and its marble altar has been broken. The mosque's minaret was badly damaged, and the prayer hall is covered with debris.”<sup>11</sup>

## **Syriac Heritage Communities of Iraq**

The plight of Syriac and Aramaic heritage minorities in Syria is not unique. Since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the various Syriac communities in that country have also experienced population loss and cultural destruction. Indeed, many Syriac Christians from Iraq had sought refuge in Syria before 2011, since at the time Syria had prosperous and stable Christian minority populations.

In 1991, on the eve of the Gulf War, Iraq's Christian population (the majority of whom were from Syriac heritage communities) stood around one million (about five percent of the total population). Since then, deteriorating circumstances under Saddam and after US-led invasion have led to an exodus, with sources estimating that fewer than two hundred thousand Christians remain (less than one percent of the total population).<sup>12</sup> The Iraqi Christian community represents one of the world's oldest, with roots dating back to the first century CE. Most Christians in the country belong to Syriac heritage communities and some speak modern dialects of Neo-Aramaic.

Since the fall of Saddam the deterioration of the security situation for Iraq's population in general has affected the Syriac minorities as well, with terrorism and kidnapping now ever-present dangers for Iraqis of all religions and ethnicities. Nevertheless, minority populations have often become particularly easy targets. On Christmas day in 2013, bombings targeting the Christian area of Baghdad left at least thirty four people dead.<sup>13</sup> In November of 2010, an attack on a Syrian Catholic Cathedral in Baghdad killed more than fifty worshippers and police.<sup>14</sup> These attacks, unfortunately, are not uncommon; Alhayat (as presented in al-Monitor) reports that “from 2003 to 2011, Christian organizations reported

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/militants-set-down-strict-laws-christians-syrian-city-n40146>

<sup>11</sup> See the images at

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/06/syria-conflict-destroys-mosques-churches\\_n\\_3709262.html#slide=2774745](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/08/06/syria-conflict-destroys-mosques-churches_n_3709262.html#slide=2774745)

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-11669994>. Estimates vary, with some suggesting that the population has declined from 1.5 million in 2003 to as few as 200,000 in 2013 (see <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/9935960/Iraq-invasion-anniversary-the-last-Christians-in-Baghdad.html>). All agree that the Christian community has decreased drastically.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/12/25/us-iraq-christmas-idUSBRE9BO06I20131225>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/11/01/us-iraq-violence-idUSTRE69U1YE20101101>

that more than 60 churches and monasteries were targeted by bombings and raids in Iraq at the hands of al-Qaeda.<sup>15</sup>

Syriac heritage communities have increasingly turned to internal migration and emigration in the face of these threats. Many have fled historically diverse cities such as Baghdad and Mosul to autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan, and to the Nineveh Plains region in particular; more than 1,380 families fled Mosul in the winter of 2008 alone.<sup>16</sup> While Iraqi Kurdistan is much safer than the rest of the Iraq, Syriac heritage communities in the region also report discrimination, corruption, intermittent violence and a lack of employment opportunities.<sup>17</sup> As a result, Iraq's Syriac heritage populations continue to shrink.

### **Conclusion: Preserving Cultures**

In addition to the cost in human life and the destruction of physical property, the plight facing Syriac heritage communities of the Middle East is also one of cultural extinction. With the displacement and even permanent departure of these minority communities, a significant and ancient part of Middle Eastern culture threatens to disappear permanently. Already, many dialects of Neo-Aramaic are endangered as living languages. Moreover, there is only limited state-level support in Syria or Iraq for the preservation of Syriac and neo-Aramaic literature and cultural resources.

A number of scholarly initiatives have formed in the last two decades in response to these cultural crises. For the past four years, [Syriaca.org: The Syriac Reference Portal](http://www.syriaca.org) has been working to document and preserve Syriac cultural heritage. Its online tools serve a broad audience including researchers and students in Middle Eastern studies, classics, medieval history, religious studies, biblical studies, and comparative linguistics. In addition, [Syriaca.org](http://www.syriaca.org) exists to provide both the Syriac heritage communities and the interested general public with access to well documented reference information related to Syriac culture and history.

Although the preservation of culture may seem a futile act in the face of catastrophic human violence and destruction, its importance remains central to human flourishing. Without identity and history, the Syriac heritage communities will lose their unique place and contribution to Middle Eastern culture and society. As the Chaldean Catholic Patriarch of Babylon Louis Sako has noted, "Today, Christian communities lend to the region plurality and diversity. The loss of Christianity would fundamentally alter the contours

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/culture/2013/08/iraq-christians-face-challenges-migration.html> See the images at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/08/02/us-iraq-violence-church-idUSTRE7712GM20110802>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/culture/2013/08/iraq-christians-face-challenges-migration.html>

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/culture/2013/08/iraq-kurdistan-region-no-longer-haven-christians.html>; <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/world/middleeast/exodus-from-north-signals-iraqi-christians-decline.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>

of culture and society in nations such as Iraq, Syria, and Egypt. It would deal a severe blow to any hope of pluralism and democracy."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/10515545/We-will-all-lose-if-Christians-flee-the-Middle-East.html>