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## **Christian Assyrians injured in axe attack during the celebration of their New Year in Kurdistan**

HRWF (07.04.2025) - On 1 April, two Assyrians and a policeman were injured in an attack on an Assyrian Christian celebration in Dohuk, in the northern Iraq's autonomous Kurdistan region.

The attack targeted the Akitu springtime celebrations observed by members of their community to mark the first day of their calendar year.

The parade drew thousands of Assyrians from Iraq and across the diaspora, who marched through Dohuk waving Assyrian flags and wearing colorful traditional clothes.

Witnesses said the attacker ran toward the crowd and struck three people with an axe before being stopped by participants and security forces. Videos circulating online showed him pinned to the ground, repeatedly shouting, "Islamic State, the Islamic State remains."

A 17-year-old boy and a 75-year-old woman suffered skull injury. Both had been displaced to the north of Iraq due to ISIS violence in their region. A member of the local security forces, who was operating a surveillance drone, was also wounded. All three were hospitalized, local security officials said. The woman suffered a haemorrhage that did not require surgery, Dohuk medical authorities said, adding that her condition was "stable".

At one point, as the injured teenager was rushed to the hospital, some participants wrapped his head in an Assyrian flag, which was later lifted again in the parade -- stained with blood but held high as a symbol of resilience.

Despite the attack, Assyrians continued the celebrations of the holiday, which symbolizes renewal and rebirth in Assyrian culture.

The assailant behind the attack was identified as a Syrian national adhering to ISIS.

The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) strongly condemned the attack.

Dr. Mohamed Al-Hassan, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Iraq and Head of UNAMI, praised the swift and effective response by Iraqi authorities, which led to the immediate arrest of the perpetrator.

Ninab Yousif Toma, a political bureau member of the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM), said that the Assyrian community had celebrated their new year, known as Akitu, in Duhok since the 1990s without incidents of violence.

He said that the community was waiting for the results of the official investigation and planned to file an official lawsuit.

Iraq's Christian population plunged from some 1.5 million before the fall of Saddam Hussein in the early 2000s to about 400,000, the majority having fled successive bouts of violence in the country.

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## Report highlights Assyrian fight for their future in their homelands



[AINA](#) (28.02.2025) -- Assyrian leaders and advocates are sounding the alarm on escalating human rights violations in Iraq and Syria, where forced displacement, systemic discrimination, and cultural erasure continue unabated. As political disenfranchisement and targeted violence drive Assyrians from their ancestral lands, the urgent need for intervention grows stronger.

A new [report](#) exposes the policies eroding Assyrian rights, including land seizures, religious persecution, and the suppression of political representation. This comes on the heels of a pivotal gathering of an Assyrian coalition in Washington, DC, where the Athra Alliance and advocates presented their case at the International Religious Freedom (IRF) Summit. They engaged with distinguished officials and leading policy think tanks to discuss their concrete action plan for addressing the worsening crisis.

Assyrians in Iraq have faced deliberate political marginalization. Kurdish and Iranian-backed proxies continue to manipulate Assyrian political seats, effectively silencing the

community and obstructing self-determination. Alongside this, land confiscation and illegal appropriations systematically strip Assyrians of their homes, continuing to force many into permanent exile.

Security threats remain dire. Political assassinations of Assyrian leaders in Kurdish-controlled regions remain unsolved, with perpetrators enjoying impunity. Economic suppression further fuels this crisis. Assyrians endure discriminatory policies and restricted access to resources, leaving them economically incapacitated. In education, the Kurdish-led administration in Iraq imposes a mandatory curriculum that expropriates Assyrian history and glorifies figures responsible for the assassination of Patriarch Shimmun XXI and the massacres of their ancestors.

The report also exposes extremist threats, including Hawpa, a Kurdish neo-Nazi organization, which is registered with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). Its charter "explicitly calls for the genocide of Assyrians, outlining plans for extermination before later being removed from their website in an effort to obscure its extremist agenda."

In Syria, Assyrian schools have been forcibly shut down, further erasing Assyrian cultural and linguistic heritage. Assyrians are trapped between two oppressive education systems: the central Syrian curriculum, which includes Sharia law and is banned by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), and the Kurdish-imposed AANES curriculum, which promotes historical revisionism, glorifies terrorism, lacks accreditation, and advances Kurdish nationalist ideology.

Fear of retaliation forces individuals who report these violations into anonymity, highlighting the repression and violent retaliation against Assyrians in the region. Assyrians who speak out against the human rights abuses committed by the Kurdish administration face targeted violence, harassment, disappearance and death.

Western-backed Syrian Democratic Forces have repeatedly desecrated Assyrian churches and cemeteries by digging trenches and establishing military positions within these sacred sites, turning them into battlegrounds and launch points for attacks, placing Assyrian civilians in the crossfire of a conflict they did not choose. The report documents violations that meet the established criteria for ethnic cleansing, demonstrating a systematic campaign to erase Assyrians from their indigenous homeland.

As Assyrians face ongoing challenges in both Iraq and Syria, securing self-administration remains essential for their survival. In Iraq, one of the last remaining hopes lies in the establishment of the Nineveh Governorate as an autonomous region, governed by Assyrians and protected by a locally embedded security force. Similarly, in Northeast Syria, self-administration remains crucial for Assyrians to sustain their presence in their ancestral lands and ensure their continued survival.

The report concludes with a decisive call to action, urging policymakers and human rights organizations to enforce protections against land seizures, support Assyrian self-governance, and hold accountable those responsible for political repression and violence. Without immediate intervention, the indigenous Assyrians of Iraq and Syria risk being erased from their homelands.

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## **A monastery heals religious divides by building inter-religious solidarity and helping refugees**

***Fr. Jens Petzold, a Swiss priest based in the Kurdistan region of northern Iraq, speaks to Vatican News about his work serving the tiny, ever-changing population of local Christians.***

*By Joseph Tulloch*

[Vatican News](#) (07.02.2025) - When, in the mid-1990s, Jens Petzold first arrived in Syria, it was only supposed to be a temporary stop on his journey eastward from his native Switzerland. An agnostic and spiritual seeker, his real goal was East Asia, where he hoped to explore Taoism and Zen Buddhism.

While in Syria, Petzold heard talk of the desert Monastery of Mar Musa. Dating back to the fifth or sixth century AD, it had recently been re-opened by the charismatic Italian Jesuit Paolo Dall'Oglio, who had dedicated it to Muslim-Christian dialogue.

Petzold decided to pay a visit and was instantly enthralled.

"At the time, I had no idea that Christians were capable of taking another religion seriously, without looking down on it," Fr. Petzold tells Vatican News. "I liked that a lot."

Eventually, after several stays at Mar Musa, Petzold decided to be baptised there. Shortly after, at the end of 1996, he entered the monastery as a novice.

### **Arrival in Kurdistan**

A decade of service at Mar Musa followed. And then, in 2010, Archbishop Louis Raphael Sako—then Chaldean Archbishop of Kirkuk, now Patriarch of Baghdad—asked the community to open a monastery in Iraq.

Petzold was one of the Mar Musa monks sent to Iraq to give life to the project, and he has been there ever since.

Today, he is the head of the monastery, which is located in Sulaymaniyah, in the Kurdistan region of northern Iraq. As well as Fr. Petzold—now an ordained priest in the Chaldean Catholic Church—the monastery is home to Sr. Friederike Gräf from Germany, a fellow member of the Mar Musa community.

The monastery also has six or seven full-time employees, who help run its various projects. It hosts language courses—teaching Kurdish to Arabs, Arabic to Kurds, and English to both groups. It also runs programmes on topics like leadership and decision-making and serves the pastoral needs of the tiny local Christian community.

And, like its parent monastery of Mar Musa in Syria, the monastery in Iraq is actively involved in promoting Muslim-Christian dialogue.

### **Interfaith work and peacebuilding**

"In Iraq, the lines between the different communities are much more pronounced than in Syria," Fr. Petzold explains. "In Syria, I would often see students of different religions taking trips together, for example. That happens a lot less in Iraq."

For this reason, Fr. Petzold says, he initially had his doubts as to whether the Mar Musa mission of promoting interreligious understanding would be as successful in Sulaymaniyah as it had been in the Syrian desert.

But, he continues, "I was standing in the monastery's church one day, and I realised that most of the women coming in to light candles in front of the icon of the Virgin Mary were Muslims."

"That's when I realised that this could work out."

All of the monastery's projects contribute to the goal of promoting interfaith relations, Fr. Petzold notes. Around 2,000 to 3,000 people visit the monastery each year to take part in its courses, and very few of them are Christians.

But the Swiss priest thinks that the monastery's biggest contribution is likely the informal encounters that it facilitates.

"The main aim is just to get people to meet and discuss," he says. "Drinking tea together is probably much more effective for peacebuilding than having long discussions about human rights."

"That's my personal conviction," he says, and laughs: "It's much more difficult to shoot at somebody once you've drunk a good cup of tea together."

The local church: constant departures, new arrivals

As well as encouraging deeper understanding between religions, the monastery in Sulaymaniyah aims to serve the local Christian population.

After it first opened, a major focus was helping Christian refugees who had arrived in Kurdistan. Many were fleeing the ISIS takeover of northern Iraq, others the instability caused by the Syrian civil war. At the height of the refugee crisis, 255 displaced Christians were living in the monastery.

Of these, only three or four families remain today, Fr. Petzold says. Somewhat fewer than half have returned to their homes, and around a third have moved abroad.

This means that the makeup of the local Christian population has changed dramatically. Christianity has deep roots in the region, and local Christians are traditionally Arabic-speaking. Today, as more and more Arab Christians leave to seek their fortunes abroad, they are being replaced by Christian migrant workers from further east in Asia, and certain countries in Africa.

"They bring their families with them," says the Swiss priest, "and so one day, these migrants will be the new local Christians. It's our job to serve them."

### **Seeds of hope**

Much of the work that happens at the monastery, Fr. Petzold says, has to do with the desire to "give a future to the young people here."

"I'm very much interested in working with young adults," he says. "They have a lot of energy, and they still have a lot of hope. Sometimes, I watch the discussions they have here, the way they try to solve problems together, and I hope that, perhaps one day 15 years in the future, they might remember those discussions, that spirit of working together."

Given that the interview is taking place as part of Vatican News' "Seeds of Hope" project for the 2025 Jubilee Year, we asked Fr. Petzold whether he sees the monastery's work as contributing to the unfolding of a more hopeful future.

"I don't know if we're a 'seed of hope,'" he says. "Our aim is to help the people we work with discover that seed inside themselves."

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