

**A DEMAND  
FOR ACTION**

# The Forgotten Genocide

written by Nuri Kino

## Introduction

The genocide in Syria and Iraq continues as the terrorist organization known as ISIS and other Jihadi movements are working to annihilate everything Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac: the language, religion, and historical heritage of this ethnic group are under attack.

The European Parliament, the British House of Commons and the US Congress have all recognized what is happening to this ethnic group as a genocide, and meets all the criteria for genocide as laid out in the UN Convention on Genocide.

A Demand for Action (ADFA) has been part of this genocide recognition and we are now questioning what is being done to stop the genocide, who are its victims? We have travelled to the Middle East once looking for answers, this time to Lebanon and Syria where we met and interviewed eyewitnesses to the atrocities and realities of modern day genocide.

## Seven children, two missing

Four of their seven children were disabled, born with deformed backs. The parents have come to an interview bringing what remains of their family, two sons remain missing.

The mother speaks first “I will not be able to breathe properly until I know what happened to my sons. Every time I drink water, I wonder if they are thirsty. When I shower, I wonder if they are dirty, have they washed? My sons are gone but I feel they are alive. I can do nothing but wait.” Her husband stays silent for most of the interview, she looks at him and tells us “he has many medical issues”. They can’t afford medical care. After lighting a cigarette, the husband, trembling and pale faced, finally speaks, “I would be mad to spend money on myself. We don’t know where our sons are and our other children are not able to work. The last thing we should be concerned is my illness. We shouldn’t be spending money on me”.

## Pay or die

One of his daughters continues when the father has again retreated to silence, “they burned our farm, our crops, everything we owned because we refused to convert to Islam. They demanded us to pay jizyah”. Jizyah is a tax levied on non-Moslems that if paid would allow the family to live on their land unmolested. But after paying the jizyah the family quickly found it had been lied to, “we were run off our land, we had to flee with nothing but what we wore. Our brothers carried us on their backs as we escaped. When we arrived at the bus terminal my brothers disappeared. Since then we have not heard anything from them.”

The family has applied to become quota refugees, but the UN refugee agency, the UNHCR, wants to split the family as the children are all over 18 years of age and are thus considered adults. The family refuses to be split up, they have been through enough.

An hour later we are with another family.

## Two rape attempts

She is 18 years old, blond and blue-eyed. Her name is Maria and two years ago, along with her mother, stepfather, and younger siblings, she fled Syria to Lebanon. Her grandmother died when Maria's mother Klara was only 17 years old. Soon thereafter, Klara was married off to an older man, Maria's father. The man beat both his wife and daughter, and Klara took her daughter and fled to Syria in search of a better life. She soon found work cleaning a church and the convent adjacent to it, and received a token salary along with food and shelter for her and Maria. After a while Klara fell in love with the priest's chauffeur and they were married. As ISIS attempted to invade Hassake in northeastern Syria they started to get threatening phone calls. ISIS members phoned the priest and anyone else who worked in the church and presented them with the ultimatum of "convert or die". Maria's stepfather was among those who received the call. His friend was killed in the street, an easy target because of the cross that was hanging from his car's rear view mirror. Many Christians were kidnapped in a short time, ransom was demanded from their families. Klara's husband decided to take his family and flee to Lebanon.

Maria has bruises and lacerations on her arms. Reluctantly she tells us that she worked in a tailor's shop and the owner tried to rape her. He dragged her by the hair down a flight of stairs, she kicked him several times between his legs and managed to escape. It is the second time that she has escaped attempted rape in Lebanon.

When I ask why they have not reported the attempted rape to the police, Maria's mother exclaims "we work for slave wages in order to pay rent and electricity. We are entirely at the hands of the employer. They can do almost anything and get away with it. We cannot report them to the police! And look at my other children, they are indoors almost all the time and don't go to school. This is no life! To be killed by the Islamists might be better".

They tell me that their temporary residence permits have expired and they have not applied for new ones as it costs money and they cannot afford it. Also, to get residence permits in Lebanon they need a Lebanese sponsor who would assume responsibility for the family. Sponsors demand 800 USD per person a prohibitive cost for a family already living in poverty. Ultimately, would the family after finding a sponsor afford the ongoing costs of the temporary residence permit, as its only valid for six months and costs 200 USD per person for anyone over the age of 15.

Klara's siblings have also fled from Iraq to different parts of the world. Maria shows me photos of her aunts, uncles and cousins in Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Sweden and Jordan.

## Flee for your life

When we are about to leave Maria's family, we are stopped by a young couple in their thirties. They also want to tell us their story, they are from Qarakosh in the Nineveh Plains in northern Iraq. They fled from Baghdad to Mosul after Saddam Hussein's fall. They were afraid of the Islamist's wrath, and the man, Jacob, had lost his job. They could not support themselves and in 2008 the situation in Mosul also deteriorated, being a Christian was especially dangerous.

"I took my family and moved to the Christian town of Qarakosh. I got a job as blacksmith, we managed and felt safe and thought the danger was at least partly over. On August 6<sup>th</sup> 2014 everything changed. That date marks the end of Christianity in Iraq. At dawn, a neighbor knocked on our door and woke us up, he told us we only had ten minutes until the terrorists would invade the city. We panicked and were terrified. We knew they would kidnap our children. We fled so quickly that we did not even dress the children.

They fled further north, the trip to Erbil took eight hours. There was chaos at the border, hundreds of thousands of terrified and desperate people wanted to cross the border. When they came to the border they lived on the street for the first few days. A priest asked them to come to his church where they lived for over two months. There were long lines for food, few toilets, and no showers. They have relatives in Canada who managed to send money so the family could fly to Lebanon, unlike so many who continue to live in camps in Erbil and the surrounding region.

"Sometimes I regret we left Erbil, it is much more expensive in Lebanon, my wife has had surgery in Beirut and that costs a lot of money, and though I work as a blacksmith here I still can't even meet the rent."

His wife is showing me their UN applications. She claims that the UN said it would take two months to move them to a country in the West. But that was 18 months ago and nothing has happened.

## Jizyah – or ransom - a lie

The next family we visit is from Raqqa, the capital of ISIS. The wife, Sara, has asked us to visit them. They live with another Syrian family and share three rooms and a kitchen. The landlady also lives there, an old Lebanese woman. The family has been in Lebanon for three years, Sara is ill and has diabetes, high blood pressure and migraines.

“The first year of the uprising against the Syrian regime, we were at home most of the time, everyone except my husband Shabo. He had to work to support us. Immediately after they had taken to the streets to demonstrate, the threats against us Christians started. They said that Christians had nothing to do in Syria anymore. We did not live day by day, but hour by hour. One day Shabo didn't come home. He was gone for three months, we had no idea if he was dead or alive. I was about to lose my mind”.

Shabo had been kidnapped. They paid all the money they had, borrowed more and got more money from relatives in Sweden, amongst others, to help pay ransom. When Shabo was released ISIS invaded Raqqa. Now they demanded that all Christians should pay jizya as extortion money in order to be allowed to live. Shabo is mostly quiet during our visit, he is visibly tired. In Syria, he was a well-known and wealthy businessman. Now he has nothing left, not a penny.

“I have lost my dignity. We Assyrians, and other Christians live in constant danger in the Middle East. Shiites and Alawites are supported by Iran, Sunnis by Saudi Arabia. Who cares about us? We are not worth an iota in the eyes of the world.”

After listening to her husband, Sara speaks again “first we were supposed to pay 17 grams of gold in jizya, that amount would protect us. But they decapitated an Armenian father and his son, they were our friends. They were not able to pay more and they were killed. Several of our friends and relatives disappeared without a trace. Jizya was only a way to trick Christians not to flee, their leader, al-Baghdadi or whatever he is called has now said that it does not apply, that you can't pay for protection anymore. Among all of the grief and devastation, I am still happy that neither my husband or my sons are dead. When Jack, my oldest son who is now in Germany, was looking for his father, he was kidnapped. But he managed to escape.”

## Sheyno, persecuted three times over

We leave Shabo and Sara to take a coffee break at a local association. The man who serves us is a Christian from Iraq. His name is Sheyno.

Sheyno fled from Iraq twelve years ago, when the first Christians got their heads cut off in front of a camera. It was in 2004. Sheyno was working as an interpreter for the Americans and for this reason he suffered threefold persecution; because of his ethnicity as an Assyrian/Syriac, his Christian faith, and his work for the “enemy”.

When we meet Sheyno’s 12 year old son Nazer, we first notice his sad eyes and his burns. His reasoning is sensible and he is fluent in English. He says he is often forced to stay at home because the school for refugees is marked by criminality. Nazer smiles when explains that he has learned English by watching television, a language that he now teaches to his siblings.

With sadness in his voice he talks about some tough experiences in his short life. He speaks about his father being kidnapped twice by Islamists, and about the dramatic escape to Lebanon. Sheyno interrupts him gently and asks him to leave the room for a while. We remain silent, waiting. He pleads us not to reveal what follows. We listen, it hits us hard, our hearts are broken. We promise Sheyno not to reveal his secret.

## Four months in darkness

While I do the interviews in Lebanon, Lars Adaktusson and his staff meet with internally displaced people in Syria. One of them is Father Bhotros who was kidnapped by ISIS in 2015 in Al Qaryatayn and taken to the Caliphate's capital of Raqqa. He was held for four months along with other Christian prisoners in the absolute darkness of a silo where they were exposed to sham executions and torture. Exactly a year ago, he was released in a prisoner exchange. He is still weak and frail and his fellow captives who are still held captive are constantly in his thoughts.

## Helped by a terrorist

In one of the meetings in Damascus the Swedish delegation met with a man from Aleppo. He managed to get away from ISIS captivity thanks to the fact that one of the terrorists was the son of the man's Sunni neighbors who had been helped by the Christian man's family during hardship. At a checkpoint, the kidnapped man from Aleppo got help to escape when the terrorists were busy fending off an attack.

Another Syrian Orthodox priest told me about his four months as a prisoner of ISIS, about the torture, abuse and violence he witnessed and was subjected to. He too was given a chance to escape when a person from his village, now working with ISIS, hid him at their home for two days. The backdrop for this tangible act of compassion was the relief work with food and medical care carried out by the priest and his church in the town before it was conquered by ISIS. The person now helping the priest escape had several family members who had received aid and care from the church when they too had needed help.



## Concrete evidence of genocide

On September 18<sup>th</sup>, a ceasefire was supposed to take effect in Syria. But as Mr. Adaktusson and his entourage drove towards the Christian town of Maloula, where people still the ancient Aramaic language that Jesus himself spoke, there were explosions. A grenade fell 20 meters from the car they were travelling in. It did not, however, prevent them from travelling on and they were able to interview more victims of the ongoing genocide against Christians in Iraq and Syria.

The material they collected provides concrete proof that there is an ongoing genocide and it will be submitted to the United Nations. Adaktusson's efforts have contributed to the recognition of this genocide by the European Parliament, the British House of Commons, and the US Congress. The organization to which I belong, A Demand For Action, has helped with facts and done research which have been relayed to decision makers.

It was already 9 p.m., I had a throbbing headache and thought both my clothes and my body gave off a stink. We were in the Beirut district of Burj Hamud, where many of the Christians who have fled from Iraq and Syria now rent apartments. The crowded apartments where I interviewed refugees were also stinking, they had neither electricity nor ventilation. Outside the rubbish had accumulated as the garbage collectors had been on strike.

I had been working since 5 a.m. At 6 a.m. Lars Adaktusson and his two colleagues, Charlie Weimers and Martin Kallstrand left Lebanon for Syria. They were invited by the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch Ignatius Aphrem II. I was in touch with the monk who was driving them from Beirut to Damascus. The plan was for me to go with them, but after careful consideration I finally decided not to expose them or myself to the extra danger. Two of my contacts in Syria had warned me that the risk of being kidnapped was too great and all too real. Being both a journalist and an activist made me a likely target and constituted a significant risk. In addition, it was a known fact that Sweden pays ransom for its kidnapped citizens.

"You have to meet her Nuri. I know you are tired but I called her and has agreed to share her story with you!" my friend the interpretor, fixer and activist Sharbel kept saying. But I refused, I had already interviewed more than 20 refugees, by this point I thought I had heard it all. Besides I was meeting friends for a late dinner at 10pm and I needed a shower.

## Kidnapped, raped - pregnant

Sharbel did not give up and I did. We got out of the car and she was standing on the balcony calling to us to go up to the second floor and ring the doorbell on the right. The door was open. It was a bigger apartment than the others we'd been to, very clean and nicely furnished. I thought that she looked like a young Sophia Loren, she said her name was Ilham. A little girl demanded her attention, "I'm sorry, I'm going to give her some juice," she said and took the little girl in her arms, kissed her on the forehead and went into the kitchen.

"Tell us, don't be afraid, Nuri is not prejudiced, he will not judge you," said Sharbel and looked at Ilham and the little girl. Ilham fell silent, she swallowed three times and her shoulders stiffened.

The little girl, who turned out to be her daughter, took over. She asked what I was called and I asked what her name was, she answered "You can see it, can't you, in my face what my name is? Grandpa says you can". Her name was Kinora, and when I mistakenly called her Kenora she quickly corrected me. Kinora means "the fair one" or "just", it can also mean "the right thing" doing what is right.

Ilham asked Sharbel to play with the girl, and after she gathered up the courage to speak, looked me in the eye and began to tell me her story. Her eyes also spoke, I could see the brutal abuses that she was subjected to- I could see fear, terror, disgust, but also defiance and courage.

"I came to Aleppo with my family, my mother and father and my sick brother who needed medical care. We came here en route to Beirut, while my family went on to Beirut I remained in Aleppo waiting for my passport to travel from the Middle East to be issued and stayed with relatives. One day I went to an internet café to talk with my parents via Skype.

After we spoke, I went out into the street to go home to my family. Suddenly I felt a blow to the head and fell to the ground. I was pulled into a car, blindfolded and handcuffed." She thinks the drive lasted about a quarter of an hour. Ilham was then carried out and thrown down onto a hard stone floor. Around her she could hear other women crying and the distinct sounds of laughing men. It was then she realized what this could mean for her, she started to panic. Then they came for her, they ripped off her pants and spat at her, called her "sharmouta kuffar" an "infidel whore". While she told me about the continuous rapes her whole body stiffened, her hands trembled.

From time to time, she would glance at Sharbel and Kinora, she did not want the little girl to hear. They were busy playing.

She was held in the basement for one or two days, she is not sure how long, she was raped repeatedly. How many times, and by how many men she does not know. It could have been "only" two, but there could have been more men who assaulted her. Ilham was also severely beaten during the rapes.

There were bombs, she thought she could hear the explosions coming from all directions. She heard the men screaming hysterically, they sounded confused, should they run or not? Should they bring the women they had kidnapped? Or would it be better to kill them and not leave a trace?

After five minutes all was silent, there were still bombs falling but Ilham no longer heard the men. She also was no longer handcuffed and could get up. She walked cautiously to the door, it was open. She and two other women ran up a flight of stairs, and then ran, ran, ran, she can't remember for how long or even which way. She wasn't sure which part of Aleppo she was in, someone asked her what had happened to her. She told them and said she needed help getting back to her relatives, she was given a ride and called her father who told her "a friend of mine will come and pick you up, you must get out, you must go to Lebanon." Someone then drove her to Beirut, "luckily they let me into Lebanon with only a Syrian ID card".

The war hit Syria's second largest town with full force.

In Lebanon a NGO specialized in helping Christian refugees from Iraq and Syria helped her family to find an apartment.

After a few months, she could no longer stand the nausea and stomach pains. The NGO took to her to a doctor and paid for the examination.

"He told me I was pregnant, he asked if my husband was still in Syria, or if he was in Lebanon. I froze, I fantasized about stabbing myself in the stomach with a knife. I carried the terrorists' child. Thank God my father and I have been close, and I felt I could tell him. I knew it was no use telling my mother, she would only become hysterical. A single woman in the Middle East who is pregnant without a ring on her finger, it can't get any worse. But in my case it was worse, I carried a product of rape, a child whose father is horrid, a terrorist."

Her eyes fill with tears, she is trembling all over, and yet she continues.

"My father was talking to the doctor who said I was too far gone for an abortion. I just wanted to rip out the fetus, my instinct said that I could not keep it. But the doctor said that an abortion was out of the question, there would be lasting complications, I would be ill. It was already a complete child and it would be dangerous for and I would not be able to have children in the future. That child was Kinora."

We hear footsteps, a man enters the room and Kinora runs to him. He lifts her up and kisses her on the cheek, we shake hand and he introduces himself as Sabri, Ilham's father.

Ilham has registered herself and Kinora at the UNHCR. She has also asked to become a quota refugee somewhere in the West. Sabri has also applied. The UNHCR insisted that Ilham should provide them with the name of Kinora's father. Without a name, she had to ask her father to register as Kinora's father. For the UN now, Sabri became the father of his own daughter's child.

"But when I was talking with another official of the UNHCR, he said that there must be some misunderstanding, the name of the father was not needed and we should not have registered my father as Kinora's parent. It is such a mess, please help me to talk with the UN and sort it out".

## Conclusion

Of 1.3 million of Iraq's Christians, over one million have left the country. Of Syria's two million Christians, one million have fled. It is true that the relentless fighting and wars in these countries have affected all ethnic groups, regardless of religion. In total 6 million Syrians have fled from their homes. But it is the minorities that have the most to lose, they are being eradicated. Non-Muslims, like the Christians, Yezidis, Mandeans, as well as the Shahbak Muslims have suffered the most and yet have received very little attention or help from the Western world. If no drastic measures are taken to attempt to aid or remedy their current and tragic situation, these minorities, many indigenous to the lands they have been driven off of, will soon be history in this part of the world.

Faithfully

A Demand for Action

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