

Cultural Genocide of the Assyrian in Kurdish Controlled Regions

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You cannot divorce language from its speakers. If you have people who have been disenfranchised, neglected, marginalized, and rejected such as the Assyrians in their own homeland, it is very difficult for society at large, to elevate their language. Thus when one starts to make a case for legitimizing the Assyrian language in Iraq, you are talking about bringing the Assyrian people to a status comparable to the Kurds, Arabs, and Turkomen. We cannot talk about the Assyrian language as separate and distinct from the state of the Assyrian people in Iraq as a neglected and as an underclass, marginalized people.

When we speak of a group of people and their language, we cannot be “for it” or “against it” to the extent that it EXISTS. The Assyrian language to the Assyrian people (wherever they may live, but especially in their own homeland) is the language they heard as their mothers nursed them and changed their diapers and played peek-a-boo with them. It is the language through which they first encountered love, nurturance, and joy. Assyrians know having access to the politically mandated language, (Kurdish or English only-as was recently demanded by the KRG in northern Iraq) will not by any means, guarantee economic success for the Assyrians in northern Iraq. Constant coercion seldom has the desired effect. Forcing speakers to monitor their language typically produces fear and silence.

Those of us that are educators know that when children start attending school, their language most approximates their teacher’s in school. Surprisingly enough, however, by fourth grade, when one might assume growing competence in standard forms, their language moves significantly toward their home dialect. The fourth graders, thus have the competence to express themselves in a more standard form, but choose, consciously or unconsciously, to use the language of those in their local environment. Researchers believe that, by age eight to nine, these children become aware of their group membership and its importance to their well-being, and this realization will reflect in their language. They may become increasingly aware of their government and its institutions’ negative attitude toward their community and find it necessary through choice of linguistic form to decide with which camp to identify.

The linguistic form a child uses is intimately connected with loved one’s community, and personal identity. To suggest that one cannot use their language at their own place of business, or in school, is ignorant and oppressive, as it implies there is something wrong with that language and the people who speak it. This implication fits the perfect definition of Racism and Discrimination, which is what the Assyrians of northern Iraq are currently experiencing at the hands of the Kurds!

Prejudice and discrimination tend to focus on the biases and negative perceptions of individuals toward members of other groups. Gordon Allport, in his ground-breaking work on the nature of prejudice, quotes a United Nations document defining discrimination as, “any conduct based on

the distinction made on the grounds of natural or social categories, which have no relation either to individual capacities or merits, or to the concrete behavior of the individual person.” While this definition is helpful, it is incomplete in so far as it fails to describe the harmful effects of such conduct. More broadly speaking, discrimination denotes negative or destructive behaviors that can result in denying some group’s life necessities as well as their privileges, rights, and opportunities enjoyed by other groups.

Discrimination is usually based on prejudice, that is, the attitudes and beliefs of individuals about entire groups of people. These attitudes and beliefs are almost always, negative, because they limit human perspective of an entire group of people, to the extent that others will stereotype such groups in the overall culture, and both material and psychological resources will be distributed differently to such stereotypical groups.

The Kurds in northern Iraq are categorizing people according to both visible and invisible traits, and using such classification to deduce fixed behavioral and mental traits, and then applying policies and practices that jeopardize some and benefit others. In modern society, the metaphor of “pulling yourself up by your boot straps” is powerful indeed: It allows little room for alternative explanations based on structural inequality.

Racism and other forms of discrimination are based on the perception that one ethnic group or language is superior to all others. In northern Iraq, for example, the Kurdish language is instituted as the conventional norm used to measure all other languages, particularly the Assyrian. In the Kurdish controlled regions of northern Iraq, discrimination based on perceptions of superiority is part of the structure of schools, the curriculum, the education most teachers receive, and the interaction among the teachers, students, and the community. This discrimination is not simply an individual bias; it is above all, an institutional practice.

Most definitions of racism and discrimination obscure the institutional nature of oppression. Although the beliefs and behaviors of individuals may be hurtful, far greater damage is done through institutional discrimination, that is, the systematic use of economic and political power in institutions that leads to detrimental policies and practices. These policies and practices have a harmful effect on groups that share a particular identity, be it racial or ethnic. The major difference between individual and institutional discrimination is the wielding of power to the extent it is primarily through the power of the people who control institutions such as schools and businesses that oppressive policies and practices are reinforced and legitimized.

Institutional discrimination generally refers to how people are excluded or deprived of rights, privileges, and opportunities as a result of the normal operations of the institution. Although individuals involved in instituting policies may not have racist intentions or even awareness of how others may be harmed, the result may nevertheless be racist. In this sense, intentional and unintentional racism are different, but because they both result in negative outcomes, in the end it does not really matter whether racism and other forms of discrimination are intentional. In other words, there are all sorts of underlying rules that if you’re not this, you can’t do that, (i.e. if you are Assyrian, you can’t use your own language in the KRG controlled regions of northern Iraq). In the case of the recent banning by the Kurds of Assyrian language from Assyrian businesses, the Kurds seek to not only control the Assyrians in Ankawa, where the Assyrians

are the majority, but to destroy their economic success and deprive them of the use of their own language, which is a fundamental human right.

Interethnic and intra-ethnic biases and personal prejudices, while negative and hurtful, simply do not have the long-range and life-limiting effects of institutional racism and discrimination. Prejudice and discrimination, then, are not just personality traits or psychological phenomenon, they are also a manifestation of economic, political, and social power. An understanding of racism and discrimination as a system of advantage presents a serious challenge in northern Iraq, to the notion of the Kurdish region as a just society, where rewards are based solely on one's "merit." Racism, as an institutional system implies that some people and groups benefit and others lose. Discrimination always helps somebody; those with the most power, which explains why racism and discrimination continues in the Kurdish controlled regions.

According to Meyer Weinberg, racism is a system of privilege and penalty. One is rewarded or punished in housing, education, employment, health, and so on, by the simple fact of belonging to a particular group, regardless of one's individual merits or faults. He goes on to explain, "Racism consists centrally of two facets: First, a belief in the inherent superiority of some people and the inherent inferiority of others; and second, the acceptance of distributing goods and services, let alone respect, in accordance with such judgments of unequal worth."

The most blatant form of institutional discrimination practiced in the Kurdish-controlled regions of northern Iraq, is the way in which the Kurds are withholding education, linguistic practice, and economic opportunities from the Assyrians in their own homeland. The Assyrians of northern Iraq are encouraged to adopt the ways of the dominant group, (the Kurds) in sundry ways, from subtle persuasion to physical punishment, to psychological coercion for speaking their native language, or trying to implement Assyrian educational and cultural institutions, or putting up signs in the Assyrian language in places where business is conducted. The majority of Assyrians in northern Iraq do not speak English or Kurdish, and the new policy instituted by the Kurds will negatively impact the Assyrian communities in ways that will affect their daily lives and their future, by denying them access to their own language, culture, and goods and services offered by Assyrian businesses.

In this manner, the Kurds hope to extinguish the linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic aspirations of the Assyrians, denying them basic human and civil rights. To that extent, Assyrians cannot be free unless conditions are created which enable them to enjoy full civil, political, economic, social, cultural, and linguistic rights.

Considering that, in the Recife, Brazil, Declaration of 9 October 1987, the 12th Seminar of the International Association for the Development of Intercultural Communication, recommended the United Nations Organization to take the necessary steps to approve and implement a Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights, the Kurds are instituting illegal policies by which to oppress the Assyrians of northern Iraq.

The Kurds should show some regard to the Universal Declaration of the Collective Rights of Peoples, (Barcelona, May 1990) which declared that all peoples have the right to express and develop their culture, language, and rules of organization and, to this end, to adopt political,

educational, communications and governmental structures of their own, within different political frameworks. After all, did the Kurds not establish for themselves those very same rights within the political framework of Iraq? Or have the Kurds become so emboldened by the United States that they perceive themselves to be the new dictatorship in Iraq, replacing Saddam, in exchange for Assyrian homeland?

According to United Nations, the majority of the world's endangered languages belong to non-sovereign peoples and that the main factors, which prevent the development of these languages and accelerate the process of language substitution include the lack of self-government and the policy of states which impose their political and administrative structures and their language. This is precisely what the Kurds are doing in the northern regions of Iraq, illegally imposing their will and their language against the will of the indigenous Assyrians.

Invasion, colonization, occupation and other instances of political, economic, or social subordination often involve the direct imposition of a foreign language, (in this case, Kurdish) and at the very least, distort perceptions of the value of languages and give rise to hierarchical linguistic attitudes which undermine the language loyalty of speakers.

Universal rights must be based on a conception of linguistic and cultural diversity which prevails over trends towards homogenization and towards exclusionary isolation. In order to ensure peaceful coexistence between language communities, overall principles must be found so as to guarantee the promotion and respect of all languages and their social use in public and in private;

Various factors of an extra-linguistic nature, (historical, political, territorial, demographic, economic, socio-cultural and sociolinguistic factors and those related to collective attitudes) give rise to problems which lead to the extinction, marginalization and degeneration of numerous languages, and that linguistic rights must therefore be examined in an overall perspective, so as to apply appropriate solutions in each case.

The international community, in the belief that a Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights is required in order to correct linguistic imbalances with a view to ensuring the respect and full development of all languages and establishing the principles for a just and equitable linguistic peace throughout the world as a key factor in the maintenance of harmonious social relations.

The Declaration of the Inter-American Human Rights Commission on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, approved at session 1278 on September 18, 1995, adopted the following articles; which are now incorporated into the United Nations Charter:

Article 1

1. This Declaration considers as a language community any human society, established historically in a particular territorial space, whether this space be, recognized or not, which identifies itself as a people and has developed a common language as a natural means of communication and cultural cohesion among its members. The term language proper to a territory refers to the language of the community historically established in such a space.

2. This Declaration takes as its point of departure the principle that linguistic rights are individual and collective at one and the same time. In defining the full range of linguistic rights, it adopts as its referent the case of a historical language community within its own territorial space, this space being understood, not only as the geographical area where the community lives, but also as the social and functional space vital to the full development of the language. Only on this basis is it possible to define the rights of the language groups mentioned in point 5 of the present article, and those of individuals living outside the territory of their community, in terms of a gradation or continuum.

3. For the purpose of this Declaration, groups are also deemed to be in their own territory and to belong to a language community in the following circumstances: A-when they are separated from the main body of their community by political or administrative boundaries; B-when they have been historically established in a small geographical area surrounded by members of other language communities; or C-when they are established in a geographical area which they share with the members of other language communities with similar historical antecedents.

4. This Declaration also considers nomad peoples within their areas of migration and peoples established in geographically dispersed locations as language communities in their own historical territory.

5. This Declaration considers as a language group any group of persons sharing the same language which is established in the territorial space of another language community but which does not possess historical antecedents equivalent to those of that community. Examples of such groups are immigrants, refugees, deported persons and members of diasporas.

Article 2

1. This Declaration considers that, whenever various language communities and groups share the same territory, the rights formulated in this Declaration must be exercised on a basis of mutual respect and in such a way that democracy may be guaranteed to the greatest possible extent.

2. In the quest for a satisfactory sociolinguistic balance, that is, in order to establish the appropriate articulation between the respective rights of such language communities and groups and the persons belonging to them, various factors, besides their respective historical antecedents in the territory and their democratically expressed will, must be taken into account. Such factors, which may call for compensatory treatment aimed at restoring a balance, include the coercive nature of the migrations, which have led to the coexistence of the different communities and groups, and their degree of political, socioeconomic and cultural vulnerability.

Article 3

1. This Declaration considers the following to be inalienable personal rights, which may be exercised in any situation: the right to be recognized as a member of a language community; the right to the use of one's own language both in private and in public; the right to the use of one's own name; the right to interrelate and associate with other members of one's language

community of origin; the right to maintain and develop one's own culture; and all the other rights related to language which are recognized in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 16 December 1966 and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of the same date.

2. This Declaration considers that the collective rights of language groups may include the following, in addition to the rights attributed to the members of language groups in the foregoing paragraph, and in accordance with the conditions laid down in article 2.2:

The right for their own language and culture to be taught; the right of access to cultural services; the right to an equitable presence of their language and culture in the communications media; the right to receive attention in their own language from government bodies and in socioeconomic relations.

The aforementioned rights of persons and language groups must in no way hinder the interrelation of such persons or groups with the host language community or their integration into that community. Nor must they restrict the rights of the host community or its members to the full public use of the community's own language throughout its territorial space.

In conclusion, the Kurds have no right to impose their will on the indigenous Assyrians of northern Iraq, in the way of banning the Assyrian language from any institutional space, especially, when the Kurds are but guests of the Assyrians in Iraq.