

ANALYSIS

BEING ASSYRIAN IN MONO-ETHNIC ARMENIA

Today, the population of Armenia stands at nearly three million. Armenia has a mono-ethnic, monolingual, monocultural and mono-religious society (predominantly Armenian Apostolic Church followers) comprising 98% of the nation's population (Armenians total 2,961,801, or 98.1%). This monoethnic envisioning of society is exemplified by the censuses that convey the overall composition of Armenian society. Whereas, in 1988, national/ethnic minorities formed 6.7% of the population, by 2011 that figure had decreased to 2.2–2.3%; that year's census demonstrates that 98 per cent of the three million Armenian residents are "ethnically Armenian." Minority groups, according to the 2011 census, comprise: Yazidis, 35,308 (1.1%); Russians, 11,911 (0.3%); Assyrians, 2,769 (0.09%); Kurds, 2,162 (0.07%); Ukrainians, 1,176 (0.03%); Greeks, 900 (0.02%); Georgians, 617 (0.02%); and others, 1,734 (0.05%) (<http://www.armstat.am/en/?nid=81&id=1512>). Unofficial sources assert that the number of Assyrians has now reached 5,000–8,000.

Assyrians (in Armenian usage: *Aysors*, *Ասորիներ*) form Armenia's third largest ethnic minority, after Yazidis and Russians. The first appearance of Assyrians in the territory of the Russian Empire (current Armenia) harks back to the Russo-Persian war of 1826–1828, when they were moved there along with Armenians. Under the influence of the Russian authorities, the immigrants promptly followed Orthodox Christianity, which thus became a significant bond between Armenians and Assyrians. Today, the Assyrian population is mainly concentrated in four villages: Arzni, Koylasar (Dimitrov), and Verin Dvin, which are heavily populated by Assyrians, and Nor Artagers in Armavir region. Not only Assyrians, but also Russians, Yazidis, Greeks, and Kurds, are among the national minorities living in the Ararat region.

Assyrians make up significant proportions of the communities of Verin Dvin and Dimitrov; 80% of the population of the Verin Dvin community are Assyrian. The community has a functioning church, built in 1828, called Mar-Tuma. There is also a chapel called Marez in the community, which was built in

1830. The Holy Apostolic Church of the Assyrian Catholicosate of the East, headed by Isaac Temrz, is an important Assyrian religious organization in Armenia. In the Kotayk region, Assyrians live in Arzni (1,500 people) and Argel (13 people). Both Yazidis and Assyrians live together in the Nor Artagers community of Armavir region. The number of Assyrians here is 256, and that of the Yazidis is 327 (<http://geopolitics.am/archives/14125>). In general, the Assyrians of Armenia have well-established relations with Russia and Iran.

Armenia and ethnic minorities

In 2002, Armenia joined the list of countries that have ratified the European Charter for the Protection of Regional Languages and adopted a resolution on the implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. The republic took under its protection the languages of traditional linguistic minorities: speakers of Yazidi, Kurdish, Russian, Assyrian, and Greek. The state guarantees favorable conditions for the study of their languages, acting on the principle of “do no harm.”

Since Armenia had sought a foreign policy course oriented to close relations with Europe, from 2002 on the country should have taken into account the values and ideas that are considered the cornerstone of the European community; values such as tolerance, which can be described as the ability to perceive different thoughts, behaviors, ways of self-expression, and lifestyles without aggression. The principle of equality of all people is enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of Armenia. Article 41 of the Constitution states that everyone has the right to preserve their national ethnic identity. Persons belonging to national minorities have the right to preserve and develop their traditions, religion, language, and culture.

Razmik Khosro, an actor in the National Academic Theater, named after Gabriel Sundukyan, an Assyrian, states that ethnic minorities living in Armenia have never had political problems, but there have always been educational and cultural problems. Previously, there was no state policy toward national minorities in Armenia; even now, it cannot be said that such a policy fully exists. According to Khosro, organizing festivals for national minorities once or twice a year does not amount to promoting ethnic culture. The government allocates 20 million *drams* a year to the cultural needs of national minorities, a sum that they simply have to distribute among eleven distinct ethnic minorities.

On the other hand, representative of the Yerevan City Committee of the ARF “Dashnaksutyun” party Zhirayr Peochekyan believes that only those representatives of ethnic minorities who would like to live in Armenia and are ready to voluntarily **“fall under the current conditions, law, cultural values of the Republic of Armenia” (in other words, willing to be voluntarily assimilated)** are welcome in the country (<https://yerkramas.org/article/173061/prioritetnaya-zadacha---repatriaciya-armyan-v-armeniyu>). Otherwise, the priority of the country must, for now, be ensuring the return of Armenian compatriots.

The place of Assyrians' language, tradition and culture in the Armenian reality

The Armenian Public Radio Company produces the "First Program," in which Assyrians have 15 minutes to spotlight ongoing processes in their native language. The company's website has an Assyrian version for posting these recordings; however, the news feed is available only in Russian and Georgian. The National Library of Armenia possesses just five textbooks in Assyrian and has three registered Assyrian readers. Although financial support is provided to other national minorities of Armenia to ensure the periodical publication of books, digitalization of newspapers, and availability of the press in general, no digitalization or publication resources are allocated to Assyrians.

The same can be said for the "Support to National Minorities" program that helps national minorities to organize events by way of grants. Hence, in 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018 (information on 2019 and 2020 is unavailable), no grants were given to the Assyrian community through the framework of the "Support to National Minorities" program. Moreover, within the scope of the "Government-Sponsored Literature" program, no Assyrian literature was published between 2015 and 2017. There is merely one newspaper, *Assyriskie Novosti* (Russian for Assyrian News), that exists as an international newspaper of Assyrians living in CIS countries. From 2015 to 2018, for publication in Armenia, this newspaper was allocated 800,000 AMD per year, rising to 1.2 million in 2019.

Sources state that there are in total four schools (Arzni, Verin Dvin, Dimitrov, and Yerevan) teaching Assyrian in Armenia. The lessons are in Assyrian, but explanations are in Russian. Moreover, in the school located in Yerevan, the subjects "Assyrian" and "Assyrian Literature" are taught as part of the Russian Language curriculum. In the village of Nor Artagers there is no separate Assyrian section for children. The school is completely Armenian, and Assyrian is taught as an optional subject for just one hour a week. Often, the entirety of this optional education does not go beyond the alphabet. Furthermore, the assimilation processes are much stronger here. In Dimitrov, the education was in Russian, but owing to the "money deficit," lessons continue to be taught in Armenian (<https://ru.armeniasputnik.am/society/20190512/18539799/My-prosto-ne-dolzhen-assimilirovatsya-kak-sberech-assiriyskoe-menshinstvo-v-Armenii.html>). In 2017, only two teachers of the Assyrian language were trained. It has since been revealed that four representatives of national minorities are receiving postgraduate education at the moment, and one of them is Assyrian.

The problems tackled: Discrimination and assimilation

First and foremost, the issue is (voluntarily and forced) assimilation and self-preservation. To begin with, in all archives and documentation, Assyrians are presented as "Armenians," which causes significant dissatisfaction among community representatives. Last year, some Assyrians were asking for international community action to protect the Assyrian village of Dimitrovo from Armenization (https://facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10212065856596579&id=1679384713&sfnsn=m).

Following the same religion makes assimilation easier and opens a path for mixed marriages. Today, almost every Assyrian family has an Armenian family member.

Meanwhile, Armenians are attempting to seize Assyrian churches located in Assyrian-populated villages. According to the Assyrian community, in the Assyrian village of Dimitrovo, an Armenian priest, with the support of the local Chairman of the village, “captured the Assyrian church, Mat Maryam.” To be more precise, Armenians and Assyrians cannot agree on the ownership of this church in the Ararat region of Armenia. The Assyrian community considers all the columns and altar to be Assyrian, asserting that all of their churches are akin to one another, as can be seen in Dvin and Arzni. Armenians try to justify the ownership through an “Armenian inscription” at the entrance and the church’s “Armenian builder.” Subsequently, Armenians took away the keys of the basilica, although for a long time they have been held by Assyrians (<https://rus.azatutyun.am/a/30069764.html>). Today, Assyrians continue to demand that Armenia’s Prime Minister, Nikol Pashinyan, and the Catholicos of all Armenians, Karekin II, return the church to its true owners.

The second issue has to do with the discrimination occurring in Armenia against Assyrians. Irina Gasparyan asserts that, today, Assyrians and other nationalities are subject to invisible discrimination. They can be fired from work because of their nationality and for no other reason, which is usually difficult to prove. She exemplifies her argument with a reported case in the ArmenTel company. In the Artashat branch of this company, an Assyrian woman was fired from her job. Outwardly, discrimination in the workplace remains invisible. However, when the time comes to fire someone, the choice is not made in favor of representatives of other nationalities (<https://www.panorama.am/ru/news/2012/07/03/i-gasparyan/721597>).

According to the Assyrians, Armenia has failed to make the ethnic culture of national minorities a part of its culture. The Assyrian population believes that much remains to be done in this direction by the government and the Ministry of Culture. Another problem relates to the Assyrian language; it is not taught in any Armenian university, and what is taught in schools is inadequate for a full education. Thus, Assyrians use community funds to send their youth to study at the Assyrian University of Urmia (Iran), after which they return and teach children in rural schools. However, in this case, they also have to study *in absentia* at Yerevan Pedagogical University in order to obtain a teaching qualification. Several years ago, Assyrians submitted to the government a draft law on national minorities, through which, if adopted, they would have a mechanism for solving their problems. However, this draft was never sent to parliament (<https://jam-news.net/ru/меньшинство-в-большинстве/>).

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