

centered in the villages of Hawrezk and Avzrook (the latter comprised of a mixed Assyrian and Armenian population) until around 1975 when the government of Saddam Hussein disbanded the villages and forced the population to relocate to neighboring towns. This strategy was not directed against the Armenians but rather aimed at weakening the support that many villages in Kurdistan provided to the Peshmerga (the Kurdish paramilitary groups). According to Aram Shahin Bakoyan, a former MP in the Kurdistan Regional Parliament and a native of Avzrook, most of the Armenians sympathized with the Peshmerga and some of them were even imprisoned under the Saddam regime in the notorious Abu Ghraib prison. In some instances, when the regime tried to persuade non-Kurds fighting with the Peshmerga to renounce and sever their affiliation with the Kurdish groups, the Armenians refused by saying they considered themselves Kurds, albeit "Christian Kurds."

The two villages were repopulated and rebuilt in 2006 after the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) provided funds to build houses and encouraged the former population to return. This endeavor was greatly assisted by Sarkis Aghajan Mamendo, an Assyrian politician who held numerous posts in the KRG, including that of Deputy Prime Minister (2004-06). According to Murad Vardanian, the village chief of Hawrezk, since 2006 the KRG has built over 115 houses in the village. The construction and operation of a nearby regional airport promised to be a major source of employment for the villagers. Once again after the fall of Mosul in 2014, those plans were put off amidst the growing climate of insecurity.

Church and State

The focal point of the Armenian communities in Kurdistan is the church. According to Father Masis Shahinian, the pastor of St. Nerses Shnorhali Church in Dohuk and the visiting pastor of Hawrezk, most Armenians speak Armenian and Kurdish in their daily lives. While the church liturgy is still held in Armenian, the sermons are in either Kurdish (the Kurmanji dialect) or Arabic.

In the town of Zakho, less than 10 miles from the Turkish border, the church of St. Astvatsatsin (Church of the Virgin Mary) stands in a complex built with funds from a donation from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation in 1968. As was the case in Erbil, the Armenian population of Zakho increased in recent years, from approximately 165 families in 2013 to over 240

families today. According to Father Arakel Kasparian, the town's Armenian pastor, most of the newcomers were families from Mosul and its surrounding areas who fled the city after ISIS took over, including Kasparian, who until 2014 served as the pastor of Mosul, and was responsible for finding a safe passage of his parish after ISIS seized his hometown.

The small Armenian community in

Armenians as their ethnic brothers, affirming a belief that "the Kurds and Armenians were a single nation. Jesus came and separated the two, and then Islam came and turned the Kurds against Armenians." In the town of Duhok, another Kurdish official remarked that "unlike most Christians, who have their eyes set on the West, Armenians are part and parcel of our society. We are ethnically similar and many

"The lack of measurable and concrete actions taken by the Armenian government and the Armenian communities around the world is viewed with considerable resentment."

Kurdistan is well integrated in the local socio-political and economic fabric. According to Yarwant Nisan Markoz (Yervant Aminian), the current Armenian MP in the Kurdistan Regional Parliament, Armenians are viewed favorably by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which considers Armenian as one of the official languages of Kurdistan. One Kurdish official in Erbil who spoke on the condition of anonymity, recounted how Kurds viewed

Armenians fought with us to obtain our independence. The fact that Armenians in Avzrook use Kurdish as their language of communication is more proof that we are both brothers."

This perception is accentuated looking at the political lexicon used in Kurdistan to describe non-Kurdish minorities. Under the constitution of Kurdistan, the region has a parliament consisting of 111 seats, 11 of which are reserved for non-Kurdish mi-

