

Assyrian Dikhwa

The Assyrians are an ethnic and national minority in Syria, mostly in Al-Hasakah province, but some live in other Syrian regions. The origin of the Assyrians goes back to the Assyrian Empire that existed in Nineveh, Iraq, and later spread to what is today the Levant, Egypt, and a large part of Turkey. The Assyrian civilization is one of the oldest in the world. It is known for producing the oldest documented literary work known to mankind, The Epic of Gilgamesh. It is interesting though that after its victory over the Aramaic kingdoms, in present-day Syria, and the annexing them to the empire, the Assyrian Empire adopted Aramaic as its official language, contrary to what all victorious empires that try to impose their language and culture. Hence, the Assyrian and Aramaic cultures were closely linked and even mixed sometimes⁵. The Assyrians adopted Christianity, and their Syriac language became associated with the language of their church. This has preserved this language until today as prayers are still read in Syriac, and tens of thousands of Assyrians around the world, particularly in Syria and Iraq, still speak it as their mother tongue. The Syrian Writer Karam Dooley says: 'During the Christian era, the "Syriac" name was established as a label for all the citizens of Assyria and Syria, as well as all the peoples who converted to Christianity as its origin was Syria and its people are the Syriacs. Thus, the Syriac name became, in this era, a

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e2iz-nQ2H1U&t=692s>

historical and cultural outcome for the entire civilization of Syria and Mesopotamia.’⁶ Therefore, the Syriac Assyrians have close emotional links to Syria because her name is associated with them, and their name is associated with her. Speaking of name origins, the name of the Khabur River- around which many cities and towns of the Assyrians were established in the modern era- is the name of the god Ashur’s dragon in the ancient Assyrian myths. There is also a very long list of colloquial Syrian words used today across the country and the surrounding countries that come from Assyrian-Syriac origin.⁷ Most people use these words on a daily basis knowing they are not Arabic but not knowing their origin, just like me until writing this book!

Most of the Syrian people are considered Arab by nationality and language, except for few minority groups that are already established as non-Arab: Kurds, Armenians, Turkmen, Circassians, and Assyrians, who altogether make somewhere between 12-15% of the population. Moreover, the official name for Syria since 1963 is the Syrian “Arab” Republic. However, the reality is that even the Syrian ‘Arabs’ have multiple ethnic and linguistic components weaved into them. Some linguistic

⁶ <https://mena-studies.org/ar/%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b3%d8%b1%d9%8a%d8%a7%d9%86-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a2%d8%b4%d9%88%d8%b1%d9%8a%d9%88%d9%86-%d9%81%d9%8a-%d8%b3%d9%88%d8%b1%d9%8a%d8%a7/>

⁷ For readers of Arabic, we recommend reading Yassine Abdulraheem’s book ‘*The Syrian Colloquial Dictionary*.’

components go back to the very origin of Syria, such as Aramaic and Assyrian; some ethnic components have deep roots in Syria, such as Kurdish and Assyrians again; and some national components do not go back to the ancient origin of Syria but have been an essential and authentic part of it for more than a century, such as Armenian, Turkmen and Circassian. So, the Assyrians are among the Syrian minorities that have blended with the Arab culture that started dominating the cultural, political and social life in Syria since the 19th century, reaching full dominance in the 1960s. They have successfully and proudly preserved their distinctive identity and are still practicing and celebrating their language, music, dances, events and cuisine today.

In the modern history of the Assyrians, there are two painful massacres: the first was the Sayfo massacre in 1915, which was committed by the Ottoman Empire and led to the displacement of most of Turkey's Assyrians to Syria and Iraq. The second massacre was Simele massacre, committed by the Iraqi government in 1933 and led to the displacement of many of Iraq's Assyrians to Syria. These Assyrians who escaped to Syria established the city of Qamishli in north-eastern Syria and transformed Al-Hasakah from a former Ottoman military post inhabited by some families to the current city, now the capital of Al-Hasakah province. They also established many other towns and villages in the Syrian Jazira region.

The most important holiday for the Assyrians is the Akitu holiday on April 1st of each year, which is the Assyrian New Year. It is actually an astronomical holiday

that is not linked to the Assyrian Christian religion, and the current year (2023) coincides with the year 6773 in the Assyrian calendar. In Assyrian mythology, the Akitu festival is the celebration of Ishtar, the goddess of fertility, as April is the beginning of spring and the return of fertility and life to the earth after the winter months. One of the popular folkloric stories about Akitu is that on the day of Akitu, Ishtar wears her dress decorated with fruits and walks across the lands, bringing spring and green and spring crops to them, hence come the famous 'Om El-Zuluf' and 'Abu El-Zuluf' folk songs, widely popular in Syria and the region.⁹ However, according to a linguistic research in ancient Aramaic and Syriac by the writer Yassin Abdel Rahim, the word 'Zuluf' symbolizes the locks of hair hanging on the forehead. In either case, the sure thing is the association of spring celebrations, such as Akitu and others, with Ishtar in Syrian mythology as well the Syriac origin of the popular Zulf songs.⁸

An Assyrian lady from Qamishli, who preferred not to mention her name, hosted us at the Akitu feast. She cooked us the dish of Dikhwa that is associated with this festival and is always cooked during it and the rest of the festivals celebrated by the Assyrians.

- **Dikhwa**

- **Ingredients:** 1 kilo of peeled barley, half a kilo of chopped meat, two kilos of sour yogurt, a tablespoon of

⁸ For readers of Arabic, we recommend reading Dr Ahmad Daoud's book '*Syria's Ancient History*.'

starch, a spoonful of black spices seeds, two bay leaves, salt, mint or dried wild thyme for garnishing.

- **Instructions:** Soak the barley in hot water for a day, then drain and rub it well. Boil the meat in water until it is done, and add the barley, then boil until the grains open. The texture remains like soup. Stir the yogurt with a spoonful of starch, add it to the soup and stir constantly until it boils. When it boils, turn off the heat and add dried mint or wild thyme.

