



Assyrians Under ISIS: Cultural Destruction

Time: 60 minutes

Audience: Grades 9-12

Student Outcomes:

At the end of this lesson, students will:

- Understand the impact of ISIS on the Assyrian nation
- Understand how international law defines genocide
- Analyze definitions and core concepts of genocide through comparing text
- Examine the immediate and long-term impacts of genocide and cultural destruction

Aligned Standards (California Common Core):

- Students analyze instances of nation-building in the contemporary world in the Middle East (CA.HSS-10.10)
- Describe the recent history of the region, including political divisions and systems, key leaders, religious issues, natural features, resources, and population patterns (CA.HSS-10.10.2)
- Discuss the important trends in the regions today and whether they appear to serve the cause of individual freedom and democracy (CA.HSS-10.10.3)
- Discuss the historical role of religion and religious diversity (CA.HSS-POAD.12.3.3)
- Explain how the different philosophies and structures of government influence human rights practices (CA.HSS-POAD.12.9.1)
- Describe for at least two countries the consequences of conditions that gave rise to tyrannies during certain periods (CA.HSS-POAD.12.9.4)
- Identify the successes of relatively new democracies in Asia and the ideas, leaders, and general societal conditions that have launched and sustained, or failed to sustain, them (CA.HSS-POAD.12.9.8)
- Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1)
- Determine the central ideas of a source and summarize key details and ideas (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2)
- Compare the perspectives of multiple authors or witnesses on the same historical event (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.6)
- Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1)
- Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.7)
- Integrate information from diverse sources into a coherent understanding of an idea or event (CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9)

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Context:

The Islamic State's siege of portions of Iraq and Syria from 2014 through 2017 perpetrated the second genocide against Assyrians in a century. The first, lasting from 1914 through 1918, saw the Ottoman Empire kill more than 250,000 Assyrians. Successive governments prevented most survivors from returning to their homes, forcing many Assyrians into permanent diaspora. Many Assyrian refugees ultimately remained alongside existing, indigenous Assyrian populations in Iraq and Syria, in some cases creating new villages. The genocide perpetrated by ISIS, almost exactly a century later, aimed to kill and ethnically cleanse Assyrians from their homelands in northern Iraq and Syria, to destroy Christians and the practice of Christianity, and to erase evidence of Assyrian cultural and religious heritage throughout the region.

This lesson asks students to consider how we define genocide, exploring the legal framework of the genocide convention alongside practical questions of the importance of culture and history to a group's existence. Students will explore Raphael Lemkin's original framework for defining genocide and examine how it changed through comparing language in an early draft and the final text of the UN Genocide Convention. They will have the opportunity to watch a video (or several) regarding ISIS's destruction of Assyrian sites in northern Iraq and consider the impacts of cultural destruction. Survivor testimonies are also made available to support student learning.

This lesson has several goals: to develop understanding of the Assyrian genocide under ISIS; to gain experience analyzing primary source documents; and to explore questions of genocidal intent.

Materials:

For instruction:

- ['ISIS: A Timeline of Key Events'](#)
- ['Assyrians Under ISIS: An Overview of the Genocide'](#)
- ['Key Terms'](#)
- [Teacher Resource slides](#)

For student learning activities :

- [Comparison of Genocide Convention Language](#)
- Raphael Lemkin [1946 NYT Letter](#)
- Lesson plan videos: ['Rebuilding Nineveh: What Does it Look Like to Rebuild after ISIS?'](#)
- [Video worksheet](#)
- [Additional Video Resources](#)

Differentiation:

- Gifted learners: Examine multiple videos, write a reflection on what they learned about the damage caused by ISIS and broader challenges of rebuilding and returning home
- ESL: Subtitles in different languages

- SpEd: Modify questions to meet educational needs, such as focusing on general impressions, what they would do in that situation, etc.

Assessment(s): [Genocide Convention Comparison worksheet](#), [Video worksheet](#), reflections

Lesson/Activity:

- 1) Introduction: Defining Genocide (Part 1 in [Teacher Resource Slides](#))
 - Teacher introduces students to Raphael Lemkin, who coined the word genocide and developed much of its legal definition
 - Teacher asks students about culture, guides discussion to Lemkin's belief genocide included both physical destruction and cultural destruction of a people
 - Optional: Teacher shares Lemkin's 1946 letter to the New York Times on the genocide and asks students to reflect on his argument (an excerpt is also included in the class instruction slides if preferable)
 - Teacher shares document comparing the 1947 draft of the genocide convention and the final language adopted in 1948; students read both and identify changes
 - Note: cultural elements are taken out (although some elements, such as transferring children, are kept); students might also notice that political and linguistic groups are removed as victims
- 2) Instruction on ISIS (Part 2 in Teacher Resource Slides)
 - Teacher provides students with material handouts (key terms, timeline, optional overview).
 - Teacher asks students what they know about the Assyrian population and shares brief description.
 - Teacher may wish to share a video clip on ISIS (see 'optional video resources' - options include short 5-minute news clips to 24-minute documentary).
 - Teacher leads students in discussing the timeline of events and historical overview (optional - using Teacher Resource Slides).
 - Teacher centers question of the importance of cultural, historical, religious, language, and community factors to a group like the Assyrians
 - **Optional activity:** have students first list things on the board that are essential to a people (could be general or specific to Assyrians). Give several long strings to a student in the center or front of the room. Students take the other ends of those strings, each representing the elements they just named (for example, one string is language, one is connection to community, one is living in their home, one is practicing their religion, one is knowing their history, etc.). Have another student representing ISIS cut each of the strings that ISIS destroyed or damaged (and the students holding the other ends sit down). Students look at what strings are left and reflect on the impact of ISIS's actions.
- 3) Rebuilding Nineveh: [Video excerpts](#)
 - Teacher explains that a major challenge after ethnic cleansing and genocide is rebuilding community and making it safe for people to be able to return home.

- Teacher explains that sometimes governments and many humanitarian organizations come together to provide money and manpower to repair the damage, but sometimes, like in Iraq, there is so much damage that smaller communities don't always receive the help they need.
 - Students watch a video or selection of videos on rebuilding Nineveh
 - Students individually complete worksheet reflection on the video(s) they watched.
 - Group discussion: students discuss their reflections and what they learned from the videos, as well as empathy questions such as if they would feel safe returning and what would be needed for them to feel safe in their home.
- 4) Optional: ISIS as depicted by Assyrian Artists (Part 3 in Teacher Slides)
- Teachers may wish to share one or several paintings by Assyrian artists related to ISIS.
- 5) Individual written reflection:
- Students write a concluding reflection explaining what ISIS did and the impact of its actions on the Assyrian community. Students may also discuss thoughts on Lemkin's original framework and changes made in drafting the Genocide Convention.
- 6) Concluding class discussion:
- Students share reflections with the class.

Supplemental Resources:

Testimonies, news coverage, short films, and more can be found [here](#)

References:

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