

# Contested nations: Iraq and the Assyrians

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**ABSTRACT.** The formation of nation-states from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East after World War I, under colonial auspices, proceeded with negotiations in some instances and hostilities in others from previously autonomous communities, some of them formally designated as *millet*s. Iraq comprised a diversity of religious and ethnic communities. The Assyrians, Christian mountain tribes, mostly refugees from Turkish Kurdistan under British protection, were one community which actively resisted integration into the new nation-state and, as a result, were subject to violent attacks by the nascent Iraqi army in 1933. This episode and the way it was perceived and interpreted by the different parties is an interesting illustration of the political psychology of communitarianism in interaction with nationalism, complicated by religious identifications, all in a colonial context. Subsequent histories and commentaries on the episode are also interesting in illuminating ideological readings.

Religious boundaries and their politicisation in Middle Eastern countries persist, or rather, are renewed and reconstructed in relation to political mutations and international balances of force. We saw these processes in operation in the recent civil war and its aftermath in the Lebanon. In Egypt, Muslim-Coptic issues are revived by some sectors of political Islamic activism, and this prompts protestations of equality and brotherhood from some quarters, and charges of discrimination and persecution from others. The diversity of population and the complexity of communal boundaries have been particularly notable in Iraq and are exacerbated by the present repressive regime with its tribal and sectarian policies. The formation of the Iraqi nation-state, under British auspices, in the years following World War I, oscillated between negotiations with and repression of diverse communalist forces intent on maintaining their boundaries and autonomies. This article will explore aspects of the response to these challenges in terms of religion and nationalism, as illustrated by the episode of the massacre of Assyrians by the Iraqi army in 1933. This may shed some light on the social and political psychology of communitarianism and nationalism in their complex combinations. Accounts and explanations of these events by contemporary observers and subsequent historians and commentators also illustrate the ideological perspectives and political interests involved.

### *Millet and nation*

The basic units of social organisation and solidarity in the Ottoman era were those of village, tribe, religious community, urban quarter and craft corporation, many of which were officially recognised by the government as corporate groups and units of taxation. Some religious communities were recognised as *millet*s with a measure of internal self-government by religious leaders and elders applying religious law to matters of personal status and community affairs. Muslims, though not *millet*s in this sense, were in fact mostly organised in corporate groups of different kinds.

These models of corporate organisation and solidarity were at odds with the 'national' model emerging in the nineteenth century inspired by European ideals of nation and citizenship, constitutions and representations. The *Tanzimat* reforms proclaimed the principle of common citizenship for all subjects of the sultan, and the subsequent Constitution of 1876 reinforced this idea. There was no effort, however, to abolish the *millet* system. And one of the most difficult ideas to accommodate at the popular level was that of equality of the religious minorities with Muslims.<sup>1</sup>

For the majority of people throughout Ottoman lands the '*millet* model' of social organisation and of social solidarities persisted, arguably to the present day, but superimposed on ideas of nationality. Ottomanism and subsequently Arab or regional nationalisms were modern ideologies of nationality and state formation for the intelligentsia, but for the common people they were often understood in communalistic terms: Muslims as against Christians and Jews (including Europeans, then Israel); Arab *versus* Kurd or Turk in terms of personalised neighbourhoods and communities. In Iraq this was further accentuated by the Sunni-Shi'i divide and the proximity of Iran and Turkey as the protagonists of the two sects. A kind of communalistic model of international relations emerged in the region (and is still in operation) which classified local religious and ethnic groups alongside their foreign co-religionists and ethnic kin.<sup>2</sup>

Members of religious minorities were often themselves divided by these issues. The emerging intelligentsia and business elites were unhappy with the domination of traditional religious leaders and elders. They, too, were affected by modern political and social outlooks and were seeking a community of liberty and equality, and if possible, fraternity. The question was whether these ideals were to be achieved in the context of a common multiethnic nation-state of equal citizenship, such as a reformed Ottoman Empire and, subsequently, its successor nation-states, or in terms of separate nation-statehood on the model of the secessionist southern European nations (Greece, Bulgaria). This dilemma was particularly acute for the Armenians, with the tragic consequences which we know.

We can then speak of three competing types of mentality regarding political models: the *millet* model, that is of closed self-administering communities within a more inclusive political authority; the ethnic nation-

state model; and the inclusive multiethnic nation-state. Superimposed on all these is the implicit communalistic model of international relations already outlined.

Most of the successor states to the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East were to follow, formally, the multiethnic nation-state model. However, the *millet* model was to remain prominent in mentalities and forms of solidarity and organisation of most sectors of the population. Only Lebanon formalised this fact in its constitution. All the others continued to pretend common and equal citizenship.

### The kingdom of Iraq

The three Ottoman provinces which constituted modern Iraq were backwaters of the empire, dominated until well into the nineteenth century by Mamluke factions, local warlords and tribal confederations. Reformist governors, notably Midhat Pasha (1869–71) brought the spirit of the Tanzimat to the country, banished the mamlukes, curbed the tribes and enacted some semblance of rational administration and fiscal policy. However, the ideological and political ferments of the central lands of the empire affected Iraq but marginally.<sup>3</sup>

The British Mandate authority and King Faysal I (reigned 1921–33) whom they sponsored were acutely conscious of the communal pluralism of Iraq and the problems that would pose for the formation of the new nation-state. Iraq was to be an Arab kingdom, but the Kurds had to be accommodated. The abandonment of the promise of a Kurdish state (at Sèvres in 1920) made the obligation to the Kurds ever more pressing, especially when the British, then the Iraqi armed forces were episodically confronted with forceful Kurdish insurrections. The constitutional formula was equality of citizenship, but with special regard for the Kurdish language and Kurdish cultural specificities, issues which remain with us to the present day. The motives for the insurrections were not so much 'nationalism' in the modern sense, but the (well-founded) fear of the Kurdish tribal chiefs that their customary autonomy under the Ottomans and the Persians would be restricted if not ended under the proposed nation-state. Subsequent nationalist sentiments of the emerging intelligentsia were superimposed on these tribal sentiments, and the leadership of the Kurdish movement in Iraq has continued to include prominent tribal elements, especially the Barzanis, to the present day. The Assyrians, as we shall see, shared these sentiments, but with a different twist.<sup>4</sup>

Faysal tried to build bridges to all the main communities, but his efforts were often weak and frustrated by the actions of his subordinates and later by the new Iraqi army. Guarantees of the safety and well-being of minorities were among the foremost problems the British authorities and their Iraqi *protégés* had to face when Iraq's independence was to be proclaimed in

1932. The British authorities were in a hurry to end the Mandate which they found costly. An independent Iraqi government under their control was preferable. But to embark on this step they had to re-assure the League of Nations as well as prominent sectors of British public opinion, that the new government would be capable and responsible, and above all able to protect the minorities. British politicians had to vouch to the League of Nations for the capabilities of the new government and undertake ultimate responsibility for the protection of minorities. British officials were thereafter ever keen to support the Iraqi government in its dealings with dissident or rebellious minorities, and to cover up the misdeeds of some of its organs in these respects. At the same time, Iraqi nationalists, and the majority of Iraqis considered all acts of minority dissidence as a British conspiracy to undermine Iraqi independence. The minorities were caught in the middle.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Assyrian episode of 1933**

The Assyrians were mountain people mostly from the region of Hakkari, now in Turkish Kurdistan, but some were from Urmiyah in Iran. Their language is Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic. They are Nestorian Christians (though, as we shall see, they now try to distance themselves from this designation) headed by a hereditary patriarch. They were divided into tribes with hereditary chiefs. Their social organisation was similar to that of their Kurdish neighbours, and, like them, they enjoyed considerable autonomy under Ottoman rule. They had the reputation of being fierce warriors, who held their own in conflicts with Kurdish neighbours. On occasions Assyrian tribes would enter into alliances with Kurdish tribes against other Kurd-Assyrian forces. The centralising policies of the Ottomans in the nineteenth century encroached on these autonomies, and the Islamic policies under Sultan Abdul-Hamid (reigned 1875–1908), made life increasingly difficult for the Assyrian tribes, who fell victim to alliances between Ottoman and Kurdish forces. During World War I the Hakkari Assyrians were induced to rebel against the Ottomans in favour of the Russians. The rebellion failed, the Russians let them down after the Revolution, and they had to flee their homes in a march across high mountains to western Iran. There, after many battles with Turks and Kurds, and suffering from the prevailing famine, they had to flee south where they made contact with British forces. The British took the remnants of the Assyrians, about 50,000 of them, to Iraq, where after a spell in refugee camps they were to be settled in northern Iraq. Most of the Urmian Assyrians eventually returned to their original homes, some Assyrians were already on the Iraqi side of the emerging border with Turkey, and the remnants of the Hakkari Assyrians, some 15,000 souls, were then, in 1921–2, to be settled in the Mosul and Kurdistan region.<sup>6</sup>

The dominant sentiment among those Assyrians was the wish to return

to their original homes and to regain their previous autonomy. The first objective could not be fulfilled because the Turks would not have them, and those who went back after the war were forcibly expelled. If they had to settle in Iraq, they wanted an Assyrian homeland where all of them could live together, and they wanted autonomy to run their own affairs, like that which they had enjoyed under Ottoman rule. They looked to the British to fulfil this aspiration. The British, on the other hand, were busy creating an Iraqi nation-state with a common citizenship and a centralised inclusive sovereignty over its territory. This excluded particularistic autonomous enclaves.

During the Mandate period (1920–32), the British authorities formed battalions of Assyrian Levies. These, renowned for the quality of their fighting men (considered a ‘martial race’ by their British masters, much like Ghurkas and Sikhs), were to serve the British, and the incipient Iraqi state, well in defending the borders against Turkish incursions, and then in quelling Kurdish rebellions (which contributed to Kurdish antagonism). There were, however, incidents in which military discipline was broken in impulsive acts of communal revenge. The main incidents were in Mosul and Kirkuk in 1923–4, in which the Levies broke out of their barracks and attacked the townspeople in response to reported injuries or insults to Assyrians. Relations between Assyrians and the local populations of Arabs, Kurds and Turkomen were decidedly unfriendly. This antagonism and the fear of the military prowess of Assyrians were important factors in the events which were to follow.

Through the 1920s, British and Iraqi officials were busy trying to settle the Assyrians on lands in the northern provinces of Iraq, falling mainly in Kurdistan. Plans were drawn up, negotiations were engaged, offers were made of lands, some of them in grants, some on leases from Kurdish Aghas, and taxation and exemptions were discussed. The Assyrians were divided on these issues. It is important to note that Assyrian tribesmen, like their Arab and Kurdish counterparts, were prone to factions and dissensions. One party, under the leadership of the incumbent patriarch, Mar Shim’un, was obstructive. Basically they did not wish to reach a settlement short of their objective of an Assyrian national home. They kept finding reasons for rejecting the various plans and offers advanced by the authorities. Other Assyrian parties sided with the government. It is important to remember also that there were many Assyrians who were already settled in the region. Some Assyrians had settled in Mosul and other cities, and some of the young men entered Iraqi government service, mainly the police force, but later the army. The Mar Shim’un party, however, was the most influential among the Levies.

The matter came to a head when the end of the Mandate was announced. Assyrians could not believe that British rule was ending and they feared the rule of an Arab state. Being Christian, they had connections and sympathies in Britain and Europe, notably with the archbishop of Canterbury (the

young Mar Shim'un studied in England under Church auspices). In 1931 Mar Shim'un petitioned the League of Nations for the establishment of these demands. The League put pressure on the Mandatory authority and the new state for guarantees of safety and well-being of minorities. This was made a condition for the admission of the newly independent Iraq to the membership of the League. As a result, Iraqi politicians and officials, and their British advisers, were especially careful in handling the Assyrians. They could not, however, accede to their demands that they be treated as an autonomous *millet* and not merely a religious community, and have a national home in the Amadiya, Zakho and Dohuk districts of Iraq (at the expense of the Kurds), and that this national home should be open to all Assyrians in the region. The Kurds, far more numerous and established, would have a stronger claim. In any case, such treatment was seen by the British and the Iraqis as an infringement on the sovereignty of the emerging nation-state. Offers of equal citizenship and land settlement did not satisfy the increasingly intransigent Mar Shim'un and his party. Their calculation was that if they held out long enough, the British government, under pressure from British and European public opinion, would give in to their demands.<sup>7</sup>

In the summer of 1933, a group of several hundred armed Assyrian men under the leadership of a certain Yaqu of the Mar Shim'un faction crossed into Syria, then under the French Mandate, and requested permission to enter and settle. Alerted to the possibility of trouble from armed and restless Assyrians, the Iraqi authorities had sent a detachment of the army to the north and recruited a force of irregular police from Kurdish tribesmen. After Yaqu's crossing, a section of the army went to that part of the frontier with Syria. Some days later, the French authorities in Syria sent Yaqu and his men back to Iraq, with their arms. On their entry into Iraqi territory at a place called Dayraboutn they clashed with the Iraqi army units. There is a dispute as to who fired the first shot, and that was part of the subsequent argument as to the allocation of responsibility and blame. The Assyrians were defeated in this skirmish, but only after they had killed some Iraqi soldiers. They were accused of having mutilated the bodies of soldiers they killed in the one picket they occupied overnight. The great majority of the Assyrian fighters, some 500 in number, fled back into Syrian territory where they were interned by the French authorities, and eventually allowed to settle. A few escaped into the mountains and made their way towards their villages. Those who were caught by the Iraqis or by Kurdish irregulars were shot forthwith, apparently at the order of the commander, Bakr Sidqi.

The account I give here of the events that followed is derived from *The Tragedy of the Assyrians* by Lt.-Colonel R. S. Stafford,<sup>8</sup> who was administrative inspector in Iraq, and was in Mosul in the Summer of 1933 when these events unfolded. He subsequently wrote an official report, and the book is derived from that report. After presenting his narrative, I shall take up points of dispute of fact and interpretation in some subsequent

accounts and comments, probing the conceptual and ideological questions at issue.

The news of the Dayraboun events spread through the country with exaggerated rumours as to the strength and continuing threat from the Assyrian fighters. A great nationalist fervour gripped Iraqi Muslims, manifested in the press and in demonstrations and proclamations against the Assyrians and the British, who were thought to be their protectors and instigators. Politicians, officials and army officers demanded strong action against the Assyrians:

Even in the highest circles there was talk of the 'rid me of this turbulent priest' order. 'Let all the Assyrian men be killed,' they cried, 'but spare the women and children as the eyes of the world are on us. Let the Arabs and Kurds be raised against the Assyrians. Let trouble be stirred up in Syria against the treacherous French.' Saner councils soon prevailed, but there can be no doubt that unofficial and verbal instructions of this nature did reach the army. And the army needed little urging on; it obeyed the instruction literally. For some days every male Assyrian encountered was shot. The Arabs and Kurds were raised, as will be related later, and encouraged to loot. (Stafford 1935: 162)

I shall discuss the possible significance of 'the highest circles' in what follows.

Over the days following Dayraboun, the army, aided by Kurds, continued to track down Assyrian fugitives in the mountain and shoot them. They also moved into some villages and towns, notably Dohuk, arrested Assyrian men and shot them in batches. The Assyrians of Dohuk were completely innocent of any association with Yaqu and his men. The army were aided in this mission by the civil officials. The shootings were stopped when the minister of the interior, Hikmet Sulayman, arrived there. Stafford relates that Iraqi officers during this period evaded or obstructed their British liaison officers. Bakr Sidqi, who could not shake off his liaison officer Major Alfry, stayed in Mosul to keep the major with him there.

In the meantime, Arab tribesmen (Shammer and Jbour) from across the Tigris and local Kurds started looting Assyrian villages, some of which, devoid of their fighting men who were with Yaqu or in the Levies, were easy prey. No injury or loss of life was reported to accompany the looting at this stage. But the fearful inhabitants of looted villages took refuge in Dohuk or in larger Assyrian villages. One such was Simmel, the scene of the main massacre.

Simmel, in the region of Dohuk, was the largest village in the neighbourhood with 100 Assyrian and 10 Arab houses, and a police post with a sergeant and several men. This population was swelled by the arrival of many refugees from looted villages. Hours before the massacre on 11 August, the Arab inhabitants left the village with their flocks. Two days previously, the *qaimaqam* (prefect) of Zakho (who appears to have played an important part, and outside his administrative area) arrived with some

soldiers and ordered the Assyrians to surrender their guns so that they would not be involved in possible fighting between the army and the 'rebels'. They complied. Seeing the continuing looting and army activity, the inhabitants of Simmel feared the worst, and on the night of the tenth congregated around the police station. The police sergeant then ordered the people from other villages to return to their homes, which they refused to do, so he ordered everyone to move away from the police station. In the small hours of the morning of the 11th lorries of troops and armoured cars arrived and opened fire on the inhabitants, who fled to their houses. The officer in charge, Ismail Abawi Tohalla, drove into the village and shouted to the soldiers not to kill women and children; those ordered to leave their houses and go to the police station. That massacre of the men then proceeded systematically, with machine guns trained at the windows of houses killing the men inside. Some men were then dragged out of the houses and shot in batches. A plea by one community leader that he was known for his loyalty to the government and that his nephew was a police officer was to no avail, he too was shot, as well as a priest who had taken refuge in the police station. The bodies were then buried in a shallow ditch. About 300 men and a few women and children died. That night some of the women were raped by the police sergeant and the soldiers. But, states Stafford, 'All that can be said is that throughout these terrible days there were fewer outrages on women than would have been expected' (1935: 176).

It took a few days for the Iraqi and British authorities to realise what had happened. The survivors of Simmel were then transferred to camps in Mosul. Eventually, some of the families of Yaqu's men were allowed to join them in Syria. When the massacre was discovered efforts were made, under British pressure, to prevent further outrages. Stafford states that a planned massacre in Alqosh, another Assyrian centre, was prevented. After that there were sporadic killings and some looting, but mostly by Kurds. The total number of Assyrian victims of these events was estimated by British officials at about 600, but Assyrian sources put it at several thousand.

At first the Iraqi authorities attempted to hush up the whole affair. News, however, travelled fast, mainly through Christian and missionary channels, and accounts of the massacre were published in Beirut newspapers before they were fully known in Mosul. The scale of the massacre and the numbers killed were inflated in reports emanating from Assyrian sources. The Iraqi government had to admit that a massacre did occur, but it denied that the army was responsible, and put the blame on tribesmen and irregular police. Eventually, Yasin al-Hashimi, the Iraqi delegate to the League of Nations, did admit that the excesses were committed by the regular army. Those responsible, he added, were to be censored and punished. This was not true.

In fact the army units responsible were given a tumultuous welcome by the crowds in Mosul, and Bakr Sidqi and his officers were cheered as conquering heroes and decorated by the crown prince, later king, Ghazi,



and subsequently promoted. Triumphal receptions for the army were later organised in Kirkuk and Baghdad. They were the defenders of the homeland and the new state against imperialist conspiracies.

British protests and European outrage only seemed to the nationalists to confirm that European imperialism was behind the Assyrian rebels and that their defeat (the massacre was not publicly acknowledged within Iraq) was a blow against it. British representatives, spurred by protests and demands at home, demanded from Faysal and his ministers that Bakr Sidqi and the other culprits be tried and punished. These demands were not heeded, and they soon realised that any such action against the current national heroes would seriously endanger the position of the king and the government and invite a military rebellion.<sup>9</sup> A nationalist government could depose the king, establish a republic (on the Turkish Kemalist model) and demand British withdrawal. This scenario was to be realised in 1941, under the leadership of Rashid Ali (who was prime minister in 1933, and staunchly defended the Iraqi army and its actions in reinforcing national sovereignty). The British response in 1941 was to re-impose the then regent and their general control by force of arms. That was under conditions of world war.

The British military mission proposed to resign from service in Iraq in protest. This step, however, was considered wrong by the high commissioner and the Foreign Office (Husry 1974: 357–8) who argued that this was an internal Iraqi affair. In fact the position of the British government and its servants was particularly interesting. As we saw, at Iraqi independence in 1932, the British government had argued that the new country and its government were ready to assume their responsibilities and that they would guarantee the safety and welfare of minorities and afford them equal citizenship. Public opinion in Britain and in League quarters was now holding them responsible for the fate of the Assyrians. The official response was to defend the Iraqi government for its perseverance and patience against Assyrian intransigence, and to attribute the atrocities to army units out of control. A report on the battle of Dayraboutn by Brig.-General Headlam dated 6 September 1933, that is to say after the massacre, lays the blame firmly on the Assyrians, praises the Iraqi army, commends Bakr Sidqi as a good officer who attended courses of military instruction in Britain and India, and who acquitted himself well in spite of a 'most unfortunate order connected with a small party of prisoners', i.e. shooting prisoners (quoted in Husry 1974: 174–5). High Commissioner Humphries advised the FO strongly against pressing Faysal for the punishment of Sidqi. Stafford himself, much more critical of Sidqi and horrified by events, nevertheless defends the decision not to hold a British or League inquiry. An inquiry cannot be imposed on a sovereign state, he argued, and if it was forced, then given the attitude of the populace and the army, it would lead to a massacre of Christians in the north.

### Nationalism and the communities

The Assyrians were, at that stage, a different kind of community from the religious minorities designated as *millet*s under the Ottomans, and granted a measure of religious-legal self-administration under the Iraqi and other successor states (e.g. application of their own personal status laws). These latter were for the most part urban communities or settled peasantries. The Assyrians were like the Kurds, armed tribes under their own chiefs and priests nominally under Ottoman suzerainty. They maintained their security and property in a network of precarious pacts and alliances between their own segments and with Kurdish neighbours. When these broke down then force was the only arbiter. Like the Kurds, they resented and feared centralising governments, first the modernising Ottomans and Young Turks, then the successor states. Unlike the Kurds they are Christian, and as such assume a 'special' relationship with Christian Europe. This was the cause of their first misadventure in alliance with the Russians, and it was also to be at the base of their tragedy in Iraq. Their sense of corporate identity and separateness was reinforced by their status as *protégés* and servants of the British, whom they perceived as the colonial masters. This attitude reinforced Iraqi nationalist sentiment as well as Muslim communal feeling against them. Iraqi nationalism was precarious. Many Shi'is were unhappy with Sunni ascendancy, and the Shi'i tribes in the south were in constant turmoil. Indeed, one explanation of the action against the Assyrians was as an attempt to unite Muslims against an external enemy.<sup>10</sup>

The Kurds were even less happy with the new state and the prospect of giving up their customary autonomy for Iraqi citizenship. In the early decades of the twentieth century, with the prospects of the founding of nation-states, many Ottoman communities, whether *millet*s or tribes, were beginning to speak the language of nationality and nationalism, and the Assyrians were amongst them. A national home and national self-determination were to become strategies for maintaining autonomy and communal self-administration that were being lost in the trend to centralisation and inclusion within nation-states dominated by other ethnicities and religions. European colonial regimes in the Middle East were welcomed by religious minorities as protection from perceived discrimination, violence and lawlessness, and the end of European rule in favour of Muslim/Arab dominated nation-states was seen as a threat. The Assyrians, previously divided by tribalism and only united in religion, were now seeking re-definition as a 'nation', entitled to self-determination and a homeland. National myth and history were created for the Assyrians by European missionaries and archaeologists. As a religious *millet* they were known, to themselves and others, as 'Nestorian', after a dissident theologian in one of the many Byzantine schisms. Protestant missionaries in the nineteenth century who favoured Assyrians and tried to find points of religious convergence with them, did not like the 'heretical' designation. Archaeologists uncovered the

traces of the ancient Assyrian civilisation centred in Nineveh, near Mosul, whose language was Aramaic, similar to that of Christian (and Jewish) communities in Kurdistan and northern Iraq. These European savants perceived resemblance in the physiognomy of Christian peasants and those of the portraits of kings revealed by excavations. The appellation 'Assyrian' was eagerly taken up as a national designation with an ancient history and glorious romantic associations, the stuff of nationalist mythology. The constructed Assyrian identity could then draw on two sources of favourable associations: ancient national ancestry and a Christianity which forged links with the dominant European powers, but rid of the heretical association with Nestor.<sup>11</sup>

This new-found Assyrian identity and struggle for an autonomous homeland was to clash with the nascent Iraqi nation-state and the national and religious sentiments of Arabs and Muslims. The army was the focus of Iraqi and Arab nationalism and the sphere which most symbolised independence. Throughout the years of the Mandate, Faysal was lobbying the British authorities to build up the Iraqi army, then to boost its numbers and equipment. The army, as we have seen, continued to have British connections, with liaison officers and advisers, and some army officers like Bakr Sidqi (himself of Kurdish origin, and a Sunni Muslim like practically all Iraqi officers) were trained in military institutions in Britain and India. At the same time nationalist sentiments were pervasive in the officer corps, which made them resent the British connections. This resentment was exacerbated by the fact that the Iraqi army did not do very well in the battles against the southern tribes and fared even worse against Kurdish insurgents. In 1932 they were only saved from defeat at the hands of the Kurds by the intervention of the RAF and the Assyrian Levies. They badly needed a victory, especially one apparently unaided by the British (although the British equipped the forces which attacked the Assyrians at Dayrabboun), and indeed against what was generally perceived as a British related target.

The army was also a symbol of modern nationhood. Tribes, religious sectarianism, ethnic and religious identities, all these were part of what was regarded by the nationalists as pre-national backwardness, inhibiting progress through unity and strength. The nationalist project was set within the discourse of progress *versus* backwardness. Kemalist Turkey (and to a lesser extent the Iran of Reza Shah) was the model of progress. Within this perspective, the British, and Western, concern for minorities was part of an imperialist conspiracy to resurrect and maintain divisive and backward elements to put obstacles in the way of this national project.

At the point of antagonism to the British and their minority *protégés*, the national assertion of the army and the intelligentsia struck a chord with popular sentiment. The common people, however, viewed the British and the Christians in the traditional communalist model of international relations. The Assyrians were assertive and arrogant militant fighters, in sharp contrast to other non-Muslim communities. They did not display the

outward submissiveness and deference to Muslims of these other minorities. That and their close association with the British facilitated the common perception that this constituted Christian aggressive solidarity against the Muslims. Within this perspective, the army were the heroes of a communalist struggle against enemies of Muslims and Arabs. Thus, the Assyrian episode realised a convergence between modern nationalism and traditional communalism. There are good reasons to believe that communalist sentiments of this nature played and continue to play an important part in the phenomenology of nationalism at the popular level.<sup>12</sup>

An important feature of the Assyrian episode is that the violence involved is one committed by organs of the modern nation-state. In the discussion which follows of retrospective accounts and interpretations of this episode, we shall see that one issue of disagreement is on whether the violence was started by the army or the tribes. If the latter were responsible, then the episode can be assimilated into a familiar paradigm of tribal raiding and violence, and the involvement of the army is then incidental. Whereas if it was the army that started it, then it would make the episode and its violence a feature of modern nationalism and nation-statehood. This is clearly an important ideological point.

### **Retrospective accounts and interpretations**

There have been many accounts of, references to and comments upon the Assyrian affair in history books, articles and passing judgements. No serious historian or commentator would now doubt the view that sections of the regular army were the main culprits in the affair. There are disagreements, however, on the circumstances and triggers of the events, and also on their significance in the history of the new state and its army.

The main criticisms of Stafford's account came in two articles on 'The Assyrian Affair' by the historian Khaldun S. Husry in 1974. The author, son of the Arab nationalist intellectual Sati' al-Husry, was a witness as a small boy to the triumphal return to Baghdad of Bakr Sidqi and his troops. His articles are based on a thorough search of the British government records. He did not challenge the fact that the regular army was involved in the massacre, and indeed dismisses the original official denial as a 'bare-faced lie'. He throws doubts, however on two elements in Stafford's account (which he describes as 'well-written but one-sided' (174)). The first concerns the incident at Dayrabboun. There Husry draws on the report by Headlam (cited above) to show that Yaku's Assyrian forces bore the primary responsibility for starting the fight. Whereas Stafford stated that no such judgement was possible from the available accounts, and that the first shot was probably fired by some nervous and panicky individual who could have been from either side, Husry argues that the indications are that it was a deliberate provocation by the Assyrians.

The other point of concern to Husry is whether the regular army actually planned and started the massacre at Simmel. Again he uses official British reports to question whether the Assyrians were disarmed shortly before the events occurred. On the balance of his evidence, he favours the account given to him many years later in an interview with Tohalla, the officer in charge of the troops in Simmel. This was to the effect that the troops came upon the village while tribesmen were looting, and they joined in, the whole thing culminating in the killings. This admits the culpability of the regular troops, but denies premeditation, and, crucially, exonerates Bakr Sidqi who was then in Mosul. Husry accepts Stafford's account of how Sidqi and the other officers conspired to keep British officers out of the area in question, but explains that as a general desire for independence in dealing with the Assyrians, rather than evidence of planning the massacre. I shall come back to the significance of 'tribesmen' in these accounts.

In an interesting twist in the narrative, Husry relates a conversation between Nuri as-Said, the foremost statesman of the monarchical period of modern Iraqi history (up to 1958), and the pillar of British influence in the country, and a British diplomat (as revealed in the latter's report to the FO), in 1941 when Nuri took refuge in the Embassy after Rashid Ali's *coup d'état*. Passing the time of day in gossip, Nuri says confidentially that the real responsibility for the 1933 massacre lay with Faysal himself who gave the order for it (Husry 1974: 349). Is this the explanation of Stafford's hint in the passage quoted above, 'Even in the highest circles ...'? That is unlikely, as Stafford seems to share the benevolent image of Faysal common in some British as well as Arab accounts, one of the humane statesman trying to unify all sectors of Iraqi society, but defeated by the fierce factionalism and antagonisms of politicians and the army. This image is not confirmed in confidential British reports which show him as weak, hesitant and capricious.<sup>13</sup> More likely, Stafford was referring to the prime minister, Rashid Ali, and most of his cabinet. Indeed, in Stafford's account, Faysal, who was abroad as the crisis developed, is reported as sending telegrams urging moderation and caution, which fell on deaf ears in a cabinet contemptuous of what they saw as subservience to the British (Stafford 1935: 196–7). Yet, on 5 August, in the wake of the Dayrabout events, Faysal, now back in Baghdad, is reported by the British chargé d'affaires, to be agitated and worried at the prospect of an Assyrian threat to the newly independent state, possibly with secret French backing (Husry 1974: 349). The British official had to dissuade Faysal from his proposal to go to the north and personally assume command of Arab tribal forces (note, not the army!) to put down the Assyrians. Husry states, however, that by 11 August it had become clear that the insurgents had been defeated and the Assyrians no longer posed a threat. He exonerates Faysal and his government from any responsibility for the massacre, as he exonerates, as we saw, the army command, and in particular Bakr Sidqi.

Husry's reproduction of Nuri's gossip has the effect of implicating

Faysal: founder and head of the British-dependent *ancien régime*. He then dismisses this possibility, while still presenting an unfavourable image of Faysal as weak, emotional and hesitant, an image which emerges from some British reports. Ultimately, it is the tribes who were to blame for starting the looting, and the army joined in, not at the command of the government or its leaders, but as a spontaneous reaction of ordinary soldiers at the prospect of pillage. The beneficiaries in this interpretation are Bakr Sidqi and the army command. In exonerating Sidqi and the army, Husry favours the modern nationalists, whose image would be tarnished by their implication in ethnic massacres.

The British official sources, on which Husry draws for his account, are not consistent, but emanate from different sources, each with its own interests. Many were concerned to exonerate British authority and its Iraqi *protégés* against the criticisms emanating from British public opinion and the League of Nations. Indeed Husry remarks on the irony of the general Iraqi perception of the whole affair as British instigated and supported (on the side of the Assyrians), while the British officials were backing the Iraqi government and trying to whitewash the misdeeds of the army.

'Tribes' have a symbolic and ideological significance. They are seen as an elemental force, subject to its own rules and impulses. Yet, at the same time, they are a repository of noble Arab/Bedouin traditions. They can be blamed for spontaneously starting pillage and massacres, for, after all, this is in their 'nature'. Yet, Faysal, when he contemplates assuming personal command of defence against the insurrection, picks the tribes of Shammar and Jubour as the saviours of the Arab nation-state, rather than the army. In nationalist ideology, however, tribes are part of the 'backward', fragmentary, pre-national condition. They must be settled, united and harnessed in the new nation. What, though, was the actual condition and significance of tribes at that point?

Tribes, Arab and Kurdish, were armed, and government control over them precarious. Historically they had enjoyed considerable autonomy, and in the case of the powerful tribes and their chiefs, considerable power over peoples, revenues and territories. From the middle of the nineteenth century, they were increasingly resentful of the centralising measures of the Ottomans, and even more so of the successor nation-states. The changing technology of war, of artillery and now of air power, as well as transport and communications, was tilting the balance firmly in favour of central authorities. During this period, the armed activities of the tribes fell more and more within the orbit of the nation-state, either in revolt against its centralising thrust, or in battles determined by its strategies. That is to say, the alliances and antagonism of tribal forces were increasingly subsumed within the political fields of the new states. Kurdish participation in actions against the Armenians in Turkey in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were not merely autonomous adventures of armed tribes, but were often instigated and directed by agents of Sultan Abdel-Hamid (the Kurdish

irregulars responsible for many atrocities were known as 'Hamidiyya'), then by his successors.

It is true that there was antipathy and antagonism towards the Assyrians by their Kurdish neighbours. They were also feared. The absence of considerable numbers of their fighting men made those remaining in the villages easy targets. Yet there was no move against them between the middle of July when the men left until after the Dayrabin events on the 4–5 August. That is to say, it was only after the army started its offensive against them that the looting commenced. This is in line with the view of many observers, including Stafford, that the looting was not a spontaneous action, one of those things that lawless tribes are apt to do, but was actually instigated by the army. And it was not only the Kurdish and Yezidi neighbours who looted, but Arab tribesmen who came especially from the other side of the Tigris.

I should finally like to mention a few retrospective commentators expressing different ideological standpoints. Samir al-Khalil (Kanaan Makiya), in *Republic of Fear* (1989: 166–75) presents the action of the army and the popular sentiments which it aroused on that occasion as part of the genealogy of nationalist paranoia in the name of anti-imperialism which was to culminate in the Ba'hist state. Anti-imperialism in Iraq, as manifested in the Assyrian events, should properly be understood as a representation or metaphor – an iconic sign in the language of semiotics. There is no simple cause-and-effect relationship between the object of hatred – the British and their role in Iraq – and the intensity of the anti-imperialist sentiment among the masses; the relationship is one of a symbol to mass psychological reaction, and one not based in actuality (Al-Khalil 1989: 172–3).

It is not part of Al-Khalil's argument that anti-imperialism is never realistic, but that it was not on that occasion. As we have seen, British officials were backing the Iraqi government fully against the Assyrians, yet were the object of the strongest antipathy from the army and the populace. It is this kind of 'iconic' anti-imperialism which al-Khalil postulates as being one of the instruments in the generation of the collective paranoia and terror, aroused at various points in Iraqi history, and central for the mass psychology of Saddam Hussein's Ba'hist state.

In contrast, Fadhil al-Barrak was a spokesman of that state and one of its official historians (also, for a period, the head of internal security, later executed for close association with the Russians). His book on the history of the Iraqi army<sup>14</sup> is about the role of the army in the 1941 events. He recounts the Assyrian episode (Al-Barrak 1987: 62–4), drawing primarily on Husry's account, except that he presents Bakr Sidqi as the author of the whole campaign against the Assyrians. A footnote states:

In any case, the Nestorian Assyrians live today in the Iraqi Republic in a calm and secure existence, employed with other Iraqis in government posts and institutions especially in the spheres of finance and accountancy, while the agriculturists among

them till the land without conflict or harassment, similar in this respect to all other Iraqis who are secure in their property and person. (Al-Barrak 1987: 64 n. 25)

So, past conflicts and sufferings were part of the birth pangs of the new nation under the regime of 'fake independence'. Now, it is implied, all the minorities are safe and secure and integrated into common Iraqi citizenship.

Al-Khalil presents the Assyrian episode as part of the genealogy of the Ba'thist state, while the Ba'thist historian presents it as part of the bad old days before the true nationalist revolution established a liberated and integrated nation. In view of what we know about the Iraqi situation, al-Barrak's tale is, to say the least, problematic.

The problem of the 'minorities', however, has come to prominence again in many parts of the region, and not just in Iraq. It may be useful to conclude with some general and tentative ideas about the question.

### **The security of minorities**

Given that there has always been some degree of latent or manifest antipathy or hostility between religious and ethnic groups, why was there not more open conflict and aggression? What is remarkable is that most of the time relations were peaceful, if not always amicable.

The Assyrians were not typical of other non-Muslims. As we have seen, they were armed and militant mountaineers who protected their own community. They also entered into pacts and alliances with their Kurdish neighbours and with Ottoman agents. Even if they had not become embroiled in the games of regional power, their position would have been surely undermined by the emergence of centralised state powers. A semblance of autonomy was retained under British protection, but that had to end. Part of their tragedy is that they could not believe the inevitability of this development.

Other Christians and Jewish minorities were formally protected by the state. However, state power did not always reach very far, and its agents were often capricious and avid for gain. Invariably, such communities found a niche within local social and power networks. Economic interdependence, neighbourhood, clientage to local notabilities, all these acted as forms of protection and security.

Under the modern nation-states, some of these security mechanisms survived. In the outbreak of violence against the Jews in Baghdad in 1941<sup>15</sup> (known as the *farhud*, which occurred during the few days of government breakdown after the flight of Rashid Ali and before the re-establishment of the British controlled monarchy), most Jewish communities in the provinces were spared. A convincing explanation is that the smaller number of Jews in provincial towns were much closer socially and spatially to their Muslim neighbours than the Baghdad Jews, concentrated in their own quarters,



were to theirs. In Basra, after some looting of Jewish shops, Salah Bash-A'yan, a leading local notable and religious dignitary, took steps to stop any further transgression. Significantly, the initiators and major perpetrators of the violence were soldiers and youths, influenced by the pan-Arabist and pro-Nazi ambience generated by some of Rashid Ali's colleagues and the mufti of Jerusalem who was with them. That is to say, like the earlier attack on the Assyrians, the perception of minorities had been ideologised in the context of modern nationalism (and in some cases political Islam). These ideological forces were on the ascendancy while the traditional mechanisms were breaking down. So what new mechanisms were being generated for social peace?

Apart from (sometimes theoretical) protection by the state, there are the much more powerful and 'organic' consequences of the social processes of modernity and the modern nation-state which provide avenues and mechanisms for integration of the religious minorities into a national life which should, at the same time, afford them security. Participation in a common occupational structure, in commercial society, in education and the professions, in common neighbourhoods and avenues of public sociability, all these create ties of friendship, partnership, professional fellowship and many others (but short of intermarriage!). This integration, though important and real in many countries in the region for most of the modern period, ten-1, nevertheless, to be more characteristic of particular social milieus, of educated and prosperous strata, and some urban spheres of work. At the popular level it is not as fully accomplished, and is often checked by tensions and conflicts arising from reconstructions of old resentments. Prosperity, political stability and the rule of law would strengthen and reinforce the integrative processes, but these conditions do not prevail in much of the region. Political leaders are not above playing on antipathies and resentments when it suits them, and religious political currents thrive upon them. So, in spite of many decades of political modernity and common citizenship, we still have a 'minorities problem'.

On the negative side, in the context of nationalism and anti-imperialism, the credentials of minorities are typically suspect in the perception of many (but not all) nationalists, often quite mistakenly. Historically, non-Muslims had some affinity to the colonial powers. Many of their members, like the Assyrians, were unhappy with the withdrawal of these powers from the region. This has tended to feed into the confessional model of international relations; in the eyes of many nationalists and nationalist governments, even the secular variety, there is an affinity of religion and culture between their non-Muslim compatriots and the West. For the Jewish minorities, the formation of Israel made them seriously suspect, and in most cases, their continued existence in the Arab world became untenable. At one point (in 1959) even the Iraqi Communist Party demanded of its Jewish members to convert to Islam or leave the party. The protest from many of them that, being Marxist, they believed in neither religion, did not do any good.

In addition to all these factors, we should consider an important aspect of political systems in the region which enhance communalism in all its forms, and that is state clientalism. We see these practices at their clearest in the dictatorial regimes of Iraq and Syria, but similar elements are present elsewhere. The state and its agencies and departments enter into deals with different sectors of the population granting them protection and material benefits in return for loyalty and co-operation. Or leading members of such groups assume important positions in the ruling party (which is no more than a vehicle of loyalty and patronage for the rulers), and use these positions to favour their affiliates. This encourages sectarian and communalist networks forming around patrons and notables of their community, doing deals with functionaries and parties on behalf of their followers. This applies to tribes (the ruling clique in Iraq is firmly based on tribal kinship), to family, ethnic and regional groups, as well as to sectors of religious minorities. These practices tend to reinforce or reconstitute primary solidarities and antipathies between groups defined in their terms, at the expense of common citizenship and ideological affiliations. Competition for benefit and influence proceeds between groups conceived in these terms. The suppression by these states of all other forms of social or political autonomy and solidarity enhances these particularistic solidarities. Conflicts and antipathies, then, are conceived of in terms of particularistic memberships, notably those of religious minorities.

It is, then, not so much the persistence of 'primordial' or traditional affiliations and solidarities which perpetuate distinctions, antipathies and conflicts between communities, but the very processes and practices of the modern states themselves. Common citizenship and national integration can only occur on the basis of stability, common participation in civil institutions and the rule of law, conditions actively inhibited by modern political authorities and systems in the region, as well as by the effect of politicised religion.

Finally, a note on the fate of Iraqi Assyrians. Some remain in Iraq, a few in the Kurdish provinces. There are no accurate population figures, but estimates put their number at 100,000, out of a Christian population estimated at 1 million (probably an exaggeration).<sup>16</sup> Four Christian political parties, two of them Assyrian, participated in the parliamentary elections for the Kurdish autonomous region in 1992. Those in the northern provinces are mostly peasants and in small businesses, as well as some functionaries and soldiers. A Christian elite in Baghdad and the main cities enjoy a degree of integration and participation in the professions, business and state employment, even in politics: Vice-President Tariq Aziz is a Christian, though not Assyrian. Poor and less powerful Christians, however, are subject to routine discrimination, and sometimes persecution, both in the autonomous Kurdish province and in the Iraqi cities. All Christians may perceive themselves to be under threat in the event of the political and civil turmoil which is likely to follow a destabilisation of the current regime. Like

all other Middle Eastern Christians, the Assyrians have been migrating in large numbers to Europe, the US and Australia. Diaspora Assyrians now outnumber those staying in Iraq, and there are thriving communities in many countries, primarily the US (Chicago and Detroit), Sweden, Australia and Britain (Al-Rasheed 1998: 183–204).

## Notes

- 1 For a discussion of the Reforms in relation to the *Millets*, see Davison (1982).
- 2 See quote to this effect from the liberal Egyptian nationalist of the turn of the century, Ahmad Lutfi Al-Sayyid, in Ahmad (1960: 61). On Iraq, see Zubaida (forthcoming), and Zubaida (1991).
- 3 On Mamluke Iraq, see Nieuwenhuis (1982), and Batatu (1978: 13–36).
- 4 On Kurds in Iraq, see McDowal (1996: 151–80); also Batatu (1978: 13–43, 63–152).
- 5 On British attitudes on minorities, see Kedourie (1984: 303–6).
- 6 See Atiya (1968); Stafford (1935); Betts (1978).
- 7 Stafford (1935: 99–131).
- 8 Stafford (1935).
- 9 Detailed accounts of British deliberations are provided in Husry (1974: pt. I, 161–76; pt. II, 344–60). This work is based on a thorough search of British official sources, on which I draw in this discussion. My critical comments on some of Husry's interpretations do not detract from my evaluation of the research.
- 10 This interpretation is offered in Kedourie (1984: 303–6). Husry (1974) takes issue with this interpretation.
- 11 For an account of this history, see Madawi Al-Rasheed (1998: 37–60).
- 12 I argue this point elsewhere, see Zubaida (1993: 152–62).
- 13 Elie Kedourie elaborates this negative image of Faysal from the British sources (1984: 239–47). See also Husry (1974: 350).
- 14 Al-Barrak (1987).
- 15 For an account of this episode, see Cohen (1966–7).
- 16 Al-Rasheed (1998: 57–8), discusses the various estimates.

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