



The ChaldoAssyrian Cause in Iraq: Implications for Maronites

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Presented at the
National Apostolate of Maronites Convention
Orlando, Florida
July 16, 2004

The ChaldoAssyrians (also known as Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Syriacs) are the indigenous people of Mesopotamia and have a history spanning over 6700 years. Today's ChaldoAssyrians are the descendants of the ancient multiethnic Assyrian empire and one of the earliest civilizations emerging in Mesopotamia. Although the Assyrian empire ended in 612 B.C., history is replete with recorded details of the continuous persistence of the ChaldoAssyrian people till the present time. Assyrian civilization at one time incorporated the entire Near East most notably the area of the Fertile Crescent.

The heartland of Assyria lays in present day northern Iraq, northeastern Syria, southeastern Turkey, and northwestern Iran. The remains of the ancient capital of Assyria, Nineveh, lie next to Mosul in northern Iraq. Until earlier this century prior to the ChaldoAssyrian Holocaust of 1915, the major ChaldoAssyrian communities still inhabited the areas of Tur Abdin and Hakkari in southeastern Turkey, Jazira in northeastern Syria, Urmi in northwestern Iran, and Mosul in northern Iraq as they had for thousands of years.

The world's 4.5 million ChaldoAssyrians are currently dispersed with members of the Diaspora comprising nearly one-third of the population. Most of the ChaldoAssyrians in the Diaspora live in North America, Europe and Australia with nearly 400,000 residing in the United States of America and 200,000 in Europe. The remaining ChaldoAssyrians reside primarily in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon and to a lesser extent in Iran, and Turkey.

ChaldoAssyrians constitute the third largest ethnic group in Iraq. They represent the historically indigenous people of the region. Estimates of the total ChaldoAssyrian population in Iraq range between 1.5-2 million people. Most ChaldoAssyrians currently in Iraq reside in and around the Baghdad area with 750,000- 1,000,000 ChaldoAssyrians within central Iraq. An additional 300,000-400,000 ChaldoAssyrian reside within the area in and around Mosul (ancient Nineveh). Approximately 100,000 ChaldoAssyrians reside in the former northern UN Safe Haven. Another community of ChaldoAssyrians numbering in the range of 25,000 resides in Karkuk while the remainder of the population is scattered in smaller concentrations in the remainder of the country. Due to disproportionate emigration, ChaldoAssyrians from Iraq constitute the largest group of Iraqis in the U.S. with estimates ranging between 80-90%.

ChaldoAssyrians are not Arabs but rather have maintained a continuous and separate ethnic identity, language, culture, and religion that predate the Arabization of the Near East. Until today, the ChaldoAssyrians speak a distinct language (called Syriac or Aramaic by some scholars), the language spoken by Jesus Christ. As a Semitic language, the ChaldoAssyrian language is related to Hebrew and Arabic but predates both. The Syriac or Aramaic language of the ChaldoAssyrians remains the oldest continuously written and spoken language of the entire Middle East.

The ChaldoAssyrians were among the first people to accept Christianity in the first century A.D. through the Apostle St. Thomas. Despite the subsequent Islamic conquest of the region in the seventh century A.D., the various ChaldoAssyrian Churches flourished and their adherents at one time numbered in the tens of millions. ChaldoAssyrian missionary zeal was unmatched and led to the first Christian missions to China, Japan, and the Philippines. The Church of the East stele in Xian, China bears testament to a thriving Church of the East as early as in the seventh century A.D.

Early on, ChaldoAssyrian Christians developed into two ancient branches, the Syriac Orthodox Church and the Church of the East. Over time, divisions within Eastern Christianity led to the establishment of various Syriac Churches including the Chaldean Church, the Assyrian Church of the East, the Syriac Orthodox and Syriac Catholic Churches, the Syriac Maronite Church, and the Melkite Churches. Persistent persecution under Islamic occupation led to the migration of still greater numbers of Assyrian Christians into the Christian autonomous areas of Mount Lebanon as well. With the arrival of Western Protestant missionaries into Mesopotamia, especially since the nineteenth century, several smaller congregations of Assyrian Protestants arose as well. Over the course of several centuries, some ChaldoAssyrians came to identify themselves by these varying but closely related names.

Despite some differing self-identifications, ChaldoAssyrians still overwhelmingly consider themselves one people irrespective of whether they refer to themselves as Assyrians, Chaldeans, or Syriacs. In the 2000 U.S. Census, mainstream organizations from the different communities including the Assyrian Universal Alliance (AUA), the Assyrian American National Federation (AANF), the Chaldean Federation of America (CFA), and the Syriac Universal Alliance (SUA) endorsed the

Assyrians/Chaldeans/Syriac category that tabulated all respondents as one people independent of their preferred term of self-identification. Letters from the Bishops of the Chaldean, Syriac Orthodox, Syriac Catholic, and Syriac Maronite Churches encouraged their parishioners to support the unified category in order that all segments of the community are tabulated together.

A direct consequence of ChaldoAssyrian adherence to the Christian faith and their missionary enterprise has been persecution, massacres, and ethnic cleansing by various waves of non-Christian neighbors which ultimately led to a decimation of the ChaldoAssyrian Christian population. Quite tragically, Great Britain invited the ChaldoAssyrians as an ally in World War One. The autonomous ChaldoAssyrians were drawn into the conflict following successive massacres against the civilian population by forces of the Ottoman Empire consisting of Turks and Kurds. Although many geopolitical and economic factors were involved in provoking the attacks against the ChaldoAssyrians, a jihad or "holy war" was declared and served as the rallying cry and vehicle for marauding Turks, Kurds, and Persians. Although the Muslim holy war against the Armenians is perhaps better known, over three-fourths, or 750,000 ChaldoAssyrian Christians died by outright murder, starvation, disease and the all too familiar consequences of genocide between 1914-1923 during the ChaldoAssyrian Holocaust along with a significant number of Pontic Greeks.

The conflict and subsequent ChaldoAssyrian Holocaust led to the decimation and dispersal of the ChaldoAssyrians. Those ChaldoAssyrians who survived the Holocaust were driven out of their ancestral homeland in Turkish Mesopotamia primarily toward the area of Mosul Vilayet in Iraq, Jazira in Syria, and the Urmi plains of Iran where large ChaldoAssyrian populations already lived. The massacres of 1915 followed the ChaldoAssyrians to these areas as well, prompting an exodus of many more ChaldoAssyrians to other countries and continents.

The ChaldoAssyrian Holocaust of 1915 is the turning point in the modern history of the ChaldoAssyrian Christians precisely because it is the single event that led to the dispersal of the surviving community into small, weak, and destitute pockets. Most ChaldoAssyrians in the Diaspora today can trace their emigration from the Middle East to the ChaldoAssyrian Holocaust of 1915. Many who fled from their original homes into other Middle Eastern countries subsequently, just one generation later, once more emigrated to the West. Thus, many ChaldoAssyrian families in the West today have experienced transfer to a new country for three successive generations-beginning, for instance, from Turkey to Iraq and then to the United States.

On account of the ChaldoAssyrians siding with the victorious Allies during World War One, Great Britain had promised the ChaldoAssyrians autonomy, independence, and a homeland. The ChaldoAssyrian question was addressed during postwar deliberations at the League of Nations. However, with the termination of the British Mandate in Iraq, the unresolved status of the ChaldoAssyrians was relinquished to the Iraqi government with certain minority guarantees specifically concerning freedom of religious, cultural, and linguistic expression.

Many of the ChaldoAssyrians surviving the Holocaust had been gathered in refugee camps in Iraq pending final resettlement in an autonomous ChaldoAssyrian homeland. In 1933, however, the Iraqi government declared an ultimatum giving the ChaldoAssyrians one of two choices: either to be resettled in small populations dispersed amongst larger Muslim populations that had recently been violently antagonistic or to leave Iraq entirely. Some ChaldoAssyrians chose to leave to neighboring Syria and so notified the Iraqi government of their intention. In response, the Iraqi government dispatched the Iraqi army to attack the ChaldoAssyrians fleeing into Syria. In their subsequent defeat, the retreating Iraqi army massacred over 3,000 ChaldoAssyrian civilians in Simele and other surrounding towns in northern Iraq in August of 1933. Upon his return to Baghdad, the commanding officer ordering the massacre was hailed as a conquering hero. Thus, the first official military campaign of the Iraqi army served as the newly independent government's final solution to the ChaldoAssyrian question. The demoralized ChaldoAssyrian refugee population in Iraq was thereby resettled in dispersed villages while the other surviving isolated communities languished in the areas of Tur Abdin, Turkey; Jazira, Syria; and Urmi, Iran. The lessons of World War I remain fresh in the ChaldoAssyrian psyche. On the one hand, deep apprehension about the peaceful intentions of our neighbors is coupled with profound suspicion about the reliability and commitment of Western powers.

The Baathist government of Iraq was not any more sympathetic to ChaldoAssyrians. Under Saddam Hussein, over 200 ChaldoAssyrian villages were razed in northern Iraq in order to resettle ChaldoAssyrians into urban areas such as Baghdad in a bid to better assimilate and "Arabize" the population. ChaldoAssyrians were denied recognition as an ethnic minority and instead categorized as Christian Arabs. The Iraqi state routinely interfered in Church matters. Eventually, one Assyrian Patriarch (of the Assyrian Church of the East) left Iraq under intense pressure and settled near Chicago, thereby moving the Holy See outside of Mesopotamia for the first time in nearly 2000 years. Under the Baathist regime, Koranic instruction was also introduced into school curricula. In 1984, dozens of ChaldoAssyrian activists were imprisoned and three leaders of the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) were hanged in an attempt to squelch a burgeoning ChaldoAssyrian awareness.

Following the first Gulf War, the ChaldoAssyrian experience in the Kurdish occupied Northern provinces or UN administered "Safe Haven," was not significantly better. In the Northern provinces, Kurdish tribal and feudal groups occupied ChaldoAssyrian areas and expropriated over 50 villages in whole or in part. Overly proactive ChaldoAssyrian leaders were assassinated as in the example of Francis Shabo, a ChaldoAssyrian Member of Parliament in the Kurdish Parliament of northern Iraq from the ADM who had been assigned the task of adjudicating land disputes between ChaldoAssyrians and Kurds. According to Amnesty International, Mr. Shabo was killed by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) headed by Mazsoud Barzani. Similar to their Baathists neighbors, the Kurds denied ChaldoAssyrians their ethnicity and referred to them as Christian Kurds.

Within the northern area, however, the ChaldoAssyrians were able to establish political parties, who, as long as they did not threaten Kurdish occupation of the Northern provinces, were able to operate schools, and, to a limited extent, administer some

reconstruction and humanitarian aid projects. Also, during that time, the ADM was able to transform from an underground clandestine political organization into a legitimate political party free of direct Iraqi government threat although the threat from the KDP remained. Through the assistance of other affiliated political organizations in the US known as the Assyrian Coalition, as well as through the direct lobbying efforts of the Assyrian American League (AAL); the ADM gained legitimacy in Washington DC as the official representative of the ChaldoAssyrian people in Iraq. In the lead up to the second Gulf War, the ADM was included in opposition meetings consisting of the eight major opposition groups and was included by the US government in the Iraqi Liberation Act. Mr. Yonadam Kanna, the Secretary General of the ADM, was included as the sole ChaldoAssyrian member of the 25 member Iraqi Governing Council.

In a historic first, the ADM along with the Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO) on October 22-24, 2003 cosponsored a conference referred to as the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian General Conference in Baghdad to declare the political aspirations of the ChaldoAssyrian people of Iraq. Among the diverse list of attendees was Dr. Imad Chamoun as the representative to Maronite Patriarch Sfeir. The conference affirmed that the various names of Chaldean, Syriac, and Assyrian refer to one people. "Due to the pressing need imposed by the critical situation that our people and cause are going through, the Conference highlights the importance of concurrence on one unified national appellation." The Conference attendees "agreed on appellation of 'ChaldoAssyrian' to designate our people and the appellation of 'Syriac' to designate our language and culture to be incorporated into the Constitution."

Furthermore, on a political level, the Baghdad Conference "stressed the need to designate an administrative region for our people in the Nineveh Plain with participation of other ethnic and religious groups, where a special law will be established for self-administration and the assurance of administrative, political, cultural rights in towns and villages throughout Iraq where our people reside." Referring to past policies of resettlement and destruction of villages, the Conference also stressed the redress of such policies that "altered the demographic structure of several regions that belonged to our people. 1957 Census and earlier should be used as benchmarks." The conference also demanded the right of return for Iraqi ChaldoAssyrians.

From October to March, ChaldoAssyrians mobilized to meet the challenge of incorporating their political platform into the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) -- the presumed precursor of the future Iraqi Constitution. The final version of the TAL left ChaldoAssyrians both hopeful and apprehensive. On the one hand, the TAL was an historic first in the modern history of Iraq since ChaldoAssyrians were recognized as an ethnic minority as an integral part of the Iraqi mosaic including among others Arabs, Kurds, and Turkman. Notably, they were recognized as one people with the combined name declared by the Baghdad Conference. Also, in line with the Baghdad platform, the TAL stated in Article 53, paragraph D "This law shall guarantee the administrative, cultural, and political rights of the Turcomans, ChaldoAssyrians, and all other citizens." The TAL also established the legitimacy of the Iraqi Property Claims Commission which may potentially allow the resettlement of ChaldoAssyrians as well as other displaced people to their original homes and villages.

The TAL, however, left some cause for concern as well. First, the reference to ChaldoAssyrian rights was vague and did not specify a territory -- namely, the Nineveh Plain. Secondly, the TAL acknowledged the KRG's effective control and occupation of the three northern provinces of Arbil, Dohuk, and Sulmaniyah including additional areas in Nineveh, Kirkuk, and Diyala provinces. Dohuk, Nineveh, Kirkuk, and Arbil provinces include many ChaldoAssyrian towns and villages with Nineveh and Dohuk including the bulk of the Assyrian heartland. Especially, troubling in the context of rising Islamic fundamentalism was the TAL's recognition of Islam as "the official religion of the State and is to be considered a source of legislation." Moreover, "No law that contradicts the universally agreed tenets of Islam, the principles of democracy, or the rights cited in Chapter two of the Law may be enacted during the transitional period. This law respects the Islamic identity of the majority of the Iraqi people and guarantees the full religious rights of all individuals to freedom of religious belief and practice."

With the handover of sovereignty in June, the US sponsored UN resolution 1546 recognizing the legitimacy of the interim Iraqi government did not include the TAL. However, it is believed that much of the TAL will remain an important starting point for the upcoming constitution following general elections.

In summary, ChaldoAssyrians would like to see a democratic and secular Iraq with proper recognition of Assyrians/Chaldeans/Syriacs as a unified indigenous people of Iraq. ChaldoAssyrians aspire to have the same political rights as other constituent groups at a minimum, such that autonomy granted to some groups should be afforded ChaldoAssyrians within the Nineveh Plain as well. There must be a proper accounting of ChaldoAssyrians both within and without Iraq coupled with a genuine right of return. There must be equitable allocation of the nation's resources and reconstruction aid to allow necessary infrastructure aid to allow infrastructure development and rehabilitation of destroyed villages.

Moving forward, the remaining challenges include formulating an Iraqi constitution that preserves the gains of the TAL -- namely recognition of ChaldoAssyrians as a people -- while specifying the rights and geography of the ChaldoAssyrian self-administered area. Serious problems that remain include rising Islamic fundamentalism, growing Kurdish hegemony, concern over increasing emigration, fair and equitable appropriation of reconstruction and development aid to ChaldoAssyrian areas, internal sectarian and name-based tensions, and, American/Western resistance to helping ChaldoAssyrian Christians out of concern over an Islamist backlash.

Now, why is the ChaldoAssyrian cause important to Lebanese Christians in general and Maronites in particular? Change is coming to the entire Middle East and the first stage of that change has begun in Iraq. Successes and failures of minorities i.e. ChaldoAssyrians in Iraq will have profound reverberations throughout our communities in the Middle East, especially in Lebanon and Syria. The federal model of democracy with emphasis on a self-administered area is the only model that can help ensure the cultural survival of the various communities of Assyrians/Chaldeans/Syriacs in the Middle East. In Iraq, the emphasis on the Nineveh Plains where our villages and towns still remain must be internationally sanctioned by law in order to

allow the language, religion, culture, and geography to survive intact.

Maronites and Lebanese Christians as a whole face similar challenges that ChaldoAssyrians are now experiencing. We all are concerned with Islamic fundamentalism, demographic and political hegemony (albeit from different groups), the need for fair and equitable economic development and reconstruction, internal sectarian tensions (even within Christians groups), and a growing realization that the "Christian" West has been reluctant to advocate on our behalf out of fear of alienating the regional Muslim majority. Finally, we all face the prospects of increasing emigration from our homelands and a potentially overwhelming challenge to register and count all of our people in the diaspora.

We share a common history, culture, religion, Syriac language, and, at one time, a contiguous geography. But most importantly, we share an intimately tied future fate. When we ignore the dire situation of one of our communities in the region, we diminish from our own interest and magnitude as a people. We must now begin to present ourselves to the world as a people with a regional, international problem rather than as isolated groups with internal domestic problems.

Though many of us believe we are indeed one people, we must not delude ourselves that this has been universally adopted by all of our people. However, from a simply strategic and tactical perspective, we cannot allow the beatings and disappearances of Lebanese students, as one example, to be viewed by the world community as an internal Lebanese affair anymore than we can allow the loss of another ChaldoAssyrian village in northern Iraq to be so seen. We need to evolve to a level of cooperation where any such instance in one area draws criticism from all of our groups.

A practical approach to allow us to develop such communication and a common understanding involves increasing contacts between our leaders and people at such conventions and meetings as these. Organizing joint conventions and symposia will help to "connect the dots" of our various scattered and isolated communities and increase cross pollinization of ideas and strategies. Such approaches will send the signal to our neighbors as well as the world community that we are linked as a regional issue, not simply an internal domestic nuisance. Sponsoring research, position papers, research centers, and think tanks through the collaborative efforts of our organizations at the academic level will also have a synergistic effect. Organizing joint delegations of our leaders to our governments and representatives in the diaspora as well as to international organizations on the political level will undoubtedly augment our standing.

On behalf of the Assyrian Academic Society, we look forward to further collaboration with like-minded organizations from across the spectrum of our people.

References and Further Reading

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