

# ASSYRIANS IN IRAQ

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## Abstract

The article examines the question of the Assyrian identity; certain problems pertaining to the history of the Assyrian-Kurdish relationships; the problem of the Assyrian autonomy; the role of the political parties of the Iraqi Assyrians; the status of the Assyrians in Iraqi Kurdistan; the Assyrians after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, and several other issues.

## INTRODUCTION

Assyrians are the descendants of the ancient Aramaean-speaking population of Northern Mesopotamia, which adopted Christianity in the 1st century A.D. and pioneered this religion in the area.

The literary Assyrian language developed in the 19th century on the basis of the dialect of Urmiya, with the writing system based on the Syriac alphabet.

The Assyrians are also known as Syrians, Chaldeans, Assyro-Chaldeans or Syro-Chaldeans (Chaldo-Assyrians), Nestorians, and Jacobites. The use of these different appellations—having mainly religious background<sup>1</sup>—even among experts often creates a great deal of confusion. In this paper we shall use the term *Assyrians*, which is commonly used as an ethnic name.

Currently Assyrian communities exist almost in every Near Eastern country including Iran—mainly in the Urmiya area and in the major cities; Iraq—in the north, in the mountainous regions to the east of Mosul, near Dohuk and Akra, as well as in Baghdad; Syria—predominantly in the cities; and Turkey—mainly in eastern,

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g. Th. Nöldeke, *Grammatik der neusyrischen Sprache am Urmiya-See und in Kurdistan*, Leipzig, 1868: XVII-XXXVIII; J. Joseph, *The Nestorians and their Muslim Neighbors*, Princeton, New Jersey, 1961 (University Microfilm): 3-21; M. Chevalier, *Les montagnards chrétiens du Hakkāri et du Kurdistan septentrional*, Paris, 1985: 9-11; on the confessional break-down of the Assyrians at the present time, see <http://www.aina.org/aol/peterbriet.htm>

south-eastern and southern vilayets, and in Istanbul. There is an Assyrian community in Armenia as well.<sup>2</sup>

Like in the past, in modern Iraq the Assyrian population lives mostly in the former Mosul vilayet. A relatively small number of Nestorians populated the Amadia district, in the far north of the country. The Assyro-Chaldean population has been significantly larger. They lived in the villages around Erbil and Kuy Sanjaq. There are also large Nestorian villages in the region of the river Big Zab and near Mosul.<sup>3</sup>

A demographic analysis of the concentrations of Assyrians in the northern Iraqi provinces, presented by Firas Jatou of the Assyrian International News Agency (AINA) at the 70th Assyrian Convention (in 2003), shows that despite the destruction of nearly 200 Assyrian villages in Iraq, from the 1960s till today, “the greatest concentration of Assyrian villages remained relatively intact around the province of Mosul and Dohuk”.<sup>4</sup>

As far as the data on various Assyrian church confessions in Iraq are concerned, it is hard to be statistically accurate about the exact number of their followers. It is not uncommon for one and the same source to provide conflicting numbers.

In this context, it should be mentioned that about one third of all Christians populating Iraq left the country in the 1990s. The Christian community is largely Assyrian, including also a small number of Armenians. However, according to some sources “there are now a growing number of Kurdish and Arab believers”,<sup>5</sup> i. e. Christian Kurds<sup>6</sup> and Arabs.

<sup>2</sup> Assyrians first appeared in Armenia during the 1826-1828 Russian-Persian War, having been relocated from the lake Urmiya region in Iran. Soon thereafter, under the pressure of the Russian authorities, the settlers converted to Orthodox Christianity. The areas they chose to settle down (in the villages of Koylasar (Dmitrov) and Dvin-Aysor (Verin Dvin) of the Ararat district) have since then remained the main centres of the Assyrian population in Armenia (see G. Asatrian, V. Arakelova, *The Ethnic Minorities of Armenia*, Yerevan, 2002: 5-6).

<sup>3</sup> See W. R. Hay, *Two Years in Kurdistan: Experiences of a Political Officer, 1918-1920*, London, 1921: 88; S. H. Longrigg, *Iraq 1900 to 1950. A Political, Social and Economic History*, London, 1953: 11.

<sup>4</sup> See “70th Assyrian Convention Addresses Assyrian Autonomy in Iraq (2003)” (<http://aina.org/releases/2003/convention6753.htm>).

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.qmi.org/ow/country/iraq/owtext.html>

<sup>6</sup> With regard to the so-called Christian Kurds, Prof. Garnik Asatrian notes that “the religious history of the Kurds does not contain any traces of Christianity”. Additionally, he deems it possible that the references to the Christian Kurds in some

Due to the significant emigration of the Iraqi Assyrians and the lack of appropriate data, it is almost impossible to give accurate statistics on the Assyrian community of Iraq at the present time.

“Although population statistics are woefully inadequate in northern Iraq, one estimate indicates that the Turkomans constitute approximately 220,000, or less than 2 percent of the Iraqi population, while the Assyrians number maybe 133,000 or less than 1 percent”.<sup>7</sup> However, the figures relating to the religious affiliation of the Iraqi population indicate that the number of the Christian population in Iraq is close to 360,000.<sup>8</sup> As to the data on the Assyrian population within the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) territory, it should be mentioned that the figures cited by local experts are extremely exaggerated: indeed, according to an informal census conducted by Alexander Sternberg in the summer of 1998, the numbers of ethnic minorities are much lower than the minorities themselves would predict. While the total population within the KRG’s territory numbered between 3,7 to 3,9 million, the reported Assyro-Chaldean population was surprisingly low, somewhere under 40,000. The Turkoman population for the same territory ran about 50,000.<sup>9</sup>

## IDENTITY

When the late Patriarch of the Assyro-Chaldeans Mar Raphael I Be-Dawid was asked: “We know that the Chaldean Church has an ethnic nature, like some other Eastern churches, such as the Armenian Church. Do you consider that a sign of strength or weakness for the Church? Can a church with such a background be open and engaging with other ethnic groups or will that be its cause for isolation?”, he replied: “The original name of our Church was the “Church of the

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medieval Arab sources relate to the Aramaic tribes—the Jacobites and the Nestorians, whose external appearance is very similar to that of the Kurds (G. Asatrian, *Etyudy po iranskoj etnologii*, Erevan, 1988: 39).

<sup>7</sup> Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurdish Predicament in Iraq: Political Analysis*, New York, 1999: 138, fn.3; cf. also Helen Chapin Metz (ed.), *Iraq: A Country Study*, Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1990: 86.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.qmi.org/ow/country/iraq/owtext.html>

<sup>9</sup> See David Nissman’s review in *RFE/RL Iraq Report*, vol.2, N13, 2 April 1999; see also Alexander Sternberg’s commentary for “Kurdistan Observer” (March 23, 1999). Another source indicates: “Assyrian Christians have suffered much persecution, destruction of villages and intimidation first by Saddam and then by the Kurds. Assyrian Christians in the Kurdish Autonomous Region have been reduced by emigration to 45,000” (<http://www.qmi.org/ow/country/iraq/owtext.html>).



“Evêque nestorien”, a Nestorian Bishop  
 (Caspard Drouville, *Voyage en Perse*. Atlas, SPb, 1820)

East”. When a portion of the people of the Church of the East became Catholic, the name given was “Chaldean” based on the Magi Kings who came from the land of the Chaldeans to Bethlehem. This was done to provide a historical and a cultural value at the same time. The Assyrian brothers “took” the name “Assyrian Church” as an ethnic title in place of “Nestorian Church”, which, again, is originally the Church of the East. As for us, on the other hand, the name “Chaldean” does not represent an ethnicity. I personally feel that

once you lock a church into a single ethnicity, you end that church. My church and the church of the Assyrians are one church. If I come today and state that this is an Assyrian church or a Chaldean church, I am in effect terminating this church. In our history, our church did not stop among Assyrians, but spread Christianity in Turkey, Afghanistan, China, Southern Asia, Tibet, among others, and had millions of followers. So a person, who is a Christian and is a member of our church, cannot be necessarily called an Assyrian, but they can all be called sons of the Church of the East. We have to separate what is ethnicity and what is religion. This is very important. However, we have people that do not understand this, and in the spirit of extremism, call for Assyrian, Assyrian, Assyrian. ... I am Assyrian. I myself, my sect is Chaldean, but ethnically, I am Assyrian. That does not mean I should mix everything".<sup>10</sup> The religious separatist movement has many followers at least among Assyro-Chaldeans. The Assyrian intelligentsia has long realised that in order to be able to propose all-Assyrian programmes and see them to successful completion, Assyrians of different confessions ought to be naturally identified as Assyrians or should, at least, adopt a new name suitable to everyone (not the religious identity, but rather a universally accepted self-identification). It was stated in the resolution of the first congress of the Assyrian Universal Alliance in Poe, France, back on April 10-13, 1968, that "there will no longer be a variety of names as Nestorians, Chaldeans, Jacobites, Maronites, etc., to divide the Assyrian people, but all factions will be referred to as Assyrian (Atouria)".<sup>11</sup> However, no tangible results were achieved. In 2003, the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM), or Zowaa, came up with another initiative. Having realised that not a single political party can speak on behalf of the entire Assyrian nation (with all its colourful religious, cultural, and linguistic distinctions), and being fully aware of the importance of the religious reconciliation in the context of achieving a solidified Assyrian political front, at least in its Iraqi fraction, the Movement attempted to achieve some results through the adoption of a new name for the Assyrians of Iraq, the term *Chaldo-Assyrians*.<sup>12</sup> This name has been adopted through the majority of votes at the Congress in October 2003 in Baghdad. The chief objective of the ADM and

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.assyrianamericanleague.org/hhmarbedawid.htm>

<sup>11</sup> Assyrian Universal Alliance (<http://aua.net/APRIL%2010131968.htm>).

<sup>12</sup> Wilfred Bet-Alkhas, "Zinda Magazine Calls for Historical Summit", *Furkono*, April 2004 (<http://www.furkono.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=291>).

the Assyrian Demographic Organisation sponsored congress, convened in difficult conditions, was legally to adopt the new name for the nation, which would be included in the Constitution of Iraq, and would also make it easier for the Assyrians to draft and implement an Assyrian autonomy in the plain of Nineveh. In the view of the majority, adopting the name *Chaldo-Assyrians* is the best way to keep away from external influences, which attempt to aggravate the domestic discourse on the nation's name. In the case the new common name is not adopted, the third or fourth largest ethnos in Iraq may break into small ethnic groups.



A Chaldean Woman in Baghdad  
(*Mme J.-M. Dieulafoy, 1887*)

Although it is still too early to assess the results of the initiative, it seems that while the new designation initially saw some favourable acknowledgment among the Iraqi Assyrians of various religious confessions, in the Diaspora the new term was not at all unanimously accepted.

#### THE ASSYRIAN-KURDISH RELATIONS

As is well-known, the Kurds have always been inimical to the neighbouring Christian peoples, including Assyrians. However, until the 1840s, at least in the mountainous region of Hakkari, Kurds and Assyrians enjoyed certain peaceful coexistence. Things drastically

changed when Western missionaries began their activities in the region. The missionaries engaged in a conspiracy aimed at setting Kurds off against Assyrians who practiced different Christian confessions. The growing interest of Europeans and Americans towards Assyrians made the Kurds nervous. They had every reason to be concerned, as it was brought to their attention that Europeans promised Assyrians all kinds of support and protection trying to entice them with the security their respective countries could offer. Assyrians themselves did not conceal their fondness for the 'Frank' (European) missionaries, whom they viewed as heralds of the Christian world. In their turn, Kurds began perceiving Assyrians as the ethnos responsible for bringing Western missionaries into their territories. Although the missionaries were well aware of the enmity between Kurds and Assyrians, they did not try to settle the conflict, moreover, they escalated the inter-ethnic confrontation by bribing and recruiting Kurdish religious fundamentalists. Missionaries believed that unrest and the feeling of danger would make Assyrian Nestorians more susceptible to the "Word of God", in other words, an ongoing conflict and the ensuing sense of insecurity were supposed to "soften up" Assyrians, to make them vulnerable and, therefore, more willing to accept the missionaries and their governments as the only security guarantee for them.

Probably the Assyrian-Nestorians' and their Patriarch's refusal to side with the Kurds against the Turks was the pretext for the Assyrian massacre of 1843. Nonetheless, the Assyrians tried not to lose their dignity and always gave an adequate response, with much audacity and great valour, to any act of violence on the part of the Kurds.<sup>13</sup>

The Assyrian-Kurdish relations remained in fact tense and inimical during the whole second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. And the treacherous assassination of the Patriarch of the Assyrian Nestorian Church Mar Shimun Benjamin on March 16, 1918 by the chief of the Kurdish Shakak tribe Isma'il-Agha Simko (Simitko), further exacerbated the Assyrian-Kurdish relations. After

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<sup>13</sup> Harry Charles Luke in this connection says: "To *ashiret*, as well as to *rayah* the Kurd was the enemy, ever ready to raid and to plunder, more numerous and better armed than the Christian. But let it not be supposed that the Assyrian was content to turn the other cheek. This hardy mountain-people is a Church militant in the most literal sense of the term; and that it gave as good as it received may be inferred from the circumstance that, if Kurds address their dogs in Syriac, the Assyrians speak to theirs in Kurdish" (*Mosul and its Minorities*, London, 1925: 97).

World War I the issue became even more complicated in the virtue of the fact that the Assyrians and Kurds both aspired for autonomy and in drafting their respective hypothetical states both usually considered disputed territories as their own. In the early 1920s, the fact that the Assyrians had their own armed formations caused a great deal of concern among the Kurds and the Muslims of Mesopotamia as a whole.



Mar Shimun Benjamin, the Nestorian Patriarch,  
treacherously killed by Isma'il-Agha Simko on March 16, 1918

The Assyrian armed troops rolled back the Turkish invasion of Iraq in 1922 and 1923, at a time when the Iraqi forces were utterly unfit to take the field themselves. Along with that, the Assyrian armed groups (since 1921-1922 the Assyrian Levies) were used by the British to police Mesopotamia and the Kurdish areas to smash the successive rebellions by the Arabs and the Kurds. This, certainly, increased the hatred of the Muslims against the Assyrian Christians, which were now looked upon as an effective instrument in the local policy of the British Government.



Simko in Sulaimaniya

(Susan Meiselas, *Kurdistan in the Shadow of History*, New York, 1997)

In 1933, Assyrian pogroms took place in Iraq. The mere fact that the Kurdish tribes took part in the Assyrian pogroms had further embittered the already tense Assyrian-Kurdish relations. Another contributing factor proved to be the Iraqi government's claims that all Assyrian pogroms had exclusively been instigated and carried out by the Kurds, and that the great number of casualties among the Assyrians stems only from the Kurdish assaults.

Regardless of the historically uneasy Assyrian-Kurdish relations, the Assyrians have nonetheless had their adequate input in the Kurdish movement in Iraq, especially in the second half of the 20th

century.<sup>14</sup> One of the most famous *Peshmerga* commanders was an Assyrian woman, Margaret George Malik, killed in 1966.<sup>15</sup>

With Assyrian parties and organisations missing from the political landscape of Iraq, in their pursuit of independence from the Baghdad regime, Assyrian nationalists and opposition had two options: either to join the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) or to act within the framework of the Kurdish movement. While many Assyrians reached top levels in the ICP nomenclature, in some military formations of the Kurdish movement, they constituted about 15 percent of the staff. This state of affairs whereby Iraqi Assyrians acted exclusively from within of movements of “others”, continued at least until the late 1970s. In April 1979, the Assyrians created their own organisation—the soon-to-be-famous ADM, and the situation seemed to have changed significantly. However, pragmatic an organisation it was, the ADM did not put forth any extreme nationalistic ideas, nor did it ever reassess the friendly relationships between the Assyrians and the Kurds. Realising that those common threats must be dealt with jointly by Assyrians and Kurds, the ADM actively collaborated with the latter. The increasingly frequent attempts (especially in the 1970s) by the central Iraqi government to split the Kurdish-Assyrian collaboration did not bear any fruit. Back in the April of 1970, the Iraqi government and personally the President Ahmad Hasan Al-Bakr, invited the then Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun, and then, in February of 1973, the famous Assyrian leader Yaku Malek Ismael for ne-

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<sup>14</sup> A good number of Assyrian militants joined the Kurdish movement, while others made an indirect yet important contribution to the Kurdish struggle. Since 1960s Iran and Israel supported the Kurdish movement headed by Mustafa Barzani. In 1974, the Shah of Iran renewed his support by sending provisions to the Kurdish forces in Iraq in an effort to destabilise the government in Baghdad. The transporters of the military and humanitarian provisions were none other than the Assyrians, who in turn were promised a well-equipped army and an independent region in their ancestral home. And so began the 30-year triangular partnership between Iran, the Iraqi Kurds, and the Assyrians from Iran and Iraq (see D. McDowell, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, London-New York, 1996: 381). After the signing of the Algiers Accord (on 13 June 1975), however, both Iran and Israel withdrew their support for the Kurdish rebellion. Later, on November 6, 1975, the Patriarch of the Church of the East, Mar Eshai Shimun was gunned down by an Assyrian, David Malik Ismail, in San Jose, California. It was not a mere accident. Earlier the late Patriarch had declared his disagreement with the political planners in Tehran and rejected the idea of the Assyrian Universal Alliance “to return to Iraq to live, and to support the political alliance” (see Wilfred Bet-Alkhas, “The Nochiya Connection”, *Zinda Magazine*, volume XI, issue 58, November 2, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> See D. McDowell, *ibid.*

gotiations. During these talks, the Iraqi government offered the Assyrian leaders to build military Assyrian formations to strike the Kurds. Instead, the government promised to acknowledge some of the Assyrians' rights. Both the Patriarch and Yaku Malek Ismael declined the Iraqi offer. Further similar propositions by the Baghdad regime met the same fate.<sup>16</sup>



Margaret George Malik, the Assyrian *Peshmarga*  
(Susan Meiselas, *Kurdistan in the Shadow of History*, New York, 1997)

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<sup>16</sup> Ashor Giwargis, "Until When? The Assyrian Ethnicity Persecuted and Marginalised in its own Homeland", *An-Nahar Newspaper*, Lebanon, 1 October 2002.

The ADM kept actively collaborating with the Kurdish parties in Northern Iraq. The 1992 the Kurdistan parliamentary elections were a test of stability for the Assyrian-Kurdish relations. It was vital for the Kurds that other nations of the region (especially Assyrians and Turkomans) supported them at least by participating in these elections. The political dividends from their participation were very high. And while the Turkey-influenced Iraqi Turkomans did in effect boycott the elections to the Kurdistan parliament, the Iraqi Assyrians not only took the places allotted for them in the parliament, but also showed overwhelming support to the Kurdish leaders (at least until 2003).<sup>17</sup> They even assumed the middleman role between the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) during the Kurdish civil war.

Following the 1992 events in Iraqi Kurdistan, in their approach to the Assyrians, the Ba'ath regime switched from persuasion to coercion and intimidation. Obviously, given the Assyrian-Kurdish collaboration and after the Assyrian deputies took their seats in the parliament of Kurdistan, the Ba'athists gave up any hopes to convince the Assyrians, and instead decided to pressure them by bullying the Christians and assassinating their leaders. On that purpose, the ADM member of the parliament Francis Yusef Chabo was murdered in Dohuk (June 1, 1993).<sup>18</sup>

In terms of political affiliations and preferences, the Iraqi Assyrians can be divided into two categories: rural population, which generally sympathises with the Kurdish movement, and the urban population, which tends to side up with Arabs. At the same time, after the 2003-2005 events in Iraq and certain complications that sur-

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<sup>17</sup> With Saddam's invasion of Kuwait and his subsequent defeat, large parts of Iraqi Kurdistan became de facto autonomous under a no-fly zone enforced by the West. Under Kurdish control, dozens of Assyrian small towns and villages armed themselves and established local militias. Since 1992, five members of the locally elected legislative assembly of Kurdistan were Assyrians. Nonetheless, the Assyrian leaders and human rights activists around the world have been protesting against the Kurdish mistreatment of the Christian minority, and several abuses have been documented since the mid-1990s. Meanwhile, the Assyrian attempts to reinforce their own cultural autonomy under the Kurdish autonomous rule have not been successful (Walid Phares, "Are Christian Enclaves the Solution? Disappearing Christians of the Middle East", *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2001, volume VIII, Number 1.

<sup>18</sup> However, according to the Amnesty International, Francis Chabo was killed by the KDP (see J. C. Michael, "The Chaldo-Assyrian Cause in Iraq: Implications for Maronites", *Paper presented at the National Apostolate of Maronites Convention*, Orlando, Florida, July 16, 2004).

faced in Kurdish-Assyrian relations, as well as after the general anti-Assyrian and anti-Christian actions (terrorist attacks) in the country, now it is hard to say who the Assyrian people are affiliated with.

#### THE IRAQI GOVERNMENT AND THE ASSYRIANS

Before we proceed to discussing the relations of the Assyrians with the Iraqi government and the position of the official Baghdad on this issue, it should be noted that even if we accept that Baghdad had a distinct stance and a blanket policy towards Assyrians of all confessions, the reverse is not true. At least the position of the Assyrian Chaldean Church to the central government has been fundamentally different from that of other Assyrian churches and, first and foremost, from the views of the Assyrian Church of the East and its followers.

Under any regime, the Assyrian Chaldean Church has been loyal to the authorities, and has always separated religion from politics. It has never been involved in any anti-government activities, pressing its followers hard to refrain from setting forth nationalistic agendas. The Assyrian Chaldean Church was loyal to the Ottoman Empire, to the British administration of Iraq (1917-1921), and to all consecutive Iraqi regimes (from 1921 to the present day). Even the mass killings of Assyrians in 1933 failed to yield any change or adjustment in that stable position of the Assyrian Chaldean Church.

Furthermore, the Assyrian Chaldean Church has been trying to move even closer to the Iraqi government. The mass migration of the Assyro-Chaldeans from the cities and villages of Northern Iraq (mostly from around the Mosul region) to large cities in the central and southern parts of the country, following the end of World War II, was meant to demonstrate their desire of integration into the country and to adopt its agenda. In Baghdad and other cities, the Assyrian Chaldeans opened their businesses, took jobs in government and civil service, made careers in various, oftentimes elite spheres of the Iraqi social life.

The transfer by the Chaldean Patriarch Mar Yousef Ghanima (1947-1958) of his Patriarchal See from Mosul to Baghdad was the ultimate proof of the Assyrian Chaldeans' loyalty to the regime. That move heralded the beginning of a "new and obvious era of harmoni-

sation, integration and the melting of Chaldeans within the Iraqi society”, a process which is still ongoing.<sup>19</sup>

The situation did not change at all with the Ba’ath party’s coming to power. When the delegation of the Assyrian organisations of Iraq met in the summer of 1977 with the Assyrian communities in the U.S. and U.K., only the Assyrian-Chaldeans expressed their loyalty to the regime, while the Eastern Church Assyrians harshly criticised the Iraqi government and its policies. No wonder that a member of the Iraqi intelligence, Hashim Shabeb, Director General of the Iraqi Mass Media, the officially appointed curator of the Assyrian issues in Iraq and the Diaspora, who had been travelling with the Assyrian delegation, issued the following assessment: “The Chaldeans will remain always faithful to the government, loyal to Ba’ath party, trustful and dependable in implementing our strategy toward our Christian minorities in Diaspora, while (the Eastern) Assyrians will remain always traitorous and unfaithful to the Iraqi government and the Ba’ath party”.<sup>20</sup>

This recommendation of the expert could not escape the government’s attention. The Baghdad authorities started displaying a de facto preferential attitude towards the Chaldean Church and its followers, which had quite favourable consequences for the latter on both the religious and the secular levels. The Chaldean Church flourished and strengthened its positions: new churches and religious schools were being built in larger Iraqi cities; a number of Chaldean clerics (with all of them receiving the best possible religious education) reached unprecedented levels; all the Chaldean Church institutions experienced an obvious upsurge. All these achievements of the Assyro-Chaldean community are linked with Mar Paulis Shekho’s tenure as Patriarch (1958–1988).

The progress Assyrian Chaldeans made on the secular level has been equally impressive. They increasingly became the best-educated people in the country and took high-ranking posts in virtually all spheres of life. A great lot of non-political Chaldean clubs mushroomed all over the country. While the positive side of being apolitical is quite obvious, there were also some serious losses. Assyro-Chaldeans started progressively losing their ethnic and national identity, their sense of linguistic, historical, cultural, and traditional

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<sup>19</sup> Aprim Shapera, “Chaldean Catholic Church and National Politics (February 19, 2003)” (<http://www.atour.com/religion/docs/20030219a.html>).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

kinship with other Assyrians. The process of a change of identity, or, more precisely, self-identity was taking place. This phenomenon was especially evident in the cities, where Assyro-Chaldeans, who had already become Arabic-speaking (in the north, they mostly speak Kurdish), retained only one former attribute of their identity, the Chaldean faith. A voluntary loss of the language is also obvious. Chaldean parents in the central and southern parts of the country prefer their children to learn Arabic, instead of their native Assyrian, while in the north, in Iraqi Kurdistan, Kurdish and Arabic are languages of choice for local Chaldeans, again at the expense of Assyrian. Assyro-Chaldeans believe the knowledge of Arabic and Kurdish opens more opportunities for their offspring destined to live in Iraq. Such a state of affairs is conducive of a situation whereby Arabs, Kurds, and Turkomans call Arabic-, Kurdish-, and Turkic-speaking Assyro-Chaldeans Christian Arabs, Christian Kurds (sometimes, Kurdish-Assyrians), and Christian Turkomans respectively.

It must be said, however, that despite the preferential policy towards the Chaldeans, never did the government of Iraq recognise Assyrians as anything other than a religious minority. Moreover, with Chaldeans belonging to a different Assyrian Christian sect, the other Assyrian communities have always been considered distinct by the government.

In 1977, the Iraqi regime intensified its efforts to liquidate the national existence of Assyrians in the land of their forebears, as exemplified by its decision to ban this people from registering themselves as Assyrians in the 1977 census. Instead, they were forced to register as Arabs or Kurds. This was the first such a blatant attempt to deny the national existence of the Assyrians in modern Iraqi history. This action further made the need for a unified Assyrian democratic political organisation apparent. As a result, on April 12, 1979 the ADM was established.

The sources point out that by 1990, the Assyrian national identity in Iraq had all but been erased, to the point where foreign journalists unfamiliar with Iraqi history completely missed this hidden community and reported instead on the presence of Arab Christians (rather than Assyrians or Assyro-Chaldeans) in Baghdad.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, in the 1990s, with the implementation of the United Nations Oil-for-Food programme, Saddam Hussein's regime not only

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<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Eric Lewis, "Iraqi Assyrians: Barometer of Pluralism, October, 2003" (<http://f21.parsimony.net/forum37811/messages/21380.htm>).

manipulated the programme to its advantage, but also used it to pressure Assyrians “by stipulating that only *Arab Christians* and not Assyrians could use ration cards”.<sup>22</sup>

The Iran-Iraq war took an especially great toll, as Assyrians and the Iraqi Christians in general suffered enormous losses. The overall loss for the Assyrians was 60,000 of killed, captives, and missing in action. Suffice it to say that the Assyrian town of Baghdida (Qaraqosh) alone gave about 6,000 martyrs. Thus, the figures of losses suffered by the Assyrian community were disproportionately high, which leads to suspect a premeditated Ba’ath plot. Comparably great losses were inflicted on the Christian and particularly Assyrian population of Iraq by the Kuwait campaign and the events that followed.

As long as the domestic policy is concerned, the illicit operation Anfal undertaken to “punish” the Kurds, hurt the Assyrians as well. The Iraqi side destroyed “a large number of Assyrian villages causing more than 40,000 Assyrians to flee from their villages, along with the Kurds, to neighbouring countries”. The fate of those who stayed behind was not much better. The Baghdad regime decided concurrently to punish Assyrians, as they “refused to register as ‘Arabs’ or ‘Kurds’ in the 1987 Census”.<sup>23</sup>

The situation further deteriorated after 1991-1992, when the Assyrians were de-facto divided into two groups: one controlled by the Kurdish administration in the northern part of Iraq, and another, to the south of the 36th parallel, under the control of Baghdad. Had the Assyrians refused to support Kurds in the north, they would have been stigmatised as “Saddam’s collaborators”, while should they have failed following Saddam’s instruction southwards of the 36th parallel, they would have been brutally punished as “Kurdish collaborators”. Therefore, it is not surprising that Assyrians in either part had been loyal to their respective authorities.

Although a secular and non-Islamic state, Iraq is a Muslim country nonetheless, where religion plays an increasingly important role. Meanwhile, during the Ba’ath party’s reign, Article 25 of the Constitution guaranteed the religious liberty of the minorities. It could seem that Christians enjoyed a real tolerance in Iraq, since there were even Christian ministers in the government, such as the Chaldean Tariq Aziz. However, the real situation was different. The

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ashor Giwargis, *ibid.*

emigration of Christians, the problems with religious education for them, and, finally, acts of violence came to complete the whole picture. Figures dating from the period after the Persian Gulf war to the end of 1990s indicated a huge flow of Christians out of Iraq. The percentage of Christians leaving Iraq today constitutes 30 percent of all Iraqis leaving the country, while they form only 3 percent (!) of the total population.<sup>24</sup>

The migration situation in Iraqi regions under the Kurdish control is also worth of attention. It is common knowledge that since 1991-1992 Assyrians and Turkomans have been given certain rights and freedoms on the entire territory of the autonomous Iraqi Kurdistan, something their brethren left under control of the Ba'ath party could only dream about. Nevertheless, Christians of Northern Iraq were leaving Iraqi Kurdistan just like their coreligionists who remained under Baghdad's control.

This could possibly be explained by the escalating Kurdish civil war between KDP and PUK. That circumstance, however, only accounts for the rise in migration, yet it fails to explain phenomenon itself, as the exodus of Christians has continued after the Washington Accord between KDP and PUK, and even after the 2003 war in Iraq. In the expert's view: "they have several reasons for wanting out: a feeling that they will not be able to cope in the long run with the tribal structure of the Kurdish society; a fear of Islamism among the Kurds; and an uncertainty about the future of the northern enclave".<sup>25</sup>

On the whole, by using both stick and carrot, Saddam Hussein managed to secure the loyalty of the Christians on the land under his control, thus making sure they do not join his opposition. No wonder then that while deep down hating him up until the 2003 war, the Iraqi Christians (except those in the northern parts) were against the change of regime in Iraq, considering it the lesser evil. To justify their position, the following arguments were forwarded by them: "Nothing better can be expected either from the collapse of the regime, or from an Islamic revolution. It is hard to imagine a post-Saddam phase".<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ray J. Mouawad, "Syria and Iraq – Repression", *Middle East Quarterly*, Winter 2001, volume VIII, Number 1.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> [http://www.augustea.it/dgabriele/english/e\\_isl\\_iraq.htm](http://www.augustea.it/dgabriele/english/e_isl_iraq.htm)

## THE PROBLEM OF THE ASSYRIAN AUTONOMY

Assyrians started taking certain steps towards their autonomy as far back as during World War I. The Urmiyan Manifesto of Unification and the Union of Free Assyria, which appeared in Russia shortly after the February Revolution, contains all necessary information regarding the territories that should have been included by certain socialist Assyrian circles in the prospective Assyrian autonomy.

The first article of the aforementioned Manifesto declares: "The aim and the aspiration of the Union of Free Assyria is the establishment in the future of national government in the regions of Urmiya, Mosul, Turabdin, Nisibin, Jazira, and Jularmeg, and the partnership with the great and free Russia in the areas of trade and industry, and in military as well, so that to form an alliance with Russia".<sup>27</sup>

The Russian Revolution of October, 1917 left the Assyrian nation stranded. The Assyrians had from now on to fight alone against the Turks, the Arabs, and the Kurds. Despite the fact that the Assyrians possessed considerable military contingent, they needed the support of one of the great powers to resist the incessant pressure of the Turkish regulars and the Kurdish irregulars.

Motivated by the fact that the Assyrian army was threatening seriously the northern flank of Turkish armies that were engaged in a deadly combat with the British armies in Mesopotamia and Southern Persia, Great Britain aspired to take on the role of the patron of Assyrians.

To draw Assyrians into their game, the British were ready to promise their support in the establishment of an independent Assyrian State. Describing the circumstances under which the British gave the promise, Mar Shimun Eshai writes: "It was at this juncture that the British Government through the agency of Captain George F. Gracey, who was acting under orders of the Intelligence Service, came especially for the purpose from Van, his headquarters, to encourage the Assyrians to organise their resistance against the Turks. At a conference held in December, 1917, or early January, 1918, in the name of England, Capt. Gracey undertook to furnish immediately the funds necessary for the payment of the troops and non-commissioned officers. For the future he promised the proclamation of the

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<sup>27</sup> L. M. Sargizov, *Assirijcy Bližnego i Srednego Vostoka (Pervoj poloviny 20-ogo veka)*, Erevan, 1979: 71.

independence of the Assyrian nation".<sup>28</sup>

In early 1920s, the legendary Agha Potrus repeatedly demanded that an autonomous Assyrian state should be created. Between April 1921 and March 1922, various British offices and bureaucrats of varied calibre (the offices of the High Commissioner in Baghdad, the Director of Repatriation in Mosul, and the Divisional Advisor in Mosul) discussed Agha Potrus's proposals in earnest. Later, Agha Potrus submitted to the Lausanne conference his proposals on the creation of the Assyrian autonomous state. In Potrus's opinion the map of an Assyrian formation bordered around the Mosul province should have had the following borders: "the southern line: north of the 36th latitude; the eastern line: the Zab River where it flows into the Tigris River and through the city of Rewanduz all the way to Iran, the western line: the 42nd longitude; the northern line: the region of Van, Turkey".<sup>29</sup>

Although the Lausanne conference had unsurprisingly ignored Agha Potrus's proposal, he did not give up his attempts. On October 23, 1923, he handed the British his new proposal, this time on the creation of an Assyrian enclave. The territorial boundaries of the enclave were revisited since the previous projects: the Assyrian enclave was to include "the land between the Rivers Tigris and Zab, and Mount Sinjar".<sup>30</sup>

Despite all the defeats Assyrians suffered in 1923, as long as the fervent British-Iraqi-Turkish power struggle on the Mosul issue was still raging on, and as long as England and the Iraqi government needed Assyrian support, there was a little hope left that Assyrians could at least retain a portion of their historical homeland, Hakkari, even though not in the form of an autonomy or a state formation.

The Assyrian factor was used by the British against the Turks at the Constantinople conference that took place between May 19 and June 5, 1924. At the conference, the British delegate Sir Percy Cox, guided by strategic considerations, demanded the northern Iraqi border to be extended at the expense of the historical homeland of Assyrians, Hakkari. He motivated his demand with the unwillingness on the part of Assyrians to live under the Turks any longer.

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<sup>28</sup> *The Assyrian National Petition Presented to The World Security Conference at San Francisco* (May 7, 1945), New Jersey, 1946: 3.

<sup>29</sup> Fred Aprim, "The Assyrian Statehood: Yesterday's Denial and Today's Moral Obligation" (<http://www.atour.com/government/docs/20030120a.htm>).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

The Turkish delegate accused Assyrians of treason during World War I, and, surprisingly, the representatives of the League of Nations at the conference, apparently deeming territorial claims by the British too excessive, supported the Turks. That allowed the Turkish side to state that Assyrians deserve neither absolution nor a state of their own. The British delegate had to tone down his demands and suggest another option for a new Iraqi border. Assyrians were offered to resettle in compact communities elsewhere even though that location may be outside the borders of their historical homeland. After the Mosul issue was settled (1925-1926), it became obvious that the abovementioned offer was the best option the Assyrians could hope for, as the Mosul vilayet had remained inseparable part of the Kingdom of Iraq, while the historical homeland of Turkish-Assyrians, Hakkari, remained in Turkey, and they were banned from settling there. The Assyrians hoped that the Iraqi government, then under British control, would grant them internal autonomy or resettle them as a compact community. Soon though they were sorely disappointed, as their aspirations were met with strong resistance from the Iraqi government, while the British colonial authorities, having had already used the Assyrian factor to their own benefit, were not inclined to exacerbate their already strained relations with the Iraqi nationalists.

By then, Assyrian demands for self-determination under the British protectorate had lost their relevance. Inter-ethnic tensions in the north of Iraq were flying so high that the tiniest spark could set off a massive explosion. Even so, when by the late 1920s a relative stability and calmness were established in Iraq, the Assyrian leaders felt it was the right time to appeal to the British authorities and the Iraqi government again with just one demand, to resettle Assyrians in compact communities in the northern part of the country. The British and the Iraqi authorities, fearing Assyrian concentration in one place as a possible first step towards a future autonomy or an independent state, began pressing for settling the Assyrians in small groups all over the north, which as an added bonus, would also neutralise the ever-agitated Kurds. E. Maine believed that if Assyrians had settled together, with 10,000 well-trained and armed men and a spiritual leader, with civil power aspirations, then it would not take them long to close the gap to autonomy.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> E. Maine, *Iraq from Mandate to Independence*, London, 1935: 147.

The British press wrote that even if the Assyrians were not offered a local autonomy, but were just allowed to settle in a compact form headed by the Patriarch, they would have easily achieved the autonomy status. That is why the government of Iraq decided to settle Assyrians in groups separated from each other by hostile Kurdish lands. Assyrians were not willing to live next to Kurds, and intending to get rid of them the Iraqi government began settling the Assyrians in uninhabited marshy (breeding grounds for malaria) or waterless areas. The ensuing fatal diseases were literally wiping out the refugees. Not conceding to the Assyrians their main demand—let them live in a compact ethnic community—the British nonetheless suggested that Iraqi government ease the tension a little by yielding to the secondary demands of the Assyrians. The Iraqi government agreed to give them a number of minor concessions.

The Assyrian intelligentsia did not give up the idea of autonomy and kept it alive during and after World War II. Interestingly, still in 1943, certain Assyrian circles realised that the Jews were close to creating their own state and even hoped that they would cut out “a corner of it for an old neighbour”.<sup>32</sup> Certainly, such hopes were unrealistic. However, Assyrians kept on looking for ways to achieve their goals. On May 7, 1945 the Patriarchate of the East prepared a Petition on behalf of the Assyrian nation (The Assyrian National Petition), which was presented to the World Security Conference at San Francisco.<sup>33</sup> In addition to narrating the history of the Assyrian question in 1918-1945 (with a special focus on the role of the United Kingdom in it), the Petition signed by Mar Shimun Eshai, Catholicos Patriarch of the Church of the East, highlighted the desire of the Assyrian people to have their own homeland.

Even though the Petition did not yield any tangible results, the idea of the Assyrian autonomy was nonetheless alive. Contributing to such perseverance was the establishment of Assyrian patriotic organisations and unions. Their creation and the resulting unification of Assyrians of the world were greatly facilitated by the Assyrian Universal Alliance (AUA), founded at the first AUA congress, convened in 1968 in France. Since then, these congresses have been a regular occurrence, while AUA was even granted the right to delegate its representatives at the U.N. Human Rights Committee.

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<sup>32</sup> J. J. Goldberg, “Outcasts in Iraq. Assyrians look longingly at the Jewish Homeland”, *Jewish Bulletin*, April, 2000.

<sup>33</sup> *The Assyrian National Petition* (see above, fn. 28).

Topping the agenda of almost all international Assyrian gatherings has been the issue of statehood, despite the fact that the Assyrian leaders did not have a common approach to it, with extremists demanding independent Assyria in Northern Iraq, and the moderates who wanted an Assyrian autonomous state within the Iraqi state, similar to the Kurdish autonomy.

Interestingly, both believed that the task of creating the Assyrian state was a real possibility and hoped to achieve it soon. It should be noted that one of the main objectives of the Assyrian nationalists in their strivings for the national statehood was “to purchase land and establish a home that shall be an Assyrian National Home, in one of the free countries”.<sup>34</sup>

The issue of the Assyrian autonomy in Iraq was once again raised in the early 1970s. It is known that the so-called Assyrian Committee, speaking on behalf of all Iraqi Assyrians and consisting of all segments of the Assyrian community in Iraq (Assyrians, Chaldeans, etc.) came up with an initiative of negotiations with the central Iraqi government on the resolution of the Assyrian question. Little is known about the initial stage of the negotiations (if they really took place) or the makeup of this Committee. All we know is that Malik Yakou, who in 1973 handed the Assyrian National Petition to the Iraqi government, headed the Assyrian Committee.<sup>35</sup> The Petition itself contained arguments supporting the necessity of establishing an Assyrian autonomy in Iraq.<sup>36</sup> However, no response was ever given. That was to be expected, given that the Assyrians had refused to side with the government against the Kurds.

Once again, in the early 1980s, the Assyrians put forward the idea of an Assyrian autonomy as a short-term objective, which was designed to be a first step towards the long-term goal, the establishment of the independent Assyrian state. In 1983, the Bet Nahrain Democratic Party came up with the Assyrian National Manifesto, where “the Assyrian autonomous state was defined either as the province of Mosul or the province of Dohuk”.<sup>37</sup>

In 1999, George Habash stated that “the minimum we (Assyrians) demand is an autonomous region that will be demarcated between

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<sup>34</sup> *Assyrian Universal Alliance First Congress (Pau, France, April 10-13, 1968). Resolutions of the Congress.*

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.betnahrain.net/Autonomies/anp.htm>

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Fred Aprim, *ibid.*; see also Sargon Dadesho, *The Assyrian National Question*, Modesto, California, 1987: 275.

the Kurds to the east and Arabs to the south. The autonomous region we demand must be based in the land known as 'Mosul Province' defined prior to the creation of Dohuk and Aqra Provinces. This requires, through negotiations, the demarcation of boundaries along areas of Zakho, Dohuk, Aqra, Erbil, Hatra, and Assur".<sup>38</sup>

The issue of the Assyrian autonomy was raised by the Assyrian Diaspora in the U.S. as well.<sup>39</sup>

The Iraqi opposition conference, which was held in London on December 14-16, 2002, accepted and approved a good number of resolutions and recommendations. An article on "the rights of Assyrians" was also included in the final Political Statement of the conference in London: "The conference debated the injustice and national oppression exercised against the Assyrians and stresses the importance of guaranteeing their equality with others and agrees to grant them ethnic, cultural and administrative rights within a defined legal framework, and to protect these rights constitutionally".<sup>40</sup>

It is obvious that "the proposal for an Assyrian self administered zone established in the environs of Mosul, extending to Dohuk in the north and Fesh Khabur to the northwest has gained increasing appeal among Assyrian activists, intellectuals, and political leaders",<sup>41</sup> especially after the collapse of Saddam's regime.

Assyrians, however, are seeking to achieve that the "administrative rights" imply the rights of an "administrative region", in other words, some kind of autonomy. Yet it is unlikely that any Iraqi government would ever agree to give Assyrians any autonomy other than a cultural one. The Iraqi Kurds will not go along with the Assyrian autonomy either.

#### POLITICAL PARTIES OF THE IRAQI ASSYRIANS

The first Assyrian political party, the Assyrian Democratic Organisation (ADO), was created by the Assyrian intellectuals and political activists in 1957 in Syria. Being a tiny movement, the ADO eventually established its presence in Chicago.

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<sup>38</sup> George Habash, "What do the Assyrian People want? (1999)" (<http://www.betnahrain.net/Autonomies/pie.htm>).

<sup>39</sup> See David Nissman, "Assyrian American National Federation in Iraq", *RFE/RL Iraq Report*, September 10, 1999, vol. 2, Number 34.

<sup>40</sup> "Political Statement of the Iraqi Opposition Conference in London", *Kurdistan Observer*, December 23, 2002.

<sup>41</sup> "70th Assyrian Convention Addresses Assyrian Autonomy in Iraq" (<http://aina.org/releases/2003/convention6753.htm>).

An important place among the Assyrian parties belongs to Bet-Nahrain Democratic Party. The history of it is as follows. On August 22, 1970 Bet-Nahrain Assyrian National Movement was established with the aim of facilitating the preservation of the Assyrian identity, culture and language, as well as developing cooperation and strengthening unity between all separated segments of the Assyrian nation. But the ultimate goal of the Movement was the establishment of “an autonomous state for Assyrians in Bet-Nahrain (Iraq)”.<sup>42</sup> Later on, in 1976 (November 1), based on this organisation the Bet-Nahrain Democratic Party (BNDP) was founded. The party declaration underscores that “the ultimate aim of Bet-Nahrain Democratic Party shall be the establishment of an autonomous state to be the Assyrian home in our ancestral land of Bet-Nahrain”.<sup>43</sup> Although the BNDP does support the idea of creating an autonomous Assyrian state in Iraq, it nonetheless maintains very good relations with the KDP. It is perhaps one of the most nationalistic of all Assyrian organisations and has its American base in Modesto, California.

The most successful Assyrian political movement has been the Assyrian Democratic Movement. Formed in 1979, the ADM has a fifteen-member Central Committee and is led by its general secretary, Yonadam Y. Kanna, who was sentenced to death *in absentia* by the Ba’ath regime. He was one of the five Assyrian members of the Kurdish regional parliament. For the time being, he is one of the six Assyrian members of the Iraqi National Assembly. The ADM advocates a “free, democratic Iraq” and “recognition of the national Assyrian rights”. Unlike the BNDP, the ADM (at least until 2004–2005) did not call for an autonomous Assyrian state.

Although a great deal of Assyrian parties and organisations operate in Iraq, it is the ADM that seems to be the most noteworthy. The party maintains traditionally good relations with the Iraqi Kurds. At the ADM initiative, the first batch of Christian fighters was sent to join the Kurds in their guerrilla fight against the Ba’ath regime in 1982.<sup>44</sup>

In 1990, the ADM joined the Iraqi Kurdistan Front (IKF), in effect becoming the only non-Kurdish organisation in it. The ADM enjoys the great respect and trust of the Iraqi Assyrians. It is no wonder

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<sup>42</sup> See [info@BNDT.net](mailto:info@BNDT.net), also [http://www.bndp.net/bndp\\_us.html](http://www.bndp.net/bndp_us.html)

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Mirella Galletti, “Kurdistan: A Mosaic of Peoples”, *Acta Kurdica (The International Journal of Kurdish and Iranian Studies)*, volume 1, 1994: 49.

then that in 1992 the Movement managed to secure 4 out of 5 seats allocated for the Assyrians in the parliament of Iraqi Kurdistan. Noteworthy is also the fact that it has about 2,000 armed fighters under its command. Theoretically, in the 1990s the ADM could have been challenged by other Assyrian parties, Kurdistan Christian Unity (also known as United Christians of Kurdistan), Democratic Christians (also known as Christian Democratic Party), and Chaldo-Ashuri Democratic List (also known as Chaldean Assyrian Democracy), only if they acted in a unified front. However, these parties not only were too weak for that, but had been seen by experts as “small substitute parties for main Kurdish parties”.<sup>45</sup> The Kurdistan Christian Unity, for example, is considered to be under the influence and control of the KDP, while Democratic Christians are being overshadowed by the PUK. As for the Chaldo-Ashuri Democratic List, this organisation has been associated with the ICP Kurdistan branch. Of the three Assyrian parties mentioned above only the first one succeeded in achieving representation in the parliament of Iraqi Kurdistan. In the 1992 election, the Kurdistan Christian Unity won only one of 5 seats allotted to Assyrians in the parliament.

Among the Assyrian parties, relevant in the light of the current events in Iraq, the Assyrian Progressive Nationalist Party (APNP) is obviously worth mentioning. This is an extremely nationalistic party, which argues that Kurds are not a separate ethnicity at all, that Iraq is the exclusively Assyrian homeland, and that a Kurdish homeland, “if there is such” must be beyond Assyrian borders, maybe in Iran.<sup>46</sup>

There is also the Assyrian Patriotic Party (APP), which was founded on July 14, 1973 and in the past operated via Assyrian Cultural Club in Baghdad. After being in official alliance with ADM, the APP, however, left it in 1991 and began its independent operation, this time in Northern Iraq with headquarters in the city of Dohuk. Among the leaders of the APP have been Albert Yelda and Nimrud Baito.

Operating on the territory of Northern Iraq under the control of the KDP, the APP has apparently had issues with KDP, which were not given timely consideration and progressed to the point when in 1999 the KDP shut down (for four days) all the APP's offices. The

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<sup>45</sup> D. McDowall, op. cit.: 380-381.

<sup>46</sup> “The Constitution and Fundamental Law of the Assyrian Progressive Nationalist” Party (<http://www.leb.net/tigris/Const.htm>).

APP's relationships with the Iraqi National Congress have also been strained. In 1999, it criticised the Iraqi National Congress for clearly ignoring the role of Assyrians in Iraqi Opposition. Nothing is known about concrete actions and steps undertaken by this party, except, perhaps, for the fact that it still exists.

Also worth mentioning here is the Assyrian Socialist Party/Iraq. One of the oldest, if not the oldest, Assyrian national organisation, the ASP is also the only left-wing Assyrian party in Iraq, with headquarters in Baghdad. The ASP was founded back in 1917 by Freyduun Bit Abram in Northern Iraq, and was re-established in 2002 by a group of Assyrian activists. Beside the Iraqi branch, named Bet Nahrain, the ASP also has branches in other countries, in Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, and Iran.

Another Iraqi-operating Assyrian party has recently been in the spotlight—the Chaldean Democratic Union. The party leaders, however, vigorously deny their ethnic belonging to Assyrians and call themselves Chaldeans.

The Assyrian Liberation Party (ALP), was founded on June 15, 1995. The second ALP congress in November 2001 heralded the party's adherence to the idea of free and independent Assyria. The ALP condemns "the anti-Assyrian policy of the Arab, Turkish, and Kurdish governments".<sup>47</sup>

Simultaneously, Assyrian parties and organisations operating in the Diaspora, especially in North America,<sup>48</sup> are very active, influential and effective. The Assyrian lobby in the U.S. is conducted by the Assyrian American League (AAL). Founded in 2002, AAL's primary objective has been to professionally lobby in Washington on behalf of the Assyrian case with the political backing of the Assyrian Coalition—a grouping of the major Assyrian political organisations. To date, the AAL and the Coalition have promoted an impressive campaign focusing on raising awareness of Assyrian issues in Congress, the U.S. State Department, and the White House as well.<sup>49</sup>

Certain role in the Assyrian political developments plays also the Assyrian National Congress (ANC), which is an umbrella group, established in 1983 and based in California. It incorporates the BNDP

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<sup>47</sup> "Asuristan Kurtuluş Partisi II Kongresi", *Furkono*, N 25, 2001: 5.

<sup>48</sup> Some 400,000 Assyrians are now living in North America, particularly in Detroit, Phoenix, San Jose, Toronto, and Windsor.

<sup>49</sup> See "President Bush Includes Assyrians in Iraqi Political Formula" (<http://aina.org/releases/2002/bushspeech.htm> [10.29.2002]).

and the Assyrian American Leadership Council. President of the ANC is Sargon Dadesho, a recognised champion of the rights of Assyrians, who is headquartered in Modesto.

Finally, the aforementioned Assyrian Universal Alliance; by 1992, the AUA's status as an umbrella organisation was abandoned by all political parties. The AUA itself began joining the Assyrian conferences as a political party, even though its leaders insisted on its goal of a collective representation. For a long time (until 2005), John Nimrod, former Illinois state senator, was the president of the AUA. An exemplary American and a consummate Assyrian, "he has got two dozen groups sitting together" and also has "built respectful ties with government officials in countries where Assyrians live, from Washington to Tehran".<sup>50</sup> Currently Dr. Emanuel Kamber, a fulltime professor of physics at a university in Michigan, is the Secretary General of the AUA. Though the aim of the AUA is to become an umbrella organisation for all Assyrian groups, there are only few organisations that are affiliated with the AUA.

It should be noted, however, that the existence of this great number of Assyrian political parties and organisations is indicative not of their strength, but, rather, of the lack of national solidarity among the Assyrians.<sup>51</sup>

#### THE STATUS OF ASSYRIANS IN IRAQI KURDISTAN

Throughout 1990s and until now the AINA claims that the Assyrian population in Iraqi Kurdistan is suffering from discrimination, human rights abuses, and so on. The problems raised were the "Recent Kurdish attacks against Assyrians in Northern Mesopotamia", "Kurdish confiscation of Assyrian lands in Northern Iraq", or the "Terror campaign against Assyrians in Northern Iraq", etc.<sup>52</sup>

These are not the only issues that Assyrians have with the authorities of Iraqi Kurdistan. Some disagreements between Assyrians and Kurds have emerged following the U.S.-brokered peace accord signed between KDP and PUK in September 1998 in Washing-

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<sup>50</sup> See Goldberg, *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> That the Assyrians are hopelessly disconnected and partitioned upsets American officials too. One of them, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said: "They have dozens of organisations, and they all hate each other (Goldberg, *ibid.*).

<sup>52</sup> See <http://aina.org/lands.htm>, [November 16, 1996]; <http://aina.org/northmeso.htm> [December 28, 1997]; <http://aina.org/terror.htm> [January 17, 1999].

ton, DC. The accord provided for a new census to be conducted in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The Assyrian Diaspora in the U.S. has even coached Iraqi Assyrians to boycott the prospective parliamentary elections on the territory of Northern Iraq (Iraqi Kurdistan), so that if Turkomans joined the Assyrian boycott (which they expected to happen) the Kurds would find themselves in a difficult situation.<sup>53</sup>

However, at the present time, the situation in the region and the status of Assyrians in Iraqi Kurdistan is far from being that unbearable or strained. The Assyrian parties did gain seats in the regional parliament elections. Political, cultural, and educational rights of Iraqi Assyrians are guaranteed and protected within the territory of Iraqi Kurdistan.

In the areas under Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), three ministers are of Assyrian or Chaldean origin: Sargis Aghajan Mammudu (Deputy Prime Minister), Yonan Marqus Hanna (Minister of Industry and Energy), and Yousif Hanna Yousif (Minister for Regional Affairs), in addition to the Deputy Governor of Dohuk.

Since 1991 Assyrians and Chaldeans have been able to publish newspapers, run television and radio broadcasts in their own language, and establish political organisations. Within the KRG-area more than 30 Assyrian language schools (consisting of almost 10,000 students and more than 500 teachers) have been supported by government funding; more than 20 churches have been restored and renovated. This is not the case in the rest of Iraq. Christians recently fleeing to the KRG-administered areas in fear for their lives have been offered all necessary aid and protection.<sup>54</sup>

Of course, the mistreatment of the Assyrian population by the Kurds has never been terminated and, it seems, no one can guarantee that the Assyrians (as well as the Yezidis and other minorities, by the way) will ever have a peaceful and secure life in the Kurdish ethnic environment, especially with regard to their small number.

Currently there is a strong possibility that the Assyrian parties will join with their Turkoman and Yezidi counterparts as a counterweight to Kurdish political power in a post-war Iraq. Thus, Mir Anvar Muaviye Al-Umavi, the leader of the Yezidis, says: "We, Yezidis and

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<sup>53</sup> David Nissman, "Assyrians Protest Census in Northern Iraq", *RFE/RL Iraq Report*, January 29, 1999, volume 2, Number 4.

<sup>54</sup> See "KRG Statement Regarding the Situation of the Christian Minority in Iraqi Kurdistan", *KRG-Nordic Representation*, 16/03/2005, *Kurdistan Regional Government*.

Assyrians are not separate peoples, we are one people. The only thing that divides us from each other is our religious affiliation".<sup>55</sup> He then stressed that throughout the history Yezidis were persecuted by Turks, Kurds, and Arabs, but never did Yezidis and Assyrians kill each other. This is, according to him, because of the close national ties between them.<sup>56</sup>

At the 2003 international conference organised in Amsterdam by the AUA, Mîrê-mîrân (Supreme leader) of the Yezidis Anvar even offered Assyrians to accept Yezidis into their nation and consider them a part of the Assyrian people. And although Mîrê-mîrân's offer was met with caution by Assyrians, the final point in the summary declaration signed in Amsterdam contains the thesis on the acceptance by Assyrians of the desire of the Yezidis to be incorporated into the Assyrian nation.

Another idea is the building of Assyrian-Turkoman collaboration aimed at the establishment of independent Assyria as the home both for the Assyrians and their equal partners, the Turkomans, an alliance open for the Yezidis to join at any time. This idea was first introduced by Hanna Hajjar in January 2004.<sup>57</sup>

#### ASSYRIANS AFTER THE FALL OF SADDAM HUSSEIN'S REGIME

The fall of Saddam Hussein's regime opens new prospects and offers new opportunities for national minorities in Iraq. Of course, Kurds have better chances here, but the Iraqi Assyrians can also achieve some of their goals if they produce balanced responses to all their foreign and domestic challenges. Perhaps, for the first time in the history of the state of Iraq, they felt themselves Iraqis. The Assyrians have played a major role in providing security for the villages where Christians lived during the advance of the Coalition forces, and over 1,500 armed Assyrians participated in providing security and spreading stability in those villages.<sup>58</sup> Then, in July 2003, high level officials in the Iraqi Assyrian movement warned of the continuation of the foreign occupation in the country, saying that ignoring the Iraqis' demands and keeping the occupation would entail dangerous

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<sup>55</sup> *Furkono* (Kurtuluş) Dergisi, yıl 3, 2000: 16

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> See H. Hajjar, "The Salvation of the Assyrians lies in their Alliance with the Turkmen", *Furkono*, January, 2004.

<sup>58</sup> "Shiites, Turkmen, Assyrians, and Yezidis Demand to be Represented in the Ruling Council", *Al-Hayat*, 2003 /07/ 30.

repercussions.<sup>59</sup> Simultaneously, the ADM in Iraq was trying to achieve strong positions by participating in the ruling council and representing a strong political party capable of affecting the political situation in Iraq.

The Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), chosen by the U.S. administration in Iraq, was made up of 25 people representing the country's diverse religious and ethnic groupings in broadly proportionate terms. One of the members of the IGC was Yonadam Kanna, an Assyrian Christian, Secretary-General of the ADM and an active member of the Assyro-Chaldean Christian community.<sup>60</sup>

By the end of June 2004, the names of 99 Iraqis representing every major ethnicity and religious faction, who were appointed to the special Electoral Commission, were made public. It was expected that the Commission would organise the upcoming Iraqi National Conference supposed to be held in July 2004. The National Conference was called to select an Iraqi Interim National Assembly. Among the ninety nine names released there were 5 Chaldeans representing the Assyrians and their respective City Councils.<sup>61</sup>

The positions of Assyrians on the external front are nonetheless weak, and their potential to influence the development of events in Iraq seems minimal.

It should be noted that the real danger for Assyrians comes from within. It seemed that the fall of Hussein's regime by itself would force Assyrians all over the world to forget their differences and act together to reach their common goal. In reality, however, the division within the Assyrian nation has only increased. The idea of detaching Chaldeans into a separate ethnic group different from other Assyrians preoccupies these days new Chaldean Bishops—Sarhad Jammo of the Chaldean Catholic Diocese in California and Ibrahim Ibrahim, the Bishop of Michigan.

The former has long been known for his separatist inclinations. After Sarhad Jammo was appointed Bishop, he didn't waste time to grab this opportunity to make his ambitions come true. In early January 2003, he announced the formation of a new Chaldean political organisation. The step aimed at removing Assyro-Chaldeans from

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> He was a former minister of public work and housing and a former minister of industry and energy in Iraqi Kurdistan (see *Associated Press*, July 14, 2003, <http://www.zowaa.org/news/iframes/EIraqGovIF3.htm>).

<sup>61</sup> See *Zinda Magazine*, vol. X, issue 17, 28 June 2004.

the Assyrian movement will certainly deliver a serious blow to the unified political faction of Assyrians. The real danger comes from the fact that any progress in the Assyrian case outside of Iraq one way or another impacts the state of the Assyrian issue in Iraq. In this particular case Bishop Sarhad Jammo has already started implementing his plans in Iraq. He organised the Chaldean Democratic Union in Iraq as the legitimate representative of the Chaldean Community in Iraq.<sup>62</sup>

Meanwhile, separatist sentiments in a part of the Chaldean Assyrian community have gradually been widening. On May 10, 2003, the memorandum prepared by the separatist Bishops Sarhad Jammo and Ibrahim Ibrahim formally asserted a separate Chaldean ethnicity, rejecting a common political or nationalist purpose with Assyrians.

The high point of the separatist developments was the letter by a group of Chaldean Bishops sent on September 3, 2003 to Paul Bremer, the Civil Administrator of Iraq. The letter highlighted that “Chaldeans comprise 75% of the Christian Community in Iraq and constitute a distinct ethnicity from Assyrians”.<sup>63</sup>

The subjective conception of the Chaldean nation as a separate entity from Assyrians was reflected in the passage of the letter voicing a strong protest against an unjust treatment of the Chaldean people, no representatives of which had been included in the “temporary Council of Iraq”. Hence the appeal of the aforesaid group of Chaldean Bishops “for greater Chaldean Church inclusion into the emerging new government in Iraq”.<sup>64</sup> However, the position of both the U.S. and Vatican seems to be favourable at least for achieving the political unity of Assyrians.

As long as the United States is concerned, it should be noted that they view and recognise Assyrians as one nation. The 2000 U.S. Census was no exception. In the 2000 U.S. Census, the most mainstream organisations of Assyrians endorsed tabulation as the representatives of one people under one combined category.<sup>65</sup>

Separatist ambitions of the American Bishops of the Chaldean Church are a matter of concern for Vatican, as they pose danger to

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<sup>62</sup> See <http://aina.org/releases/2003/iraqbishops.htm> (“Chaldean Bishops’ Letter Undermines National Unity”).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> On the U.S. Census, see *AINA*, June 13, 1999.

its confessional and Middle-Eastern policy, threatening to undermine all the achievements Vatican has had in the past several years. Vatican's aim is to remove obstacles from the path to reconciliation with the other Assyrians, as well as to engage the Church of the East in cooperation and communion.

Vatican's rapprochement with the Assyrian Church of the East (a top priority in Pope John Paul II's confessional policy) should also benefit from the Common Christological Declaration of 1994 between the Assyrian Church of the East and Rome.

The picture gets less optimistic once we note that the Iraqi Assyrians have not so far had a unified national ideology or a cohesive national aim. It is worth noting that even the Assyrian parties not recognising the name "Kurdistan", do not mention either the Assyrian homeland with its real name Ashur (Assyria), but rather use descriptive terms, which do not indicate the identity of the land.

However, some progress is also evident. The adoption in 2004 of the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) is without doubt a positive achievement and success for Assyrians as well. Suffice it to say that between October 2003 and March 2004, Chaldean-Assyrians spared no effort to have an article reflecting their interests and their political platform included in the TAL, which as a de-facto Constitution for the transitional period was meant to serve as a basis for the future main law of the land. Although they have largely succeeded in having that done, their satisfaction with the TAL was mixed with concern and contemplation.

In early September 2004, in Baghdad, the Iraq's Interim Parliament was summoned for the first time, and Fouad Massoum, an ally of the PUK leader Jalal Talabani, was elected the President. Fouad Massoum is well known in political circles, and in August 2004 he supervised the national conference of 1,300 delegates that chose the Interim Parliament. The assembly consisted of 81 elected members and 19 former members of the defunct U.S.-appointed Governing Council, but several prominent figures of the Iraqi political scene and former council members were not present. Of the 100 members, 64 were Arab Iraqis, 24 Kurds, 6 Turkomans, 4 Assyro-Chaldeans, one Mandaean, and one Shabak.<sup>66</sup>

After the power was transferred from the Interim Coalition Administration to the Iraqi Transitional Government, the latter sched-

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<sup>66</sup> "National Council Selects Kurdish Politician as its President", *Kurdistan Observer*, September 3, 2004.

uled general elections for January 2005, prior to which (October 2004) a national census was planned. While the elections were held according to the schedule, on January 30, 2005, the census was put off for an indefinite period. Dispensing for now with the reasons why the census proved impossible to be conducted, let us just remark that had both the elections and the census been successfully held, the results would have been of paramount importance to all ethnic minority groups in Iraq.<sup>67</sup> Conducting a census is still very important today, at least for the purpose of having a clear picture of Iraq's demography, which will help to develop a balanced approach to tackling ethnic problems. Interestingly, in the process of preparing to the national census, a draft document listing all ethnic groups of Iraq has been prepared. The document reportedly included (in alphabetical order) Arabs, Armenians, Assyrians, Kurds, and Turks. The fact that Assyrians—and more significantly, members of all confessional groups—have been included in the list under a common name is by itself of great historical importance, as under the previous regime, Assyrians, despite their protests, were referred to as Arabs.

The Iraqi parliamentary elections (of January 30, 2005) had left Assyrians highly dissatisfied. In the northern parts of the country most of the Assyrians were simply denied the opportunity to vote, so as no balloting boxes had been delivered to compact areas of the Assyrian population. The blame at that was placed on Kurds, as the ballot boxes were supposed to be delivered from the city of Erbil, which is under the Kurdish control. There have been rumours that many Diaspora Assyrians could not vote because the polling stations were set up far from where they live in compact groups, which made it difficult for them to travel to the stations twice (first to register, then again to vote).

Regarding the voting irregularities and lockouts in Northern Iraq, the ADM protested in the January 31st *communiqué*. The lockout also affected the Turkoman and Yezidi communities. The Iraqi Turkoman Front issued a lengthy document detailing Kurdish voting abuses. In an interview with Radio Free Europe, the leader of the Yezidis, prince Tahsin-beg, asked for an investigation into the lockout of the Yezidi voters.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Fred Aprim, "Assyrians and the Upcoming Census", *Zinda Magazine*, 9 August 2004.

<sup>68</sup> See "Were Assyrians, Turkmen, Yezidis intentionally locked out of the Iraq Election?", *AINA*, 02-10-2005.

To all appearances, up to 250,000 non-Kurds may have been prevented from voting by the KDP. The obvious intent was to show that the area is predominantly Kurdish by preventing any other political or demographic expression. As one analyst noted, the Kurds tried “to de facto Kurdify the area on paper by suppressing any countervailing political assertion”.<sup>69</sup>

Elections to the Kurdistan Regional Parliament (north of Iraq) have also stirred some interest. The elections were held on 30 January 2005, to coincide with the national Iraqi elections and elections to the local councils.

Rather worrisome is the fact that, following the Iraqi general elections, certain increasing tension has been observed not only in the Kurdish-Assyrian relations, but in Kurdish-Turkoman and Kurdish-Yezidi relations as well. One of the most influential Assyrian parties, the ADM, a former ally of the leading Kurdish Iraqi parties within the Iraqi Kurdistan Front, did not even participate in the regional elections to the new parliament of Kurdistan.

As far as the situation in general is concerned, what worries Assyrians are the activities of the Western Christian missionaries in the country, which, in their opinion, negatively affects the attitude of the Iraqi Muslims towards the Christian community of Iraq.

The proselytising activities of the new churches among the Muslim population indeed have had an obvious negative influence on the situation in the region, deepening the gap between Muslims and Christians and creating a new division among Iraq's Christians themselves.<sup>70</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The future of the Assyrians is closely connected with that of Iraq. Since 1991 and even currently, the situation in this country is somewhat reminiscent of the late period of the Ottoman Empire, with some noteworthy differences: “In a number of ways Iraq today finds itself in a situation analogous to the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War. As the result of war, Iraq cannot control its own territory, and there is an implicit coalition of victorious powers in a position to fill the power vacuum and pick off the pieces of Iraqi ter-

<sup>69</sup> “Assyrians prevented by Kurds from Voting in North Iraq”, *AINA*, 01-31-2005.

<sup>70</sup> Kathleen Ridolfo, “Christians in Iraq facing Threats from all Sides”, *RFE/RL Iraq Report*, 5 July 2005, volume 8, Number 22.

ritory. But Iraq is not the new 'sick man' of the Middle East, mainly because its neighbours have so far decided to act in a manner radically different from that practiced by the allied powers at the end of the First World War. Rather than moving to exploit Iraq's weakness and brittleness, Syria, Iran, and Turkey have reaffirmed the need to keep Iraq intact, a position shared less overtly by Saudi Arabia".<sup>71</sup>

In this situation, the main national task of the Assyrians of Iraq remains the preservation of their demographic integrity by overcoming inter-confessional controversies and separatist trends within the community.

Regarding the highly complicated inter-ethnic relations in Northern Iraq, the only way for the Assyrians is to continue their 1991-2003 collaboration with the Kurds. Considering the fact that the Kurdish autonomy continues progressing, Assyrians can choose to continue as part of that autonomy. The Assyrians, who live in the regions formerly under Saddam Hussein's control, can play the other card by claiming that they, just like Arabs, are a Semitic people.

The Assyrians of Iraqi Kurdistan and those living beyond its boundaries, and the Christians of Iraq in general, should clear-headedly assess the reality of the expansion of political and radical Islam both in Iraq and all over the world.

A conflict between the Iraqi Kurds and Arabs will sooner or later become impending, something Assyrians should be aware of and prepared for. Guiding them to the future should not be the principle "either with them or with the others", but rather the principle "with both of them". Especially today, when it is the latter principle that works, and the Iraqi Assyrians are no longer facing the dilemma of choosing between Kurds or Arabs. Such a policy will help both the Kurds and the Arabs to realise that it is in their own interests to preserve the Christian element in the Iraqi mosaic.

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<sup>71</sup> John Waterbury, "Iraq's Future: Is Democracy the Only Way Out?", *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. V, Nos. 3-4, Winter 1993/94: 776.