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Autonomy and the Assyrians of Iraq

His Grace Luis Sako Bishop, of the Chaldean church in Kirkuk, Iraq, published an article in Asia News website about autonomy demand of our people in Iraq. The article included many misunderstanding points and misinformation.

Mr. Nimrud Baito, the secretary General of Assyrian Patriotic Party, sent an open letter in Arabic discussing and commenting the points stated in the article of Bishop Sako.

Below is a brief translation of that letter. The full Arabic text is here: <http://www.ankawa.com/forum/index.php?topic=292699>.

Translator's notes:

The Arabic term of (Hukm Thati) which is used in Iraqi political arena is been translated in English as (Autonomy). However, the concept of (Hukm Thati) as understood in Iraq is different from the concept of (Autonomy) as understood in Europe. (Hukm Thati) is in no means a step for independence. It is in no way similar to European term for Autonomy in Kosovo. It is a "self administrative" region with legislative bodies less power than Iraqi Kurdistan Region.

An open letter to his Grace Dr. Luis Sako

By Nimrud Baito

Summarized and translated by Awiya Khoshaba

I reviewed what your Grace has declared about the autonomy, the most recent one, was your article on Asia News website titled **Nineveh Plain: a ghetto for Iraqi Christians is an illusion** ([href="http://www.asianews.it/index.php?l=en&art=15025&geo=1&size=A"](http://www.asianews.it/index.php?l=en&art=15025&geo=1&size=A)

As I emphasize on the right of our people to express their opinions, we necessarily feel differentiation of opinions. This is not a wrong or negative matter but on the contrary, it is a factor of development and enrichment. For that sake I am addressing this letter to your Grace.

The claim for autonomy is an absolute political one, is adopted by our nation political institutions. They adopted this claim as result and in accordance with their studies to the plight of our people and their vision on the future of Iraq. It has been drafted within a mechanization that can go along with the ongoing political process in Iraq since 2003. Certainly we, the members of those political institutions, never thought and will never think, that this is the claim of our people as a whole. Personally I understand that your stand about autonomy is within multi-opinions and democracy.

The question is: why your Grace didn't take an initiate to have direct talks with the political institutions of our people through transparent and open debates and discussions. On the other hand your grace would have listened to their vision and would have exchanged information, opinions with mutual respect and responsibility. Isn't better to have direct dialogues and discussions? Rather than announcements and declarations in the media that comes short with exciting headings without any details to the extent that sometimes information are misleading and inaccurate.

1. Your Grace said: (We reject Autonomy for the Christians in Iraq)

We reject that too because that legalizes a theocratic Iraq, we must all reject that because it is the opposite of the modern rule and government. I personally reject that for I am a secular man who wants to build a liberal modern Iraq not a theocratic one.

But, no one asked for Autonomy for Christians, and there is no such a term in the political addressing of our political institutions.

We are asking for autonomy for our Assyrian Chaldean Syrian people not for autonomy for Christians and there is a great difference between them:

- a. It is true that All Chaldean Syriac Assyrian of Iraq are Christians but all Christians of Iraq are not Chaldeans Syriac Assyrian.
- b. We, who are claiming autonomy, are political, secular, and national groups: we are not talking on behalf of Iraqi Christians.
- c. Giving a religious cover to the Autonomy is a cover for the theocratic Iraq, which will legalize religious discrimination. The political parties who are claiming autonomy rejected the electoral quota since it was a religious one. Here is a quotation from a declaration of Assyrian Patriotic Party on October 4th 2008 regarding dis-acceptance of the Religious quota ((Distorting our existence, restricting our privacies and deal with our people on religious basis it is an attempt to lay down a sectarian rule in Iraq and its political institutions)) end of quotation.
- d. The claim of autonomy for our Chaldean Syriac Assyrian people is a political claim. It is in agreement with the Iraqi constitution whose articles consist of ethnic and political rights as well as adopting the principle of decentralization in the formation of the state.
- e. The claim of autonomy for our people on ethnic basis doesn't mean that it is confined on our people only but this claim can be given to all ethnic groups of Iraq.

f. The claim of autonomy in Iraq is not new but is has been granted to the Kurdish people in Iraq in March of 1970. The claim of our people for Autonomy is not new either, we can refer to the document submitted by elder men and intellectuals of our people to the Iraqi

government stating as (The autonomy granted to the Kurdish people should be for our people too.)

And finally in this regard: by giving the claim of autonomy a religious cover you are making our people a target for the extremist terrorist groups.

2. Your grace stated: autonomy is isolating Christians of Iraq and is a ghetto that isolates us from Iraq.

We decline isolation too, but who is calling for a ghetto? We all who are calling for autonomy realize and understand that Iraq is one state for all Iraqis to live wherever they prefer to be. We are not calling for the isolation of our people but to grant us a demographic existence in Nineveh plain and Kurdistan Region, practice legislative and institutional rights, develop our identity, and practice our role in building a multi ethnic and political federal Iraq.

Autonomy is not asking to evacuate our people from Baghdad and Basra and move them against their will to autonomous region.

But if autonomy, along with its economical, educational institutions, legislative, and administrative institutes attracts our people to live in the autonomous area in accordance with the law that maintains the rights of others, what is wrong with that?

If autonomy attracts the investments of our people in Diaspora, we welcome that too.

We were and we still belong to Iraq as a whole because we are Iraqis. One of our obligations is our affiliation to Iraq and we must do to strengthen the unity of Iraq. The history of Iraq and other multi ethnic countries affirm that there is no unity unless the identity and the rights of all ethnic groups are respected. The decentralized and autonomy rules proved they are the secure factor for the stability, unity and prosperity of the people. This is what we want Iraq to be.

3. Your Grace stated: There is not any claim for autonomy in the south of Iraq, then why are we claiming autonomy?

Actually, there was a claim to establish Basra Federal Region. The Independent High Electoral Commission IHEC adopted the process of establishing it. The attempt failed because it didn't get enough votes to be adopted by the constitution of Iraq.

Anyhow, the difference is so big and substantial between Regions in the south and Autonomy for our people. The right and principle of forming regions is acknowledged in the Iraqi constitution. But how, when and where to apply depends on the desire of the people and their political affiliations.

The claim of autonomy not being stated in the constitution of Iraq is the reason we are seeking to enlist it in the constitution as a right in principle but how to be applied, timing and other details will be for another stage. Especially that the process of amending the constitution is not an easy task. At the time there is a review for the constitution and all political powers are participating in this debate.

4. Claims for autonomy are coming from safe Diaspora and we are living in horrifying Iraq so we decline it.

The claim for autonomy as we all agree with is a political claim. The Chaldean Syriac Assyrian political institution and individuals who are adopting it are Iraqis and patriots, and none of us is living in Diaspora. Bet Nahrain Democratic Party, Chaldean National Council, National Union of Bet-Nahrain, Chaldean Democratic Forum, Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council, Chlado-Assyrian Association of Iraqi Communist Party, Independent Syriac Gathering and our party Assyrian Patriotic Party, are all Iraqi Parties participating in the political process and activities in Iraq. Mr. Sargis Aghajan and the writer of this letter are ministers in Kurdistan Regional Government that is a part of the Iraqi political structure.

In fact, there are some political and institutions in Diaspora calling for autonomy for our people but that kind of call is just support for our national political groups. All parties mentioned above claimed autonomy with national identity not as autonomy for Christians.

5. Your grace stated: In today's Iraqi context the demand for a Christian enclave is a dangerous political game.

We say if your Grace have such doubts, information or an idea, I guess it would have been better if you had taken the initiative and called for a closed door meeting with our political parties rather than publishing it in the media in such an exciting way.

The terms (danger political games), (Christian enclaves) has a dangerous echo in the Iraqi and Middle East political memory and mind. I wish your Grace had avoided mentioning it in your statement. Especially the claim of autonomy is for our Chaldean Syriac Assyrian people in Nineveh Plain that consists of Yezedis, Shabaks, Moslem Kurds and Arabs. It is not a (Christian enclave). The claim that we are pursuing relies on constitutional process and with peaceful means of political dialogue.

What those claiming autonomy are aiming at is to include in the constitutions of Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan region: (The constitution guarantees the political, cultural and administrative rights of Turkman and Chaldean Syriac Assyrian and other ethnic minorities of Iraq: including autonomy within the unity of federal Iraq and that will be organized by a law). Or without naming the group: (The constitution guarantees the political, cultural and administrative rights of the ethnic minorities of Iraq including autonomy within the unity of federal Iraq and will be organized by a law).

Where is the danger in such article of the constitution?

In previous statement to Aswat Aliraq Agency, your Grace declared that (the excessive propaganda for establishing a region for Christians was the reason behind what happened to the Christians in Mosul and other places in Iraq).

We repeat: there is nobody claiming autonomy for Christians, but there is a claim for autonomy for Chaldean Syriac Assyrian people.

I would like to add that, the extremist terrorism was not because of political claims or raising political slogans. Those who were targeted were not for their political affiliation. But they have been targeted for their religious identity and the extremist terrorists were rejecting the existence of others. It was merely existence regardless of political claims.

Did the Mandeans, who had also been targeted, have political claims?

Targeting our people in Dora (Baghdad), Basra and Mosul was because of an extremist creed that declines the Christian identity; it is not

fair to hide the facts and true events.

Linking the extremist terrorism with autonomy is giving excuses and justifying terrorism.

6. Your Grace stated previously that: there are many questions about the details of autonomy.

What are the rules of establishing autonomy? What are the guarantees? Would those living with us allow us to have this privilege and they not?

Let us say all these questions are logical and acceptable.

These are detailed matters that should be debated, discussed and provide the solutions for after the principle of autonomy has been admitted and adopted. And when Autonomy is to be practiced and applied depending on the security, political and economical situation of Iraq regardless of how soon or late that would be.

There are scores of articles in the Iraqi constitution that says, "will be organized by a law" and let the detailed law of autonomy be one of those to be added to other constitutional principles and articles.

From the experience of Iraq and exclusively in the field of autonomy, although the Kurdish autonomy was adopted on March 11th 1970, the final negotiations between the late regime of Iraq and Kurdish leaders there were many pending items and details waiting for solution that dragged to the nineties.

7. Your Grace said in your statement: (A good thing for the Christian community of this country is to encourage national unity, democracy, peaceful coexistence, a pluralistic culture, mutual recognition as humans with dignity, as well as cooperation with everyone to build a better society based on the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms as guaranteed by the nation's constitution and international law.)

Brilliant and beautiful words I totally agree with. But we are in the middle of the political building process of Iraq, its constitutional institutions and administrative structure that needs specific formulas and expressions in principles, and rights or in the institutions and structures.

The requirements of your wonderful view to the future of Iraq are: the Iraqi people should cancel the contents of the constitution that states religious and ethnic discrimination among the Iraqis. Your statement indicates that Iraq is a modern country that means canceling the definition of Iraq with an Islamic and Arabic Identity and to be in and keep it Iraqi Identity only. This also requires cancellation of the role of religion and Islamic articles in the Iraqi constitution, legislations and daily life with all its details, then to adopt a secular civil law in the Iraqi courts and safeguard the right of choice of religion and belief, etc.

This is from the basic principles aspect. From the administrative structure: if your grace's alternative for autonomy is a modern country then there is no need for autonomy and in this case no place for federalism either.

If your grace believe of the right of Arabic Islamic majority in Iraq for they are majority they can enjoy more constitutional legislative and legal principles, then why don't we enjoy some rights that suites our volume and meet with the principles of the constitution?

If you agree with us in the right of the Kurdish people to establish a federal rule in the Kurdistan area then why are you declining the right of our Chaldean Syriac Assyrian people in establishing a humble autonomy, which is sufficient to protect their existence and dignity?

We are claiming what is less demographical and less political influence. So how, in the name of Iraqi nationalism, we are been asked to lose our rights and refuse to enforce our existence and identity, which are threatened of extinction. While the majorities and powerful ones whose identity is not threatened are trying to use all principles and items in the constitution to support their ethnic and religious identity but the sectarian one too.

We can add more: Is the autonomy contradicting with the modern state and its democratic principles? Respect of human rights and dignity? On the contrary, autonomy as political and administrative structure is enhancing and safeguarding those principles.

Are the European countries whose constitutions are secular, and not based on ethnic, religious, cultural, gender, not modern and democratic countries because they adopted autonomy for their threatened minorities? Or it is exactly contrary to that.

Autonomy, first and foremost, is safeguard for the existence of our people in our country where our existence is threatened. It is disgrace to Iraq to lose the first nation who lived in this land since early stages of history.