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Guest Editorial

Misinformation From a Finnish Immigration Official Dr. Eden Naby

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(AINA) -- A member of the Finnish Directorate of Immigration, Antero Leitzinger published an article called [Kurds and the Kurdistans](#), which appeared on 1/23/05 at [GlobalPolitician.com](#). The article appeared so outrageous to a Kurdish supporter that this person called it to the attention of Dr. Eden Naby, Academic Advisor to the Assyrian Academic Society. The article below is Dr. Naby's editorial for AINA critiquing the misinformation that the author has knowingly or unwittingly passed into the public domain about Assyrians (ed.).

I am truly appalled at the shallowness of the analysis, lack of comparative data, and simple (mischievous?) twisting of facts in the article on Kurds and the Kurdistans, which appeared on 1/23/05 by Antero Leitzinger at [GlobalPolitician.com](#). In the age of the Internet, thankfully, one cannot get away with such low quality work. Facts are easy to check, and propaganda cannot so easily pass for expert knowledge.

Not only does this author persist on weighing "oranges" against "apples" and coming up with useless analogies (Scandinavians, divided into several countries, cannot be equated with Kurds, nor can Turks be equated with the distant Uighurs of Central Asia, whatever the language affinities may be), but he treats lightly areas of cultural history that are very complex

But this is not his most egregious mistake. No, in his references to Assyrians your editors should not have let pass the absolute historical and linguistic misinformation being passed along by Kurdish extremists to unsuspecting western sources: Can Global Politician maintain its integrity if it presents such appallingly unbalanced material?

Assyrians have never been "Kurds." Nor are Jews who lived in northern Iraq "Kurds." From reliable Israeli accounts, there are no more than 100 Jews left in all of Iraq, and most of those are in Baghdad and Basra. The Jewish religious and cultural facilities in places like Mosul and especially the large village of Alqosh on the Nineveh Plain have been looked after by the local ChaldoAssyrians once the Jews finally got permission to flee to Israel after 1949. Assyrians and Jews in Iraq, because they shared religious status as dhimmis - barely tolerated non-Muslims - and a common Aramaic speaking heritage, maintained a close relationship. One of the earliest books published about Jews in Iraq is by an Assyrian (Ghanima, 1927).

Whatever the new strategic relationship between Iraq's Kurds and the Israelis and Americans may be, let us not gloss over the fact that most Jews living in northern Iraq are today in Israel or somewhere out of Iraq. Just because they spoke Kurdish does not mean that they were Kurds. Many minorities speak multiple languages of necessity, even as a mother language, of necessity. Look at the Uzbek elites or the Kazakhs who still are more comfortable in Russian than in their own written languages. Imagine the situation in northern Iraq where Jews and Assyrians spoke modern forms of Aramaic but of necessity also communicated in Kurdish, Arabic and in some cases Turkish and Persian. That is the state of minorities. It is an injustice to parlay multilingualism into Kurdish ethnicity and deny the existence of special ethnic minorities who already suffer enough physically and culturally.

In terms of religion therefore, Kurds do not include many religions. Absolutely not. They are Muslims of several stripes. Assyrians are Christians separated into several denominations. The language of Assyrian church liturgy is Syriac, and sometimes the modern Aramaic vernacular. If in some churches the knowledge of Aramaic has decreased due to its suppression in schools, and Arabic, Turkish and even Kurdish are adopted to carry on the Christian tradition, this does not make these people Kurds. Aramaic is the oldest continuously written and spoken language of the Middle East and second only to Chinese in the entire world. It is on the verge of joining the dead languages of the world like Latin precisely because of the kinds of persecution that Christians in parts of the Muslim world have experienced.

In Iraq, northwest Iran and in eastern Turkey, the biggest direct physical pressure on the Assyrians came from the Kurds, historically and today. Antero Leitzinger should have reflected a bit more, and read a great deal more about the First World War in the Middle East before repeating Kurdish propaganda about who persecuted whom. Written records alone, of Kurdish attacks on Assyrian villages, go back to the mid-19th century. They culminated in World War I when Kurds persistently attacked Urmiyah at a time when the Iranian government was too weak (caught up in the Constitutional Revolution) to resist either the Tsarist or Ottoman armies. Kurds took advantage of this weakness to kill off Assyrians and Armenians in persistent pulses sweeping down from the Zagros foothills onto the plains of Urmiyah. In 1914, just as the Ottomans joined the Central

Powers, their Kurdish allies launched an attack on Margawar and Targawar, killing all who could not flee east to relative shelter. In 1915 when the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) launched its jihad in earnest against the Armenians, Assyrians and Pontic Greeks, driving who they could not kill into the Syrian desert, due to the Kurdish Hamidiya paramilitary units, very few, less than 50,000 Assyrians managed to reach Urmiyah since the mountain passes were held by Kurds who had taken over Margawar and Targawar already. The events of WWI culminated in the assassination of the Kurdish Shakkak tribe's honored dinner guest, the Assyrian Patriarch, titled Mar Shim'un at that time, in 1918; about 130 of Mar Shim'un's bodyguards were also murdered. Some allege the after dinner assassination took place because the Kurdish chieftain Isma'el Agha (Simku) coveted this Assyrian leader's ring. (Anzali, 1999)

Kurds have also coveted Assyrian and Armenian women, and being in a more religiously powerful position as Muslims, they have taken these women and girls as household servants or second wives with little that their Christian neighbors could do to prevent it, although trying to get the women back periodically occurred and as late as the 1960s got whole Christian villages destroyed (August Thierry, 2003). The offspring of such forced unions may be partly Assyrian, but ethnically and culturally they grew up Kurds. And Muslims. Forget racial purity in that part of the Middle East: what matters for identity is language, religion and heritage.

Due to the polygamous marriages so popular among peasant and non-peasant Kurds, the rate of population increase among Kurds is one of the highest in the world although population figures are notoriously unreliable and we only have the sample Soviet censuses to provide some evidence. One recent New Yorker article (October 2004) noted that among the Kurds moving into Kirkuk was a man with two wives and 21 children! He was interviewed at random. The upshot of all this is that the villages in Iran identified as Assyrian in 1927 were reduced drastically in number by the time of the official Iranian census published in the early 1950s (Razmara). And take a guess as to who had replaced the Assyrian Christians in and around Urmiyah? Mainly Kurds, not Azaris. Maybe Antero Leitzinger should have read a little more about why the Mahabad Republic was located where it was in WWII, instead of simply wondering why it was not in "Kordestan."

The same displacement process occurred in southeast Turkey, in northeast Syria and now with help from misinformation like that provided in Global Politician, on the Nineveh Plains in northern Iraq. These replacements are genuine Kurds, not of the variety your author is presenting as "Christian Kurds" and "Jewish Kurds."

These ethnic and religious matters in the Middle East are not simple. To try to deal with them from a biased perspective, or to create untenable analogies, only leads to disastrously tragic policy decisions. Global political astuteness requires far greater diligence and care.

Ethnic cleansing is no joking matter. Careless words can wipe out the Assyrians, one of the oldest surviving communities in the world. The culture of the Assyrians of the Middle East is precious in all the senses of that word: it is old, rich, increasingly fragile, and has made many contributions to world culture from medicine (Le Coz, 2004) to agriculture (Abdalla 1980s, 1990s articles) and all the fields of human knowledge between them. To relegate the Assyrians to a branch of Kurds, who, for whatever reason, have a low prestige culture and little written history, is a cultural crime. At the least your author and you [globalpolitician.com] need to make a retraction.

*Dr. Eden Naby is a cultural historian on the modern Middle East with a concentration on the area from Iraq to Central Asia. She has published extensively on Assyrians, as well as the Afghans, Turkmens, Uighurs and Kurds. Dr. Naby's book **Afghanistan: Mullah, Marx And Mujahid** (Westview Press, rpt. 2002), co-authored with the Prof. Ralph H. Magnus, is a seminal source on modern Afghanistan and particularly useful for its analysis of that country's ethnic and religious minorities. Her most recent writing about Assyrians is **[From Lingua Franca to Endangered Language: The Legal Aspects of the Preservation of Aramaic in Iraq](#)**, a paper in **[On The Margins Of Nations: Endangered Languages And Language Rights](#)** (Joan A. Argenter and R. McKenna Brown, ed., 2004).*

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