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Guest Editorial

Nineveh Plains Administrative Unit Would Not Be an 'Assyrian Ghetto' Waleeta Canon

Posted GMT 6-7-2007 17:12:44



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(AINA) -- An AsiaNews article published on [June 6](#) attacked the idea of establishing a self administered area in north Iraq for Iraq's besieged Christians, half of whom have left the country since 2003 because of violence, murder and Islamic fundamentalism. The article is titled *An 'Assyrian ghetto' in the Plains of Niniveh [sic] to save Iraq's Christians* and it attempts to dismiss the importance of the sensitive and complicated Assyrian (also known as Chaldean and Syriac) issue in Iraq. In a manner that can only be described as pretzel logic, the article discusses the [Nineveh Plains Administrative Unit](#) option for Assyrians in Iraq, and undermines the foundation of the political and humanitarian efforts of Assyrian leaders since the ousting of Saddam in 2003.

The opening paragraph of the article refers to Assyrian Diaspora activists as "highly politicized 'Christians'" who are "exploiting the tragic religious persecution underway in Iraq to accelerate the creation of an Assyrian enclave in the Plains of Niniveh (sic)". The fact that Assyrian expatriates are referred to as highly politicized 'Christians' is a seemingly intentional omission of their ethnic identity. An ethnically-defined Diaspora group involved with supporting policies originating in their homeland does not make a group "highly politicized", it makes them emotionally tied to their homeland, their roots, their families, their friends (and their national aspirations) in their historic lands. The Assyrian Diaspora in the West has the freedom to speak on behalf of their brethren in Iraq, who cannot speak for fear of being killed.

The article also states "...the Nineveh project reduces Christians to an ethnic group." In reality, the exact opposite is true: being called "Iraqi Christians" reduces an ethnic group to a mere religious minority. Are Iraqi Assyrians merely fighting for their rights as Christians? Perhaps the churches in Iraq are -- and they should be, considering their jurisdiction is Christianity and its survival, and it is an important and noble calling. But, in Iraq, Assyrians have spent decades building and running their Assyrian language schools. They salute the Assyrian flags which fly over official and public buildings, and wrap themselves in it in nationalist fervor and defiance. They have built Assyrian civic groups, cultural groups, and student groups to keep the Assyrian identity, culture, and language alive in their Homeland. This isn't a flight of fancy: it is an organized effort to assert their ethnic identity.

In Baghdad in 2003, a conference was held by thousands of Assyrian activists, and Iraqi, U.S. and foreign diplomats to discuss the feasible policy options for Assyrian survival in Iraq. This conference produced the "Nineveh Plains Administrative Unit" option, which guaranteed the rights of the ChaldoAssyrians and other minorities in the area. There are very specific political feasibility reasons that it was created as such, instead of an "Assyrian Autonomous Zone" or "Christian Autonomous Unit", both of which would likely anger the 50% or so of the non-Christian, non-Assyrian population of the Nineveh Plains -- the largest Assyrian population center in Iraq -- and draw the wrath of the larger religious and ethnic groups which surround them.

Considering that the Nineveh Plains plan indeed originated with the Assyrians of Iraq and their political representatives, the idea that it "does not have the support of the Catholics in the country" is off the mark. While not all Catholics in Iraq are Assyrian, and while not all Iraqi Assyrians are involved in politics, the idea that an Assyrian political party would spend years on a policy that didn't have any support is ludicrous and insulting to the political intelligence of Assyrians in Iraq and abroad.

A "Christian zone", as Asia News pointed out, would indeed increase hostility against this ethno-religious minority group, unless, and only unless, the Assyrian Christians receive the same political, financial, and military support which was provided to the Kurds in 1991. And until and only if Iraq actually breaks apart, the Assyrians must work with the goal of attaining their highest possible and politically feasible rights at the highest levels in Iraq, and accept no less. As the only indigenous group in Iraq, they deserve no less.

The largest and the most active Assyrian Diaspora and Iraqi groups -- including the Assyrian American National Federation, the Chaldean Chamber of Commerce, The Assyrian National Council of Illinois, The Chaldean Federation, the Iraq Sustainable Democracy Project, the Assyrian Universal Alliance, the Assyrian Democratic Movement, the Assyrian Democratic Organization are all united under the same fundamental principle: That at the bare minimum, Assyrians in Iraq need a secure area -- however they are able to structure it -- to allow their population, culture, language, and faith to flourish.

These fundamental uniting principles are so uniform -- especially with Assyrian groups on the ground in Iraq -- that even the Kurdish Democratic Party's Assyrian Christian Finance Minister Sarkis Aghajan was forced to toe the line of the majority of Assyrian organizations. The overarching agreement in the very basic needs of Assyrians across all Assyrian groups is clear. Internal policy debates on what an area should look like may be different, but this is not a pretense to claim "disunity", especially since in Iraq it is a non-issue: in the end, only what is feasible and possible can and will be done.

Waleeta Canon is the Director of the Washington, D.C. based [Assyria Foundation](#). She has published and presented on Assyrian political and human rights issues since 2003.

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