



Guest Editorial

Attempts To Rewrite Assyrian History -- Again

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(AINA) -- Beginning in the early 1990s when Mehrdad Izady finally got his degree at Harvard University, he has launched on an on again off again campaign to rewrite history in Northern Iraq and elsewhere with special relevance to Assyrians. He has passed himself off as a Harvard professor when he was a drill instructor in Persian and his dealing with established and reputable Kurdish organizations have been less than honorable.

Now, he has leashed his venom on Assyrians, yet again, from what corner of employment it is not clear, but certainly not from any academic establishment that is known to anyone. That KurdishMedia.com chooses to disseminate his writings is not to its credit. On March 27, 2003, Mr. Izady proceeded to corrupt northern Mesopotamian history and falsified other issues relating to Kurdish population and Kurdish ethnic and historical origins.

Falsifying Geography

In his article, attacking the recently established Kurdish Parliament in Exile, first held in 1995 in The Hague, Izady condemns the Kurdish leadership for settling for too little. He chooses intentionally to ignore some 5000 years of northern Mesopotamian Assyrian history and what the region of today's northern Iraq was always known as and in a deplorable way he depicted the demographic map of northern Iraq, southern Turkey and northeastern Syria as "Kurdish," based on a map by the British colonies less than a century old. He writes: "A large, multi-color sheet map drawn by the British Royal Geographic Society and published in 1906 depicted Kurdish majority areas with such accuracy that even today--93 years later--it remains virtually peerless."

Referring to the 1919 Paris Peace Conference and the failure of the Kurdish delegation to propagate this sudden historic British map, he writes: "Naturally putting first the interests of their own people before those of others, the Armenian delegation to the conference fully ignored this map and presented one of their own for the boundaries of an independent Armenia. The Armenian delegation's map included all of present Kurdistan of Turkey, chunks of Iraqi and Syrian Kurdistan, and large areas populated by Turks, Turcomans and Arabs thrown in for good measure."

First, the malicious effort to ignore the Assyrians' presence in the north of Iraq and southeastern Turkey is obvious in Izady's writing. Second, the Kurds were not alone in the Paris Conference. All the other minorities of the Ottoman Empire were present in one way or another, including the Assyrians and the Armenians. The Assyrian delegations presented their own demands including an Assyrian territorial map in which parts of northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey were claimed as Assyrian regions (Werda 1990, 199-220). What makes the Kurdish map more legitimate than that of the Assyrians, especially when the Assyrians have rooted historical legitimacy in the region?

There are many issues involved when discussing the subject of Kurds in the Assyrian heartland (north of Iraq). Such issues do involve migration and forced occupation of land, among others. Historically, there is ambiguity when addressing the consistent presence of people known strictly as Kurds in northern Mesopotamia. For one, Kurds variously trace themselves to Medes, then to Hurrians, and at other times to others. To present a historically reliable picture, Izady and others must investigate linguistic, cultural, and religious and any other common factors such as geographic density. A reasonable question arises that if the Kurds actually existed in this area, what was the relationship between the Kurds and the ancient people for whom archeological evidence exists. How did a Mede or a Hurrian become a Kurd? Mere bluster is not evidence.

From antiquity, people living in different regions have produced different crafts, building materials, ceramic styles, monuments and cultic installations. In very limited fashion, some of these traits and habits are alike, but very seldom we find that all these traits when incorporated with elements of language, culture, and religion, remain similar among the various ethnic groups. Northern Mesopotamia (Assyria) was always Assyrian in essence and the numerous excavations and discoveries in the region is a solid and overwhelming proof to this fact. Have any excavations in north of Iraq uncover artifacts that are coined Kurdish? I challenge Mr. Izady to list any for us.

Assyrian International News Agency

The region of north Iraq was known as Assyria even in later historical Parthian references, centuries after the fall of Assyrian political system. It kept its Syriac name "Athur", i.e. Assyria (Parpola 2000). During early Christianity, the region of northern Iraq was named Adiabene. Gibbon, the eighteenth century British historian and one time Parliamentarian, writes: "Ammianus remarks, that the primitive Assyria, which comprehended Ninus (Nineveh) and Arbela, had assumed the more recent and peculiar appellation of Adiabene, ..." (Gibbon 2001, 292). The people of Adiabene (Arbil, Kirkuk, and Mosul) were called the Adiabeni, and by the term Adiabeni, for the first century A.D. well-known Jewish historian Josephus, it was meant Assyrian (Whiston 1999, 543). Then the region went under Islamic Arab domination until the fall of the Baghdad Caliphate in 1258 and the coming of the Mongols. However, northern Iraq remained predominantly Christian until the destructions of Tamerlane in 1401. The region's main language was Aramaic (Syriac) well into the ninth and tenth centuries. Arabic began to take over at the time since it was the language of the Koran, the holy book of the newly spreading religion of Islam, which began in the seventh century.

During the second half of the 2nd millennia, under Ottoman rule (about 450 years), the north of Iraq was called "Mosul Vilayet" (Mosul Province) until 1921 when the region was separated from the Ottoman Empire and made part of what became known as Iraq.

My question is from where and when did this Kurdistan come? Well, since the turn of the twentieth century the Kurds have entered northern Iraq in great numbers from both Iran and Turkey. This migration intensified after WWII when the Persian Army put down the Kurdish rebellion in northwestern Iran and crushed the Mahabad Republic that Kurds had established in 1946, which had existed for a few months. Furthermore, Kurdish society sets little store in educating its women, and thus Kurds worldwide have one of the highest reproductive rates in the Muslim world. This factor alone has increased their numbers exponentially during the past fifty years in northern Iraq.

I challenge Izady to furnish census records justifying his claims for a Kurdish majority in northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey up to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Based on his exaggerated notions of Kurdish population in the early twentieth century, Izady brags about what he calls "Kurdish generosity" at the Paris Conference because they did not demand larger deserved regions in Syria, "from Van to Ardahan, from Mush to Maku," mostly Iranian Kurdish territories and he goes on adding more regions.

I do not understand the logic of this supposed historian, Izady. Is he implying that history has no affect in determining a region's background? Is he implying that all decisions must be made based on what the fact is on the ground at this moment regardless of how that fact came to be? Is Izady ignoring acts of genocide, oppression, forced deportations, persecution and harassment the powerful can inflict on the weakened and emphasizing only the game of numbers?

Did this supposed historian forget that in late 1914 the Kurds backed by Turks forced some 150,000 Assyrians out of their homes in the Hakkari mountains, in present-day southern Turkey and into Urmia region, in northwestern Iran? And later, in May 1915, these Kurds, aided by the Turks again and certain fanatic Persian Muslims, pushed over 10,000 Assyrians from Urmia to flee their homes and villages and seek refugee status in Russia? As the remaining Assyrians fought for months and lost thousands, the Russians returned to Urmia to establish some peace in the region. But in January 1918, the most horrifying tragedy was perpetrated by the Kurds, Turks and certain Persian elements, as some 100,000 Assyrians, including some Armenians, were forced again to flee as the Russians withdrew for the second time. This time this forced migration directed the Assyrians into Iraq, as these Assyrians of Turkey joined their brethren Catholic Assyrians of the Mosul Plain (also known as Chaldeans) in 1920 after spending over two years in refugee camps in Baquba and Mindan. Let me remind the professor that in all, and between 1914 and 1925, records show that some 300,000 Assyrians were either killed or incapacitated at the hands of the Kurds and Turks (Malek 1935).

Fanatical Kurd Izady Attacks Kurdish Parliament

Izady's malice against any Kurd who attempts a fairer portrayal of the Assyrian situation jumps from the venue of the Paris Peace Conference to The Hague meeting in 1995 of the Kurdish Parliament. Article I of the Declaration of the Founding of the Kurdish Parliament in Exile entitled "The Peoples of Kurdistan and Religious Congregations," reads: "In addition to the Kurds, there are the Assyrians and the Armenians living in Kurdistan. They too have suffered at the hands of the invading forces. Subjected to the policies of divide and rule, the people of Kurdistan have, at times, fought one another and forced one another to migrate from the common homeland. These factors have kept the population of Assyrians and Armenian slow. Today, in Kurdistan, they constitute a figure of some 10% of the total population. The people who live in Kurdistan have differing faiths and various religions. A vast majority of believers are Muslims. This diversity of beliefs has enabled the occupiers of Kurdistan to pit one group of believers against the other, to their mutual detriment..."

While Assyrians agree that this statement should be supplemented by a broad apology and indemnity to Assyrians for the Genocide, Izady castigates the Kurdish Parliament for making this bow in the direction of historical fact. After playing around with figures, Izady finally concludes that even if the Kurds were considered to be as conservative as 25 millions, then the 2.5 million (10%) Armenians and

Assyrians, in the region he calls Kurdistan, is ridiculous. Juggling sarcasm and ethnic hatred, he reaches the conclusion that the Assyrians and Armenians make up 1% of the population of northern Iraq. Izady flatly denies historical accounts that it was the Kurds who inflicted most atrocities against the Assyrians. Need we remind this fanatical throwback to the butchers of World War I as described in one whole chapter of the well-known Blue Book, referring in details to Kurds as the prime perpetrators of those atrocities? Need we remind the self-proclaimed historian by the diaries and numerous correspondences of foreign officials and European and American missionaries regarding the horrifying accounts Kurds have committed against the Assyrians? Close to one hundred and twenty pages speak of these atrocities in Ara Sarafian's edited yet uncensored version (Bryce and Toynbee 2000). Izady sees the Kurdish parliament as a defender of Assyrians' rights while neglecting the rights of the Kurds. He goes on to declare the oil wealth of Kirkuk as a Kurdish commodity and that Turkey has no right to re-open the Mosul Vilayet (Mosul Province) issue again. Of course opening the Mosul Vilayet will eventually bring the Assyrians in the political picture again.

Let me remind the Harvard produced historian that after the mandate of Iraq in 1921, there were 400,000 non-Moslem minorities in Iraq according to the British civil administration. It is safe to say that three-quarters of these 400,000 were Assyrian Christians and lived predominantly in northern Iraq when the Kurdish population was estimated around 800,000 in the same period (Malek 1935, 22). This means that eighty years ago, Assyrians formed 33% of the population of Northern Iraq. Would this fanatic describe for us what accounts for this dramatic decrease in Assyrians and the increase of Kurdish population in northern Iraq in a matter of eighty years? And if the Assyrian population has fallen to 10 to 20 % who is responsible for that?

Kirkuk Claims

Basing himself on the unsubstantiated claim that somehow Hurrians are the ancestors of the Kurds, Izady claims that Kirkuk was built and named Arrap'he over 3,800 years ago by his "ancestors". Ignoring the well-attested fact that northern Iraq was entirely Semitic by the early Christian period, and Aramaic speaking, he claims that Sassanid sources (known to him only?) show that "Yazdankart (Domitianus), the king of Kirkuk and Sulaymania, felt sufficiently "Kurdish" to participate in the defense of other Kurds..." Additional reminder here is due since throughout the early medieval historical sources "Kurd" is used as a generic term for "pastoralists." Fanatical Izady's claims cannot replace historical facts no matter to what level of sarcasm and invention he resorts.

It would be foolish to talk about Kirkuk and not mention the Assyrians and Turkomans. Although it is hard to say whether the Seljuks left any Turkish trace in Mesopotamia, we know that the Seljuk Turks revolted and had attacked many quarters of Baghdad, including the Christian quarter in A.D. 1054. This means that they were there. Still, the invasion of Tamerlane in 1401 could have brought in some Turks. We know furthermore that during A.D. (1410 1508) the Turkomans Black Sheep and White Sheep dynasties ruled Iraq; hence, there are reasonable chances that their descendents have survived since then.

Additionally, Kirkuk was known as Arrapha (Arrapkha) during the Assyrian Empire. After the Assyrians adopted Christianity beginning in the first century A.D. and the Greeks began their rule of today's Iraq in A.D. 331, the city took the Christian name Karka d' Bet Sloke (a Syriac or Assyrian name, and not Kurdish, meaning "walled city of the Seleucus house"). The word Sloke is a corrupted version from the Greek king "Seleucus" one of Alexander's generals, who ruled the region. This Karkha d' Bet Sloke was the center of one of the important Metropolitan (bishop) centers of the Nestorian Assyrians for centuries. Assyrian Church records, and other records, indicate that some 152,000 Nestorian Assyrians were slaughtered in Kirkuk (Karka d' Bet Sloke) by the Sassanid Persian Yezdegerd II in A.D. 448 (Wigram 1910, 138). This proves that there were many Assyrians in Kirkuk at that time still.

Who Are The Kurds?

I need to stress the fact that there is no single universally agreed-upon meaning for the term 'Kurd'. Discussing what he called the 'vague and indiscriminate use of the term Kurd', Vladimir Minorsky underlines the extent of the confusion, by citing remarks by the 10th century Persian historian, Hamza Isfahani: 'The Persians used to call Dailamites 'the Kurds of Tabaristan', as they used to call Arabs 'the Kurds of Suristan', i.e., of Iraq. Other Arab and Persian authors in the 10th century mean by Kurds any Iranian nomads of Western Persia, such as the tent-dwellers of Fars (Minorsky 1982/1943, 75).

Another contemporary scholar has drawn attention to his own observation, during field research in Kurdish areas, that the word 'Kurd' may simply indicate the language that one speaks. He stated, thus: "When I asked people in ethnically mixed areas whether they were Kurds of [sic] Turks or Persians, I frequently got answers such as 'I am Kurd as well as a Persian and a Turk'. The author concluded, "When I insisted and asked what they originally were, some answered 'my father speaks all three languages'." (Van Bruinessen, 1978, Utrecht: footnote 102: 430)

The Kurds might call themselves whatever they want and claim whatever they need, but this must not mean infringing on the rights of others; it must not come on the expense of other people, including the Assyrians, who have historically the same if not deeper rooted rights in the land many people share today.

What Assyrians Can Learn From Izady?

Izady strongly rejected his cooperation with an Armenian group before the latter issued statements rejecting the ethnic cleansing of Kurds in Armenia and Azerbaijan. He continues to state: "Perhaps the Kurds--first the citizens and only then the leaders--should try the novelty of placing their own nation's priorities ahead of those of other peoples."

Indeed, Assyrians should learn a thing or two from this statement. In 1961, the Kurds began their large-scale organized rebellion in northern Iraq and ever since they have continued their persecution and harassment of the peasant Assyrians even when many Assyrians had joined them and backed their struggle. The Assyrians were under the impression that the Kurds would help them since they were both fighting against common Iraqi oppressive practices inflicted on non-Arab ethnic minorities. But thousands of Assyrians were forced to evacuate their villages and move south into large cities like Mosul, Kirkuk and Baghdad while, with time, the Kurds moved in and controlled the Assyrians' villages.

After the establishment of the Northern no-fly zone and the so-called democratic Kurdish government in northern Iraq in 1992, the atrocities against Assyrians increased dramatically as Kurds attempted to purge the region >from the remaining Assyrians. Assassinations, rape, harassment and oppression against Assyrians have continued. Please visit (www.aina.org) for detailed description. This has been the Kurdish policy since 1921 when Iraq was being established. That explains why the Assyrians have continued to leave northern Iraq, leading to the increased percentage of the Kurdish population in the region.

Human beings in today's world can no longer afford to live in the dark allies of bigotry and fanaticism. I call upon the moderate Kurds to reach for all the Kurdish people, educate them, and address the legitimate case of the Assyrians in northern Iraq, their ancestral lands. There is no reason why different ethnic groups cannot live side by side, each respected, protected, and its culture and heritage preserved.

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