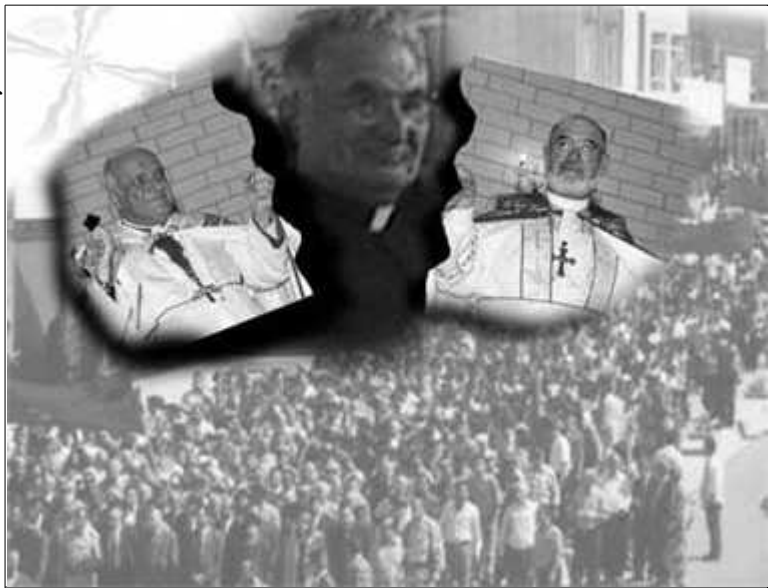


## Chaldean Bishops' Letter Undermines National Unity

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In a sign of renewed strain, a September 3 letter ([English](#), [Arabic](#)) signed by a group of Chaldean bishops implores Mr. Paul Bremer, the Civil Administrator of Iraq, for greater Chaldean Church inclusion in the emerging new government in Iraq. The letter, ostensibly drafted through the Chaldean Patriarchate, asserts that Chaldeans comprise 75% of the Christian community in Iraq and constitute a distinct ethnicity from Assyrians (also known as



Chaldeans and Syriacs). Apparently, at the heart of the matter for the Bishops is their perception of the lack of inclusion in the "Temporary Council of Iraq." According to the Bishops "that is an injustice committed against our people, for which we protest here explicitly and insistently."

The new Chaldean Bishops' attempt to forge an ethnicity distinct from Assyrians and Syriacs has been championed primarily by Bishop Sarhad Jammo of the St. Peter the Apostle Chaldean Catholic Diocese in California. Upon his appointment as Bishop, Bishop Sarhad Jammo quickly embarked upon a separatist agenda. In a May 10 memorandum from San Diego, Bishop Sarhad along with Bishop Ibrahim Ibrahim, the Bishop of Michigan, formally asserted a separate Chaldean ethnicity, rejecting a common political or nationalist purpose with Assyrians. In another separatist move, Bishop Sarhad held a political rally in early January where he announced the formation of a new Chaldean political organization -- the Chaldean National Congress (CNC) -- whose formation entailed a rejection of a unified Assyrian, Chaldean, and Syriac political movement. Moreover, Bishop Sarhad went on to recognize the Chaldean Democratic Union (CDU) in Iraq as the legitimate representative of the Chaldean community in Iraq. The CDU was formed by Mr. Afram Abdelahad, a self described member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). The CDU and the CNC have not fared well in gaining popular support due to the CDU's sponsorship by the KDP as well

as their extremist positions *vis-a-vis* Assyrians and Syrians. Mr. Abdelahad's separatist "political party" is widely believed in Iraqi circles to have been artificially created by the KDP for the sole purpose of splitting the Chaldean community from the Assyrian fold in order to diminish calls for redress against mounting KDP ethnic cleansing against Assyrians.

Three days after the controversial letter, Iraqi Assyrians witnessed another view. Chaldean Bishops, led by Archbishop Emeritus Jackues Ishaq and Bishop Shlemon Warduni, along with representatives of other Assyrian Churches, initiated the establishment of a ChaldeoAssyrian national council to further formalize the unified national front in Iraq.

The [Chaldean Church](#) is a Uniate Eastern Rite Roman Catholic Church. Although the Chaldean Church has ecclesiastic jurisdiction over its Middle Eastern prelates, the Vatican has final authority over Diaspora-based Bishops. Early notification of American Bishops regarding Bishop Sarhad's unprecedented separatist political activities has at the very least raised eyebrows. One American Bishop described his counterpart's activities as "at least mischievous, if not dangerous." Although the formation and/or sponsorship of a foreign political party by an American Bishop is itself highly unusual, of greatest concern to Rome remains the escalating tension and anger between members of the separatist wing of the Chaldean Church and the other Middle Eastern Churches -- most notably the Assyrian Church of the East. The Vatican appears mostly concerned about the threat posed by the separatists to the ongoing [Pro Oriente](#) process of rapprochement between the Syriac Churches and Rome. Pro Oriente was first initiated by the Second Vatican Council. Moreover, bringing the previously estranged Assyrian Church of the East into communion with Rome has remained an important policy for Pope John Paul II. The escalating tension has also threatened the spirit of the [Common Christological Declaration](#) of 1994 between the Assyrian Church of the East and Rome. Moreover, the inherently anti-Assyrian, anti-Syriac positions of the separatist Chaldean fringe are widely believed to sabotage the very spirit if not intent of the Pro Oriente process.

The Vatican's concerns are not merely limited to issues of ecclesiastic harmony. Following the fall of Baghdad, the Vatican very quickly convened a meeting drawing together not only all of the Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Syrians but Armenians as well in order to forge a cohesive common Christian agenda for the newly emerging government. The separatist Chaldean movement and the resulting rancor between the Churches is likely to be viewed as complicating Vatican efforts to present a unified front. As one observer noted, "All tolled, the Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Syrians together are already underrepresented and under virtual siege by rising Islamic fundamentalism. Further division only risks further irrelevance for all in the new Iraq." Echoing similar concerns, a State Department official bristled at the ongoing bickering referring to the Assyrians as the "laughing stock of Iraqi politics" for continued self-destructive efforts to divide and diminish their significance. Another observer noted "What appears obvious to those in authority, whether they be in the Vatican or the State Department, is that Assyrian rights in Iraq are the test case for the survival and future rights of all Christian minorities in the Middle East and North Africa. The undermining of our potential in Iraq, whether deliberate or unintentional, is likely to have repercussions for our people throughout the region."

The potentially subversive implications of the separatist movement have not escaped members of the Chaldean Church either. An internet based [petition](#) following the Detroit rally by Bishop Sarhad Jammo was signed by more than 640 parishioner. The petition condemned the policy of separation and noted "The Assyrian-Chaldean parishes in California are distraught at Bishop Jammo's views, which are not shared by the communities and go against the teachings of our Chaldean Patriarch, Mar Raphael Bidawid." Other public and private statements by members of the Chaldean Federation of America (CFA) similarly reaffirmed that irrespective of the preferred term of self-identification that Assyrians, Syriacs, and Chaldeans nevertheless constitute one people. In a March 20, 1998 letter to Sargon Lewie, president of the Assyrian American National Federation, the Chairman of the CFA, Saad Marouf, stated "We the Assyrians and Chaldeans have a common culture, a common heritage, a common ethnicity, as one nation, and originated from the same ancestral homeland." A joint declaration by the CFA and the Assyrian Universal Alliance on January 10, 2003 stated ". . .at a time when major decisions concerning our nation are being considered and decided we ask that you keep in mind the following statement concerning our homeland of Iraq: Assyrians and Chaldeans are one nation." Furthermore, in a [letter](#) to Younadam Kanna, the Secretary General of the ADM, Saad Marouf stated "We are confident, based on our personal knowledge of your ability, commitment, and proud history in serving your fellow Christians, and in particular our great AssyrianChaldean nation, that you, along with our brothers and sisters, distinguished members of the council, will promote the implementation of freedom, democracy, equality, peace and justice to all people of Iraq."

All the while, US Civil Administrator Paul Bremer's response has remained muted. The lack of a response has been seen by many as a rejection by Bremer of the separatist movement's legitimacy. According to some analysts, Mr. Bremer has seen from the very beginning that the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) -- which refers to their constituents as ChaldeoAssyrians -- has from its inception relied heavily on leaders from the Chaldean community within its tight inner central committee. The bold leadership position espoused by the ADM in promoting the compound ChaldeoAssyrian name has brought the communities together while marginalizing an even greater potential threat from the separatists. More concretely and practically, the first Minister to be appointed by the ADM to serve in the new government (as the Minister of Transportation) is Mr. Behnan Zia Paulus, a member of the Chaldean community. Still more, perhaps the most important appointments made to date include those of the Constitution committee assigned the critical task of reworking Iraq's new constitution. The ADM appointed Professor Hikmat Hakim, who is not only a member of the Chaldean community, but is also originally from Bishop Sarhad Jammo's home village of Telkeppe. As one observer noted "Mr. Bremer must himself be 'mystified' -- to quote from the Bishops' letter -- as to why there remains a perception that all Assyrian groups are not properly represented."

The US government has a long track record of recognizing all Assyrians, irrespective of their preferred term of self-identification, as one people. In the 2000 US Census, most mainstream organizations of Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Syriacs endorsed tabulation as one people under one combined category (AINA, [6-13-1999](#)). The determination by the US Census Bureau followed a lengthy investigative process and withstood an Assyrian separatist appeal in Federal Court. As if to underscore the US Administration's view that further division is

inappropriate at this time, a recent [letter](#) from President Bush to the CFA referred to the Chaldeans as a Church rather than as a separate people as if to say "now is not the time for separation."

The root causes of the separatist movement are not easily evidenced or understood. Some have suggested that the main proponents of separatism previously enjoyed a privileged status with the old Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein. As one Assyrian analyst explained "until too late, this same faction bet the farm on the survival of the Iraqi regime and even went so far as to claim at times that they were given a wink and a nod by the US administration to remain as a moderating force within the Iraqi regime. When it became all too clear that regime change was inevitable, this same privileged class scrambled to salvage at least some of their past power and status." This same segment of the community had not, however, invested any political capital in the Iraqi opposition and suddenly felt exposed and vulnerable. "These latest moves are the desperate spasms of those suddenly facing the threat of what they perceive will be loss of status in the new Iraq. It is regrettable that these same few did not embrace the Assyrian opposition political parties as their own and piggyback on their success. How Iraqi Assyrian political parties as the representatives of the Assyrian people can assuage these sensitive egos remains the crucial test of unity for our people."

Reaction to the separatist movement has been increasingly negative from members of the various communities. As one observer noted "we can't go back to 431 or 1552 and address all of our internal historical and religious grievances for that matter. But to think that splitting and dividing at this crucial time can further any one's survival or interest is troubling. History will harshly judge those of our people who put personal interests before the greater good." Others complained that the separatist challenges began while the late Chaldean Patriarch Raphael Bedawid lay terminally ill and accelerated after his passing. "The Patriarch was an avowed [unionist](#) and would not have condoned such divisiveness." Another view noted that the separatists represented "a temporal power grab by the religious elite" and likened the move to a "16th century mullah mentality that seems to persist within us." A member of the Chaldean community deliberated that "all sides have their fringe radicals, separatists, tribalists, and what have you. We are no exception, yet our center holds us together. Such challenges to our oneness are simply periodic nuisances that we must address together; they are merely the vestiges of the obsolete historical baggage we carry with us into the future."

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