

Efforts of Political Emancipation of Assyrians in Post-Saddam Iraq

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Abstract: *The article attempts to explore the efforts of political emancipation of Assyrians in the post-Saddam Iraq. Assyrian people are ancient ethnic, linguistic and religious minority which has for centuries been the target of persecution. Assyrians, as other Iraqi suppressed minorities, intensified their calling for self-determination after the fall of the Iraqi totalitarian regime, but without any perceptible effect. The Assyrian question is rooted in complicated history, geopolitics, ethnic mosaic and religious differences which are explained in the text. Assyrians do constitute a coherent nation. That is why the article examines Assyrian identity problems which influence the political attitudes of Assyrian groups. This text deals with the current social status and political activities of the Assyrian people in Iraq and in Iraqi Kurdistan. The author focuses on the issue of an Assyrian autonomous area in northern Iraq, dwells on the most viable proposal and outlines which intra-state and foreign political actors support the idea of Assyrian autonomy and which do not.*

Keywords: *Assyrians, Iraq, politics, discrimination, emancipation, autonomous tendencies*

Motto

'Better the devil you know than the devil you do not'

English proverb

Introduction

In spite of a wide-spread perception of the Middle East as a predominantly Arabic and Islamic monolith with patriotic inhabitants propagated by Western mass media and some

top politicians of Middle Eastern states, Iraq is a quite heterogeneous country which comprises numerous national, ethnic, religious or ethn-religious groups. One of these groups is Assyrians who are a distinct minority in the Middle Eastern context in ethnic, lingual and religious ways.

Nowadays, Iraqi Assyrian community faces many hardships, the biggest being massive emigration to the neighboring countries and then to the West caused by their unsatisfactory social status in Iraq. The end of Iraqi totalitarian regime and Iraqi democratization process is connected with the re-emergence of a more than a century-old Assyrian question. Because of frequent crimes and attacks against Assyrians, the question of the status of Assyrians in Iraq and of their self-determination is really urgent nowadays. The Assyrian autonomy is often presented by its supporters as a possible resolution for the current Assyrian troubles and as the last chance for their long-term survival in the Iraqi homeland. But Assyrians fear that, as in the past, their demands will be ignored by the Iraqi central government and by the great powers too.

Assyrians: Basic Facts and Ethnic Identity Problems

Assyrians are the only Middle Eastern Christian ethnic group without their own state, which can be ascribed to the elite category of nations, more precisely minority nations. Assyrians were relatively successful in resisting Islamization, Arabization, Kurdization, Turkization, Persization and globalization as well as in retaining their authentic languages, religious traditions and partially preserving the ideas of national conscience in the modern era. Nowadays Assyrian communities exist almost in every Middle Eastern country. Nevertheless, we can find autochthonous Assyrian communities only in Iraq (in the north of the country — in former Mosul vilayet 'Assyrian triangle' is situated between the Tigris and the Great Zab; and in large cities like Bagdad, Mosul and Basra), Syria (in the northeast of the country — in al-Qamishli district), Iran (in the Urmiya area and in large cities), Turkey (in southeastern vilayets and in Istanbul) and Armenia.

Assyrians occupy inferior and unpopular social positions in all of the above-mentioned states except Armenia, but their position is the worst in the post-war Iraq. Middle Eastern Assyrian communities live predominantly among Kurds. Assyrians are not so numerous and geopolitically important as their age-long neighbors Kurds, so they are often ignored in the issues of international politics. However, we can observe the same solidarity inside these communities, which involves various transnational activities of the emigrants. The Assyrian population worldwide is estimated at nearly 4 million. There are approximately 600 000 Assyrian inhabitants in contemporary Iraq, who constitute 3 % of total Iraqi population (CIA The World Factbook 2009). Assyrians are by far the largest Iraqi Christian minority, with 5 % of Iraqi Christians being Armenians. However, the numbers mentioned above are rough estimates, because all the available censuses are dated. Moreover, the emigration rates of Assyrians are high, Middle Eastern states pretend to be homogenous and churches have tendency to exaggerate the number of their believers.

Assyrians are the descendants of Arameanized and Christianized ancient Assyrians, however, for our research more important is the Assyrian identity which connects most of Iraqi Aramean-speaking people, but not all of them. The Assyrian nation is divided into three branches — ancestral Nestorian (Assyrian), Syriac (Syriac Orthodox and Syriac Catholic) and Chaldean Catholic. These different names have primarily religious, historical and doctrinal background. These ethno-religious communities are religiously and partially linguistically distinct from each other. Nestorians use the language called *sureth* (Assyrian or neo-Aramean), Syriac ancestral language is *turoyo* (Syriac), but nowadays they mostly use Arabic, and Chaldeans use Chaldean language (Chaldean neo-Aramean). All these languages are derived from the old Aramean language which used to be the *lingua franca* of the Middle East (Hanish 2008: 34). Bilingualism is typical for the Assyrian people in Iraq who usually speak Arabic or Kurdish.

Nowadays, Assyrians are known as Chaldeans, Syriacs (Syrians — not connected with Syrian nationality), Jacobites, Nestorians, Syro-Chaldeans, Assyro-Chaldeans, Chaldo-Assyrians (with or without hyphen) and Chaldean Assyrian Syriac people. Tempestuous debates and doubts abound concerning the identity of these people among both the Aramean-speaking Christians and the academics. Only Nestorian Assyrians consistently claim that the ancient Assyrian heritage involves all the Aramean-speaking Christians under the Assyrian ethnicity. Chaldean and Syriac people frequently break the Assyrian unity. Many Chaldeans consider themselves descendants of ancient Chaldeans, Arameans or even Arab Christians, while Syriacs sometimes claim that they are Arameans or Arab Christians. Some researchers claim that Chaldeans, Assyrians and Syriacs are one group of people and discard any other names, others think that they are diverse groups of people with different identities. The absence of unity between the Aramean-speaking Christians themselves complicates advocating their interests. The third largest ethnic group in Iraq could be further divided into lesser sub-groups. For example, Chaldean and Assyrian nationalities are currently mentioned in Iraqi constitution (Iraqi Constitution 2005).

Chaldean American scholar Shak Hanish prefers the name Chaldean Assyrian Syriac people which does not superordinate any of the Aramean-speaking groups (Hanish 2008: 45). Hanish is Chaldean Catholic and he denies Assyrian Nestorian nationalism. In 2003 Iraqi political party ADM (Assyrian Democratic Movement) started to officially propagate a compromise term ChaldoAssyrian, but this term was rejected by the representatives of church. We will prefer the name Assyrians in our research mainly due to its shortness. In our view, it embodies the collective ethnicity of Aramean-speaking Christians and includes primary religious groups under Assyrian nation which existed long before Christianity. We appreciate the words of Chaldean patriarch Mar Raphael I. Bedawid who said: '*I am Assyrian. I myself, my sect is Chaldean, but ethnically, I am Assyrian. That does not mean I should mix everything.*' (Petrosian 2006: 117) It is obvious that the agreement on a unified identity of these people is not a matter of the near future.

Historical Overview

Assyrians were the victims of various persecutions for centuries because of their differences in religion, language and culture. Religious distinctions were the reason of numerous conflicts with Islamic rulers. Christians were subject to specific status for non-Muslims regulating their integration into a Muslim society. Christians and other Monotheists were considered by Muslims as People of the Book. These people were marked as *dhimmi*, protected people which could live and practice their religion within an Islamic state (Phares 2001: 64). Islamic tolerance to these people was limited as they were not allowed to organize missionary activities, forbidden to carry weapons, hold political and military power in the state and were obliged to pay a special tax (*jizya*). Muslim superiority was granted in family matters too, as non-Muslim men could not marry Muslim women without converting to Islam.

The situation with Christians improved in the Ottoman Empire. Ottoman Turks established a system of *millets* which includes main religious denominations in the Empire — Muslim, Jewish, Greek Orthodox and Armenian. Muslim *millet* played a dominant role. Assyrians were under the jurisdiction of Armenian *millet* led by the Armenian patriarch, not only in religious, but also in civil matters. The *millet* system institutionalized the legal statuses of Christians in the Ottoman Empire and brought in the identification of nation with its religion. The number of millets was increasing during the centuries, especially because of the pressure of the European Christian powers. The Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire enjoyed the protection of European colonial powers which led to the equality conceded to non-Muslims, which provoked Muslim majority.

Revolutionary and nationalist ideas appeared in the Middle East in the 19th century. These ideas, imported from Europe, were popular primarily with the Ottoman Christian minorities. The Assyrian nationalism was connected with British archeological discoveries in northern Mesopotamia (Nisan 2002: 181). The struggle of nationalism of minorities in the Ottoman Empire with Turkish nationalism led to armed clashes. During the First World War Assyrians and Armenians were victims of the genocide and deportations made by Turkish army and Kurdish militia. Assyrians were loyal to Russia and Great Britain during the war and they expected fulfilling their national rights due to Thomas Woodrow Wilson's principles. Russia was not active in the Assyrian question after the Bolshevik revolution and Great Britain chose to pursue pragmatic policy.

Assyrians unsuccessfully pleaded for their rights in the 'Assyrian triangle' at international conferences, but received only weak international guarantees of protection. The Iraqi monarchy under the British mandate was established in 1921. However, the mandate control terminated in 1932 and the relative stability was substituted by terror. Assyrians aspiring for self-determination became a target of Iraqi Arabic troops and Kurdish militia. The worst massacre of Assyrians took place in Simel village in 1933 (Nisan 2002: 189). Following these raids Nestorian patriarch (*catholicos*) settled in Chicago. Assyrians were left to the mercy of the majority population. The oppression caused a massive wave of Assyrian emigration. Assyrian troops known as Levies helped the British army to defeat Rahid Ali's pro-Nazi coup in Iraq during the Second World War, but the British approach to them was not changed and the British army left Iraq in 1947. Assyrian emancipation efforts were suppressed after the

Second World War and the question of self-determination was discussed primarily among the representatives of the Assyrian diaspora in Western countries.

In 1960s the Iraqi monarchy was replaced by the rule of secular Baath party. Baath officially denied any discrimination. Assyrian and Chaldean cultural and linguistic rights were formally recognized by the Baghdad government. The primary goal of these rights was to erode the deepening cooperation between Assyrians and Kurds in Iraq. In 1979 Saddam Hussein became Baath party leader. Saddam's policy towards Assyrians was volatile. On the one hand, Assyrians (especially the loyal Chaldeans who attempted to integrate into Iraqi society) worked in state services (prime minister Tareq Aziz or Saddam's personal cooks), on the other hand, Assyrians became the target of brutal repressions connected with the war between Iraq and Iran (many Assyrians died in this war) and the *al-Anfal* campaign of the de-Kurdisation of the Iraqi north (Mouawad 2001: 56).

After the First Gulf War Iraqi Assyrian people were divided between Iraq and the newly-established Iraqi Kurdistan, which was almost independent from Bagdad and had strong US backing. Assyrians living in Kurdistan were loyal (at least until 2003) to Iraqi Kurdistan's executive KRG (Kurdish Regional Government). They had their own TV and radio channels and were guaranteed political, cultural and educational rights. Assyrian politicians from ADM and BNDP (Bet-Nahrain Democratic Party) were present in Kurdistan's parliament and government and the Arabic language was replaced by Kurdish and Assyrian. However, there were also problems in Iraqi Kurdistan, for example, a civil war between Kurdish political parties KDP (Kurdish Democratic Party) and PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan), Turkish raids against Kurdish extremists and the rise of radical Islam. The discrimination of minorities continued in Saddam's Iraq. Saddam's secret service was active in Kurdistan, for example, famous Assyrian politician Francis Youssef Chabo was assassinated by Saddam's agents (Petrosian 2006: 124). Generally, in 1990s Assyrians were leaving Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan *en masse*.

Iraqi Assyrians after Saddam's Fall

Operation Iraqi Freedom and the fall of the totalitarian regime brought new opportunities for Iraqi minorities. Assyrians from Iraqi Kurdistan and from Western diaspora supported Saddam's removal, but nowadays some of them claim that life was better for them under Saddam, whose behavior was at least predictable in contrast to the current terrorist attacks. Besides, a secular state which would fulfill the Assyrian desire for autonomy was not established. Assyrians were active during the advance of Coalition forces and their armed forces provide security in Christian villages. Assyrians, particularly ADM, were members of INC (Iraqi National Congress), an anti-Saddam organization composed of Shia, Kurdish, Assyrian and Turkmen opposition groups receiving the US support. An opposition conference held in London in 2002 confirmed the legal rights of Assyrians in the post-Saddam Iraq. Assyrian politician and the leader of ADM Yonadam Kanna were members of IGC (Iraqi Governing Council), provisional government of the post-Saddam Iraq chosen by the

American authorities. Assyrian politicians were present in the special electoral commission which selected Iraqi Interim National Assembly (Petrosian 2006: 142). However, the real political position of Assyrians remained weak. As other Iraqi citizens, they became the target of violence after Saddam's fall. Assyrians are target of Islamic or nationalist extremists in various geographical regions of Iraq. They are viewed as traitors and American or Western agents. That is why they are the main targets of murderers, kidnappers and church bombers (KRG 2008).

Sometimes they are forced to pay *jizya*, convert to Islam or leave the country. Assyrian business is in many cases blocked because of the violence or unresolved land possession cases. Assyrians are discriminated against at the job market and often cannot reach humanitarian aid and sometimes cannot participate in elections because of Kurdish militia's (*peshmerga*) actions which prevent them from voting. Assyrian reaction is massive exodus from Iraq. Some of them returned to their homeland (especially those originating from Syria and Jordan) after partial pacification in the country, but they have troubles with regaining their former property seized by Muslim squatters. There are also serious problems with the distribution of reconstruction funds. Acts of violence against Assyrians are more frequent in Arabic Iraq than in Iraqi Kurdistan. For example, the president of Kurdistan Massoud Barzani condemned religious violence and invited Iraqi Christian refugees to Kurdish lands. He also said: *'No one else in Iraq has offered this level of assistance to Iraq's Christians who were amongst the very first to have lived in this land.'* (KRG 2008) Assyrians in Iraqi Kurdistan live mainly in the Western part controlled by Barzani's KDP.

Another important problem is long-term political under-representation of Assyrians and other minorities. Assyrians complain that only four Assyrian politicians are present in contemporary Iraqi Council of Representatives. In Kurdistan National Assembly there is a rule ensuring minority representation, requiring that at least one member of minorities is always present in the legislative council. Assyrians are usually present in the government of Iraqi Kurdistan. There are five seats reserved for Assyrians there (Hanish 2008: 32). Serious problem has emerged recently concerning provincial elections. Special quota seats for minorities in provincial councils ensured by Article 50 were removed in 2008 by a new law of ICR (Iraqi Council of Representatives) and quotas for higher women representation were installed instead. This controversial move was criticized by the UN, Western countries, Iraqi president Jalal Talabani and Prime Minister Nouri Maliki (BBC 2008). Finally, the quota seats for minorities were restored after a number of demonstrations organized by deeply concerned Iraqi minorities, though rather curtailed. Numerous problems mentioned above are the main reasons for Assyrian emigration. One half of Iraqi refugees are Assyrians, although they make only 3 % of Iraqi population. Assyrians are also victims of their inner disunity. Ironically, the divisions within the Assyrian nation increased after the fall of Saddam's regime. Nowadays Chaldean separatism connected with the rejection of Assyrian political aspirations is the biggest challenge for Assyrian emancipation efforts.

Assyrian Autonomy as the Solution

Assyrians are indigenous Iraqi people and, according to the international and Iraqi law, they have a right for self-determination in political, cultural and economic dimensions. The current Iraqi constitution affirms that Assyrians are indigenous people. The Assyrian language is recognized in the education and can be taught in the areas inhabited by Assyrians. There are many Assyrian autonomy proposals and they differ in territorial and administrative aspects. The most viable proposal is, in our opinion, a Niniveh plain resolution created by ISDP (Iraqi Sustainable Democracy Project), a non-governmental organization promoting the rights of the Iraqi minorities and headed by an Assyrian lobbyist Michael Youash from Washington, D.C (Youash 2007). ISDP's proposal pre-supposes the creation of an autonomy unit in two districts with (the former) Assyrian majority (al-Hamdaniya, Telkaif) of Niniveh governate. The capital of the proposed autonomous unit would be Bakhdeda, the current capital of al-Hamdaniya district. Assyrian autonomous region border on both the Arabic and Kurdish Iraq and could soften the tensions between Arabs and Kurds. Assyrian autonomous ambitions should be grounded in the international law and in the Iraqi constitution. Article 125 of the Iraqi constitution deals with *'administrative, political, cultural and educational rights of various nationalities, such as Turkmen, Chaldeans, Assyrians, and all other constituents'* (Iraqi Constitution 2005).

However, article 125 does not explain what is exactly meant by these rights. The Iraqi Supreme Court should make an interpretation of this vague article. The principles of the Iraqi constitution were prepared by the opposition groups, including Assyrians, in the turbulent time before the overthrowing of Saddam Hussein. Generally, the administrative rights should ensure minority survival and enrich the Iraqi federal and democratic system. They should stand in opposition to religious and nationalist extremism. Article 125 falls within the section dealing with the division of federal powers, and thus we could consider administrative rights as sub-federal. An administrative area means something less than a region or a province. However, there are well-founded doubts about the significance of the constitution in the current Iraq. What really matters is military power and money.

According to the ISDP proposal, Assyrians will have a local governing authority that would supervise health care, education and culture, police forces (these police forces could push radicals out, like Sunni forces did with al-Qaeda in Anbar province) and tourism. Assyrian activists speak about the self-rule within the framework of a federal Iraq, with Assyrian autonomous unit not being involved in foreign policy, defense etc. The Assyrian area should be under international supervision, possibly, along the Kosovo lines. What is obvious is that there is a definite need for external patrons. The Assyrian administrative region can become a haven for all the Assyrians from Iraq, including internally displaced people or foreign diaspora. Nowadays, Assyrians from all over Iraq emigrate to Niniveh plain in hope of a better life. Recently, local Christian police and some checkpoints have been established in this area.

Assyrians often refer to the Kurdish claims for autonomy. The reasons why the Iraqi Kurds were allowed the right of self-determination are present in the case of Assyrians, who are a distinct people, having a cohesive identity for at least as long as their Kurdish neighbors. Kurds, Assyrian political parties from Iraqi Kurdistan and important individuals, like a Kurdish-

Assyrian politician Sarkis Aghajan, support Assyrian autonomy because they want to connect Niniveh plain to Iraqi Kurdistan. They claim that Assyrians could not cooperate with Sunni and Shia Arabs and they should turn to Sunni Kurds. The Niniveh plain is a fertile region, which is potentially rich in oil. It is officially under the control of central Iraqi government, but there is still strong Kurdish military presence there. The Niniveh plain, and the Niniveh governate as such, is a multiethnic area inhabited by Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, Assyrians, Armenians, Yezidis, Shabaks (Shia Kurds having their own language). Despite the fact, that Assyrians have good relations with Shabak and Yezidi people and try to cooperate with Turkmen, the Niniveh governate remains one of the least safe areas in Iraq (Youash 2007).

About 80 % of Iraqi Christians support the autonomy, which is the outcome of the efforts of ADM, the most popular Assyrian political party. However, not all Assyrians support autonomy, which has many critics, especially among Chaldeans and Syriacs, who deny the Assyrian ethnic identity. Chaldean and Syriac critics and pro-Vatican Iraqi priests speak about the 'Assyrian ghetto' and Assyrian ethnocentrism. They claim that Christians should be present among non-Christian population, fulfill their religious missions and participate in interreligious dialogue. However, the Assyrian autonomous area should not be a safe home only for Christians but also for moderate Muslims and Yezidis too, so the claims about the 'Assyrian ghetto' are empty (Canon 2007). Critics also draw attention to the imbalance between a massive support of the Niniveh plain project among the Assyrian diaspora and a hesitating approach of the Assyrians in Iraq. Another argument against the autonomy is the danger of concentrating the community in a single territory without security guarantees, which increases the possibility of violent extermination of Iraqi Assyrians.

Kurds support Assyrian autonomy (on condition that it becomes part of Kurdistan), Sunnis do not, the position of Shias is not clear (however, Prime Minister Nouri Maliki supports the autonomy). Assyrian and Christian non-governmental organizations try to make the Assyrian question heard and address the UN (Assyrians are members of UNPO — Unrepresented Nations and People Organization), the USA and the EU in their attempts to raise the awareness of the Assyrian question around the world. Most of the advocates of Assyrian autonomy come from the Assyrian diaspora living in the US. Among the supporters of the Assyrian cause are Barack Obama, Joe Biden (having proposed a federal solution for Iraq, which is supposed to be divided into Shiastan, Sunnistan, Kurdistan and Assyria), Anna Eshoo, a politician of Assyrian origin, or the late Roman Catholic Republican Henry Hyde. There are some pro-Assyrian politicians in Europe as well, for example, British Labourist Stephen Pound who attempts to renew British-Assyrian cooperation, a Dutch Joel Voordewind and a Dutch-Assyrian politician Attiya Gamri.

Conclusion

The future of Iraqi Assyrians is dependent on the future of whole Iraq, especially after the withdrawal of Coalition forces from the country, whose presence, in our opinion, prevented terror against the minorities. Despite the fact that there exist a number of concrete

proposals exists, the Assyrian autonomous region remains largely a theoretical construct, the implementation of which requires firmness from the Assyrian side and the approval of the central parliament. Assyrians face an important dilemma in choosing their strategy for a long-term survival in Iraq. As collaboration with Turkmen, Yezidis and Shabaks is not sufficient, they should also forge closer ties with Kurds and Arabs. Assyrian collaboration with Kurds was quite successful in the 1990s. In our opinion, it is the only way towards Assyrian emancipation, although many Assyrians are against this option. Assyrians cannot rely on the assistance of the West, although they urgently need political, financial and military support — just as Kurds did in 1991. Moral support, which comes from foreign non-governmental organizations and churches, is not sufficient. Geopolitically, the Assyrian minority is not as important as the Kurdish minority and Assyrian and Kurdish interests are sometimes contradictory. Iraqi Assyrians are endangered by their disunity and identity problems. Many of them support the establishing of an autonomous region under the jurisdiction of the central government. Assyrians living in Iraqi Kurdistan support the autonomy linked to KRG, while Chaldeans are against any autonomous solution. The preservation of Assyrian demographic integrity still belongs to the main goals of this ancient community.

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