

ISDP ISSUE FOCUS

IRAQ SUSTAINABLE DEMOCRACY PROJECT

ChaldoAssyrians: Resolving the Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac Identity Crisis¹

Northern Iraq is home to a significant number of direct descendents of the ancient Assyrians. On April 1st, 2008, they will be celebrating their 6758th New Year. However, today they do not all refer to themselves as 'Assyrians'; some call themselves Chaldeans and others Syriacs², which are denominational designations at their root.

As a result, they are today divided as separate ethnic groups in both the Iraqi and Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Constitutions. The founding legal framework for a new democratic experiment, in such a significant country, is serving to concretize the destruction of those people who give Iraq its significance in antiquity, as Assyrians.

The constitutional separation of Chaldeans and Syriacs from Assyrians represents a crippling political blow to this vulnerable minority. It creates a constitutional basis on which to legitimize KRG and central government policies that deliberately divide and rule this minority. The constitutional division provides the legal approval of programs (reinforced by government spending) to politically weaken and thereby physically destroy them.³

This "identity crisis", for lack of a better term, is at the root of a political tragedy

unfolding in Iraq for this community. They are failing to realize their core interests on all major political issues – federalism, security, reconstruction – mainly due to those exploiting the Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac identity crisis. For Iraqi and American onlookers this can only be viewed with bemusement and/or pity. For the people, it is the reason why their political potential remains wholly unrealized and their people remain vulnerable to every form of persecution in Iraq today as a result.

A Solution Sabotaged

In Baghdad, on October 19th and 20th, 2003, the Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac people took a historic step in overcoming their denominational divisions to work as one politically. In a conference bringing together an unprecedented segment of the community's political and religious leaders, a decision was taken to refer to the community politically as ChaldoAssyrian, and their language to be known as Syriac.⁴

The main political organization mobilizing this policy in Iraq is the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM). Their leader was selected by Paul Bremer to represent the community on the Interim Governing Council. With this policy as a frontline issue within the community, they succeeded in garnering well over 75

percent of ‘ethnically-conscious’ voters; despite having their constituency in key regions fall victim to disenfranchisement and voter fraud. It is unsurprising then, that the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) identifies this community as “ChaldoAssyrians”.

Regrettably, support for the policy waned for a variety of reasons, at the forefront of which was the political marginalization of the ADM by Kurdish-based parties – most significantly the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

Compounding the problem to this day is the willingness of the United States Government to regard all delegations (religious and secular) from this community as credible voices and legitimate sources of political representation. This is despite the ADM’s demonstrable electoral legitimacy, earning the right to most authoritatively express Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac political hopes and objectives in Iraq’s legislatures.

As a result of these two factors, old divisions remained exposed to exploitation by those seeing the unity of the Assyrian people as a grave threat, and remains the situation to date.

In Their Own Words – Chaldeans, Syriacs and the Assyrian Identity

The ‘Chaldean’ and ‘Syriac’ identities are rooted in the religious, Christian denominations from which they arise. This is reflected in the words of the very Chaldean and Syriac people, religious institutions, and religious leaders who affirm their Assyrian ethnic/national identity.

The Vatican itself makes it clear that the Chaldean identity is a religious one. Ironically, they provide this clarity as a result of the physical destruction and uprooting their parishioners face. Physical displacement from homes and in fact regions, prevent members of the Chaldean Church from having access to Holy Communion and so it has been for many members of the Assyrian Church of the East unable to access their Churches.

In 2001, the Holy See in Rome issued the, “Guidelines for Admission to the Eucharist Between the Chaldean Church and the Assyrian Church of the East” to allow members to receive Holy Communion if the only Church accessible belonged to the other denomination.

That document is prefaced with a historical description of the root of this religious, denominational division, and was developed in concordance with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, then headed by Cardinal Ratzinger, who is today Pope Benedict XVI.

It states, *“Since the very early times of Christian missionary activity, a flourishing local Church developed in Mesopotamia or Persia. As this Church was situated outside the eastern borders of the Roman Empire, it became commonly called the “Church of the East”. In 1552, after a series of individual conversions of bishops or provisional unions, part of the “Church of the East” entered into full communion with the Apostolic See of Rome. Since then, the particular Church in full communion with Rome has usually been called the “Chaldean Church”, while the other particular Church took the name of “Assyrian Church of the East”. Both particular Churches, however, still share*

*the same theological, liturgical and spiritual tradition; they both celebrate the Sacraments or Sacred Mysteries according to the East-Syriac tradition.”*⁵

The denominational root of the Chaldean identity was recently reiterated by Archbishop Gabriel Kassab on EWTN’s ‘The World Over Show’. When asked about the origin of the Chaldeans he indicated, “Some of the church in 1555 joined Rome – the Vatican – and that was the day we earned the name Chaldean Church. Before that we were called the ‘Eastern Church’”.⁶

Anyone espousing the notion that today’s Iraqi Chaldeans are a separate ethnicity from the Assyrians, must explain how those who separated from the Church of the East [comprised of ethnic Assyrians in that area], who speak the same language and live in the same area, towns and villages, were discernibly Chaldean before 1552, and prove that only those whom were racially/ethnically Chaldean joined the newly created Chaldean Church.⁷

It also explains the comments of the previous Patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church in 2000 in a Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation interview. Mar Raphael I Bid Dawid declared, “There is no Chaldean nationality. I am an Assyrian and my nationality is Assyrian [...] My Church is Chaldean.”

The designation ‘Syriac’ (sometimes ‘Syrian’ but not in terms of the modern Syrian nation-state) is the other denominational division requiring redress. It was the explorer/historian Horatio Southgate whose writings provide the clearest insight of the origins and identity of this community. He wrote, “*At the*

*Armenian village of Arapout, where I stopped for breakfast, I began to make inquiries for the Syrians. The people informed me that there were about one hundred families of them in the town of Kharpout, and a village inhabited by them on the plain. I observed that the Armenians did not know them under the name which I used, Syriani; but called them Assouri, which struck me more at the moment from its resemblance to our English name Assyrians, from whom they claim their origin, being sons, as they say, of Assour, (Asshur,) who ‘out of the land of Shinar went forth, and builded Nineveh, and the city of Rehoboth, and Calah, and Resin between Nineveh and Calah: the same is a great city’.”*⁸

This also explains the letter of Mar [Archbishop] Athanasius Yeshue Samuel of the Syriac denomination, on August 12, 1952, regarding his appointment to serve the United States and Canada, where he wrote, “*I have recently been appointed permanently as Patriarchal representative [...] and shall endeavour to [...] see that our Assyrian people in this country understand their obligations towards the support of our Patriarchate and theological seminary. [...] To do all this, I shall need the support of every Assyrian who has the love of his Church and nation in his heart.*”⁹ Clearly, as late as 1952, the Patriarch, and his appointees as far away as the United States knew themselves ethnically/nationally as Assyrians; indeed, the letterhead reads, “*Assyrian Orthodox Archdiocese of the United States of America and Canada*”.

Reinstating a Standing Solution

Clearly denominational divisions exist within this community. Furthermore, it is

undeniable that those who choose to identify themselves solely as Chaldeans or Syriacs and build a separate identity based on a more modern denominational foundation have the right to do so.

However, given the context, and point of transition in which Iraq finds itself, and the overwhelming electoral success within the community of the ADM, the policy solution of a unifying political name – ChaldoAssyrians – is the correct thing to adopt democratically and with respect to the Assyrians’ human right to not be subjected to ethnic division and subsequent cultural genocide as a result.

There are no truly ‘unified’ political blocs in Iraq today. Shi’a militias battle each other as viciously as anyone else. Intra-Sunni Arab violence is startling in its severity along the lines of those appearing to cooperate with the transition and those resisting it. Kurdish political parties demonstrate their lack of unity by the visceral and time-consuming effort to divide government posts along Barzani-Talabany factional lines. Additionally, no one can ignore the fact that in the aftermath of the First Gulf War, when Iraq’s Kurds were handed de facto autonomy, their first official act of state was a four year civil war which ultimately compelled United States intervention to terminate open hostilities.

The Assyrians/Chaldeans/Syriacs may bewilder and even frustrate those who would like to see them realize their full political potential, but they are resolving their divisions without violence, something worth nurturing for what it represents for the rest of Iraq.

It is a matter of survival and continuity for the Assyrians to bridge denominational divisions that prevent full national unity and healing. Actions which undermine this process and actively entrench and facilitate further denominational division of the one, ethnic identity of these people is an act of cultural genocide.

The community chose in a robust manner to adopt the policy of a unifying, compound name for purely political purposes in the present Iraqi context. The overwhelming electoral success of the ADM within the ethnically conscious voters serves as a de fact referendum on the policy of a unifying name. The people adopted the policy to protect themselves, realize their political potential and begin a process of national healing (by also respecting the diversity that exists within the one ethnic group).

It is necessary for both the Iraqi and KRG Constitutions to remove the divisive language they contain, separating Chaldeans and Syriacs from Assyrians – identifying them as separate peoples and respect the overwhelming and legitimate political aspirations of the people to be known as ChaldoAssyrian (or Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac) in Iraqi political terms.

The Iraqi and KRG constitutions ‘divide and rule’ this people. The result is: divide and *ethnically cleanse*; divide and *torture*; divide and encourage *large-scale land theft*; divide and *murder*. Division is politically immobilizing them in the face of all the human rights crimes they face on a daily basis in Iraq today – which is resulting ultimately in the ethno-religious cleansing of Iraq’s ChaldoAssyrians.

¹ ISDP is indebted to the research of Sargon Donabed, scholar of Near and Middle Eastern Civilization, of Arcadia Massachusetts whose research and knowledge were essential in the development of this piece. Also, readers interested in a fuller elaboration of these issues, and the link to cultural genocide are encouraged to read the report, “Cultural Rights and Democracy: Assyrians a Case for Government Intervention” in the ‘Reports and Policy Briefs’ section of ISDP’s website.

² Sometimes known as ‘Syrians’ or ‘Syrianis’ (but not to be confused with citizens of Syria).

³ A full elaboration of the types of government spending programs that reinforce divisions and further weaken the community can be found in the report, “Cultural Rights and Democracy: Assyrians a Case for Government Intervention” in the ‘Reports and Policy Briefs’ section of ISDP’s website.

⁴ Assyrian Democratic Movement, “Baghdad Conference Declaration, October 19-20 2003” <http://zowaa.org/news/news/english/pr4eng.pdf> (last accessed July 17, 2007).

⁵ Vatican. Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, “Guidelines for Admission to the Eucharist Between the Chaldean Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East”. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20011025_chiesa-caldea-assira_en.html (last accessed June 25, 2007). Rome, July 20, 2001.

⁶ Archbishop Gabriel Kassab, interview on The World Over Show. August 7, 2007.

⁷ If such an exercise strikes readers as facetious – it is only due to the preposterousness of the assertion that Chaldeans and Assyrians today are distinct ethnic groups – as the Vatican confirms.

⁸ Horatio Southgate, *Narrative of a Visit to the Syrian Church of Mesopotamia*, (New York: 1844), 87.

⁹ Mar Athanasius Yeshue Samuel, letter to the Assyrians of the Archdiocese of the United States of America and Canada, August 12, 1952.