

US INDIFFERENCE TO DECISIONS OF LEGITIMATE POLITICAL LEADERSHIPS

Iraq Sustainable Democracy Project
POLICY BRIEFING

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1. Introduction

Iraq's indigenous Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriacs (hereafter ChaldoAssyrians), like the Shabaks, Yezidis and Turkmens, have very few independent and legitimate elected representatives. These minorities, which managed to elect such representatives, now see their efforts as exercises in futility. The US Government (USG) seems to accept the views of illegitimate and unrepresentative persons as equivalent to those political parties that successfully met Iraq's electoral challenge.

On March 1st, 2003, the President of the United States made the following commitment to Americans: "The United States has no intention of determining the precise form of Iraq's new government. That choice belongs to the Iraqi people. Yet, we will ensure that one brutal dictator is not replaced by another. All Iraqis must have a voice in the new government, and all citizens must have their rights protected." The President's promise is more and more looking to be empty for Iraq's Christian ChaldoAssyrians. By consulting illegitimate ChaldoAssyrian political representatives, many of whom belong to the authoritarian parties persecuting their people, and also consulting religious figures who are easily strong-armed and intimidated into compliance, the USG is in fact reinforcing the replacement of a Ba'ath dictatorship persecuting ChaldoAssyrians with new dictatorships in Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

These new dictators, in Baghdad and Irbil, are emboldened in their efforts at politically undermining ChaldoAssyrians and other minorities in light of the willingness of the USG to disregard the demonstrable importance of independent parties that were electorally successful in relative terms.. By ignoring the special place of those minority parties who can credibly declare their right to speak for their community, the USG is preventing the effective articulation of the political hopes and aspirations of these vulnerable people, and over-looking the policies which can save them from annihilation.

This policy brief arises from two primary sources. The first is a Department of State report produced as a result of a Congressional reporting requirement on the situation of ethnic and religious minorities, and the Nineveh Plain geographically. The second source is from responses to a series of questions asked of General David Patraeus and Ambassador Ryan Crocker. The questions came from Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman, Senator Joseph Biden. This policy brief arises from these two sources that are, by default, the clearest, most formal articulation of US intentions for minorities.

The aim of this policy brief is to draw attention to the sources of US Government policy failings in terms of politically engaging Iraq's ethno-religious minorities, with a view to finding enduring solutions that will keep Iraq ethnically and religiously plural – key to peace-building, nurturing moderation and building a democracy.

2. Who Speaks for Iraq's ChaldoAssyrians

In a recent report outlining development in the Nineveh Plain, the Department of State (DoS) indicates that, "Concerns about misallocation and diversion of resources continue to be heard,

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however, and we will continue to look into them. We will stay in close contact with the leaders of the communities in the area to ensure that they continue to receive appropriate assistance.” The same report goes on to say that DoS meets with, “representatives of Iraq’s ethnic and minority groups and raises their concerns with appropriate Iraqi government officials, including the Minister of Human Rights.”

The overwhelming concern is, ‘who are the leaders engaged with on these issues?’

Presently, these minorities (ChaldoAssyrians, Shabaks, Yezidis, among others) are coping with a challenge created by the KRG which is propping-up illegitimate, unrepresentative political parties within these communities. More alarming is the KRG’s direct spending on churches through its Christian Minister of Finance, Sarkis Aghajan, who has received medals from almost every ChaldoAssyrian church leader. Churches are extraordinarily vulnerable to the intimidation and pressure from dictatorial regimes, and the pressures from the KRG are no different in this respect. Recall that Minister Sarkis Aghajan receives accolades from religious leaders even when they are aware that his party disenfranchised their parishioners and persecutes them.

Most concur that what little development has taken place relative to ChaldoAssyrian needs, and the scope of the IDP crisis especially in the Nineveh Plain, has been skewed to priorities driven by unrepresentative groups and those linked strongly with the KRG, also evidenced by spending by the KRG in the Nineveh Plain in a manner prejudicial to the core interests of the community. The DoS itself confirms this, indicating that, “In Ninawa, the Christian minority faces considerable hardship. Some factions are under-represented politically, *some suffer from uneven resource transfers from the KRG Ministry of Finance*, and some experience human rights abuses.”¹

2.1 The Electoral Basis of Legitimacy

Independent media sources, even DoS human rights and religious freedoms reports acknowledge the disenfranchisement of the Nineveh Plain during the elections.² While many political groups in Iraq were securing massive levels of electoral support through voter fraud and by disenfranchising others, ChaldoAssyrians and other minorities managed to elect independent political representatives despite being victims of such crimes.

Some independent minority political parties, such as the Assyrian General Conference, were unable to withstand the targeting and pressures from the KRG. In their case, the KRG prevented the party from campaigning – a level of aggression beyond voter fraud and disenfranchisement.³

Among ChaldoAssyrians, only the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) managed to meet the electoral challenge set by the United States in the face of these obstacles. Despite meeting that

¹ Readers should keep in mind that the Governorate of Ninawa’s governing council/legislature, is more than 75 percent controlled by the Kurdistan Democratic Party, and that the Governor and Deputy Governor are senior members of the KDP. Emphasis added by ISDP.

² Department of State, International Religious Freedoms Report, Iraq, 2005.

<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51600.htm>.

³ Assyrian General Conference. Press Release, ‘Kurdistan Democratic Party Stops Assyrian General Conference from Promoting Slate 800 in northern Iraq’. <http://www.assyanconference.com/english/1043.html>.

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rigorous electoral challenge, the US appears to maintain a consistent level of contact with persons and entities with no legitimate basis to speak as political representatives for the community. This is reflected in US Government engagement with Christian ChaldoAssyrian political parties that failed to secure any reasonable measure of political support and religious leaders whose involvement in political issues is highly suspect due to their susceptibility to pressure from governing authorities. Worse still, the US Government engages ChaldoAssyrians who are members of political groups, such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party, as legitimate representatives of the community.⁴

This scenario is at once unfathomable and appalling. It would be incomprehensible to anyone with a semblance of reason. However, this is exactly what ChaldoAssyrians have been enduring since at least the 2005 elections.

More alarming is the DoS' indication that, "The position of these groups in Iraq will become more secure as they develop the capability to advocate on their own behalf and participate actively in the political system."

After meeting every democratic standard and challenge set by the United States, and in the face of so much violent opposition from the KRG and Islamist extremists, the ADM secured the highest basis of electoral legitimacy only to find its voice equal to that of every other church leader, and newly formed political party, and ChaldoAssyrian politicians who are expressly members of either the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) or the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

Any ChaldoAssyrian, Shabak, Yezidi, and Turkmen member of the KDP, or other authoritarian parties, must be viewed in the same light as Mikhael Youkhana (also known as Tariq Aziz), Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister under Saddam Hussein. These people are not legitimate representatives of their community, but are instead spokespersons of their dictatorial parties, and are told what to say by their political bosses.

The words of one speaker at a United States Institute of Peace event in August of 2005 already identified this reality. Responding to a question about the situation of minorities in relation to the constitution writing process, he stated, "We met two representatives of minority parties who are members of the constitution drafting committee, and one of the worrying elements, is when we spoke with them, we said, 'This is great news. You're members of a defined minority community but you're here on the constitution drafting committee.' And they said, 'Yes, but we are not here on our own party, we're here as members of a larger party.' [...] And we said, 'Well that's good, obviously they are seeking out your minority as a constituency.' And they said, 'No, we're members of the party and we have to tow the party line, not our minority constituency line'."⁵

⁴ As late as January 2008, the US Government facilitated and arranged meetings between ChaldoAssyrians who are members of the KDP and PUK as legitimate representatives of their ethno-religious community with US elected representatives.

⁵ United States Institute of Peace. "Iraq Constitution-Making: What Happens Now?" August 23, 2005. Public Event. (http://www.usip.org/events/2005/0823_constitution.html).

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Over two years later, the Deputy Prime Minister of the KRG, Mr. Omar Fatah of the PUK party also spoke at the United States Institute of Peace. When asked about his government's policies regarding minority issues and also the disenfranchisement of minority communities by the KRG, he responded by saying, “The problem has also been that [...] Assyrian and Turkmen political parties have not been able to elect effective leaderships for themselves and it is not our job to elect their leaders...”.⁶

Many have questioned the effectiveness of Massoud Barazani and Jalal Talabani’s leadership skills. The choice of these leaders by the party and the people, however, is respected as the expression of their people’s political will. According to the Deputy Prime Minister of the KRG, this right is suspended arbitrarily for minorities and instead depends on the whim of the dominant Kurdish-based political entities.

3. The Impact of US Consultations with Unrepresentative Groups – The Nineveh Plain Administrative Unit Policy and US Misconceptions

Voting with their feet, minorities have resoundingly drawn attention to the Nineveh Plain as the principle geographic area they consider to be home and the area which can ensure their future in Iraq. It is also vital to understand that while ChaldoAssyrians are a significant proportion of the population in the area, it is also home to a great proportion of Shabaks and Yezidis. There are smaller Arab, Turkmen and Kurdish populations too, making it a truly heterogeneous area. It is also the expressly stated political goal of the independent, legitimate representatives of the ChaldoAssyrians, Shabaks, and Yezidis in the area to establish a federal unit in the Nineveh Plain as per Article 125 of the Constitution of Iraq.⁷

US Government willingness to consult an array of religious leaders and unrepresentative, illegitimate political entities clearly explains part of the DoS’ response on the matter of Art. 125 of Iraq’s Constitution and the formation of the Nineveh Plain Administrative Unit. The DoS response indicates that “Within the Christian community itself, there are significant divisions on a host of sensitive political issues, such as those surrounding the Art. 140 referendum on the future of Kirkuk and related concerns for a potential Assyrian homeland.”

Confronted with this statement, minorities must ask why the same approach is not taken with respect to division and dissent within Shi'a Arab and Kurdish peoples. It is clear, however, that while the US may consult an array of groups from these communities, their actions are primarily guided by the most legitimate representatives, which come from the KDP and PUK with respect to Kurds, and the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council and Islamic Dawa Party with respect to Shi'a Arabs. Why a different approach is taken with respect to the Christian ChaldoAssyrians is unknown at this stage, but the impact is clear.

⁶ United States Institute of Peace. “The Role of the Kurds in the New Iraq” November 19, 2007. Public Event. (http://www.usip.org/events/2007/0925_kurds_iraq.html).

⁷ Article 125 indicates that, “This Constitution shall guarantee the administrative, political, cultural, and educational rights of the various nationalities, such as Turkmen, Chaldeans, Assyrians, and all other constituents, and this shall be regulated by law.” This constitutional provision is defined specially for minorities, but within the definition of types of administrative/federal units. For a more detailed elaboration of this issue, readers may consult the following briefing on the Article 125/Nineveh Plain policy: http://www.iraqdemocracyproject.org/policy_brief3.html.

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This response by DoS reflects the effectiveness of the KRG in undermining the primary policy capable of ensuring a sustainable future for ChaldoAssyrians, Shabaks, Yezidis and Turkmens in Iraq. Establishing unique ‘administrative units’ as a right tied directly to the protection of minorities is a critical policy. The ADM was the first to propose and consistently advocate the formation of the Nineveh Plain Administrative Unit, first articulating it in October 2003 with widespread support, reaffirmed by its electoral success in the community.⁸

To understand the fundamental opposition of the KRG to the Nineveh Plain Administrative Unit policy only requires a glance at the KRG’s constitution which lists the area of the Nineveh Plain as an area to be absorbed into an expanded KRG. KRG territorial expansionism is the key driver of KRG policy vis-à-vis ChaldoAssyrians and other minorities such as Shabaks, Yezidis and Turkmens, among others. Coercion of religious leaders and an array of political parties with no electoral legitimacy is part of the agenda by the KRG to create confusion and dissent within the Christian ChaldoAssyrian community about the Nineveh Plain Administrative Unit policy.

Most importantly, this is not a program for an ‘Assyrian homeland’. Every element of the policy explicitly indicates that this is a constitutional provision and the plan would lead to the formation of Iraq’s only truly ethnically and religiously heterogeneous federal unit, consisting of Iraq’s most vulnerable minorities, and capable of ensuring a level of moderation and genuine desire for stability in all of Iraq. Of course, if the proposals of KRG proxies and ChaldoAssyrian members of the KDP regarding the Nineveh Plain are accepted, then the focus on feasible and productive proposals will shift to the infeasible and counter-productive, undermining the entire policy, and serve the interests of the KRG (and specifically the KDP).

4. Recognizing and Respecting the Electoral Choices of Minorities

At this point in time, the US Government is engaging in patterns that undermine the legitimate political representatives of the community by not properly recognizing and respecting those few political groups in the Shabak, Yezidis, and Turkmen peoples, which managed to independently attain seats in their respective legislatures nationally and at the governorate level.

It is of course convenient to state that the presence of ChaldoAssyrians, Turkmens, Shabaks, Yezidis and other minorities partnered on the same lists as the KDP are an indicator of pluralism and tolerance, and the growth of non-sectarian, non-ethnic politics. However, the extensively documented ethnically-motivated, human rights violations by groups such as the KDP against ChaldoAssyrians and other vulnerable minorities reflects such an idea as a pleasant fiction. When US officials meet with ChaldoAssyrians, Shabaks, and Yezidis that are members of the KDP, it should be with a view to holding them accountable for the actions of their party in oppressing vulnerable minorities, not to view them as representatives of their people.

In a clearly less than perfect system, these independent parties are at this point in time the best and most legitimate representatives of the community. In order to build an Iraq where all are

⁸ Assyrian Democratic Movement, Baghdad Conference Declaration, October 2003.

<http://zowaa.org/news/news/english/pr4eng.pdf> (last accessed September 10, 2007) and see also, Eissa, Aram and Darya Ibrahim. “Christian Call for Political Autonomy.” Kurdish Aspect News. January 21, 2007.

<http://www.kurdishaspect.com/doc0121AE.html> (last accessed September 11, 2007).

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empowered and given a chance to survive, these few independently elected representatives possess the electoral legitimacy to most authoritatively speak for the communities until such time as the system is over-hauled. This will ensure the US Government is able to establish the true political aspirations and necessary solutions for Iraq's most vulnerable minorities.