

Assyria or Kurdistan?

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It is a medical fact that if we did not use a certain part of our body over a long period of time, chances are that we might lose the use of that part. History continue to remind us that if we fail to mention aspects of our history for a considerable period, people will tend to forget them, even if those aspects were a historical reality in a certain period. On the other side of the coin, if we repeated something afresh over a reasonably long period, chances are that people will believe in it, even if it was a myth. This is the story of Assyria and the so-called Kurdistan.

Some people learn from their mistakes, others amazingly continue to repeat them! The Assyrians, as small-oppressed ethnic and religious minority in an Arab, Turkish, and Kurdish Moslem world, have only one chance to survive, through supporting each other. This, sadly, they did not practice. One expects that after centuries of genocide and massacres against the Assyrians, after many political setbacks, they would have learned to understand the advantages they would have gained if they had bonded in their national quest. Amazingly, when it comes to national affairs, the Assyrians have continued to allow few rascals to dictate how to carry their daily business and have allowed few midgets, obligated to this Kurdish and that Arab group, to keep them moving in empty circles for almost a century. These very few midgets and rascals have betrayed Prof. Ashur Yusuf, Naoum Faiq, Farid Nuzha, Dr. Fraydon Atouraya, Dr. David Perley and the other fathers of the Assyrian national movement. These few have created their own regional mini-kingdoms throughout the world and proclaimed themselves local lords and kings over a group of loyalist puppet monkeys around them. Whereas the majority of Assyrians have opted to remain uninterested in the national affairs, these "lords" and "kings" have seized the opportunity and have begun to run the Assyrian national affairs recklessly without any system of accountability.

One can easily go back to the early writings of the fathers of Assyrian nationalism and realize that much of what they have preached during the first half of the 20th century is still being reinvented on paper without any serious progress on the ground. Some individuals have argued that Assyrians would not find progress until they create a strong underground execution-type group whose job would be solely to eliminate traitors and ensure that those "kings" and "lords" are moving along an appropriately designed path.

Kurdistan: a Myth or Reality

The heart of Kurdish modern settlement in Iraq region has been parts of Sulaimaniya on the Iraq-Iran borders. Until some 70 years ago, parts of the present-day Sulaimaniya were considered Persian territories while others were considered Iraqis. The border disputes between the two countries were finally compromised with the directions of Great Britain, most of the Kurds of the region of Sulaimaniya became part of Iraq, and thus their numbers in Iraq increased. Added to that is the failure of the 1946 Kurdish Mahabad Republic in western Iran that lasted less than one year. As the Iranian army crushed the Kurdish revolution, many Kurds crossed the borders to Iraq.

History tells us that the oldest cultural settlements in the area of Sulaimaniya go back to Paleolithic times. We find that the Assyrians called this province and Shahrzour Plain by the name of "Samwa." In Derbandkawa, Kara Dagh Mountains, the Akkadian king Naram Sin (2291 - 2255 B.C.) immortalized his victory over the enemy in a famous stela of great artistry. [1] Other northern regions of Iraq were strongly Assyrian Christian in nature deep into the Islamic conquest. Hitti writes that the population of northern al-Iraq in the early tenth century was still, in the opinion of ibn-al-Faqih [Buldan, p. 315, I. 9] "*Muslim in name but Christian in character.*" [2]

The presence of Kurds have been documented throughout the centuries in proximity to northern Mesopotamia (Assyria). The Near East, as a complex region, was never an enclosed and isolated domain to one absolute ethnic group, with perhaps certain localities in the Hakkari Mountains, southeastern Turkey. Thus, the presence of small groups of various tribal Kurds from Iran to Armenia is only reasonable to

accept, the same goes to Assyria. The presence of Kurds is attested in the 12th century for example but let us investigate the circumstances. Between (1185-1186), the Kurds and Turkomans were involved in two main battles: The first, around the regions of Nisibin and Khabor. The second was in the region of Mosul (and not necessarily the city of Mosul itself). The Kurds in Mosul province escaped to the mountains of Zagros and Hakkari (between Persia and Turkey), close to the frontiers of Cilicia, seeking protection on the borders of the Armenians. Bat Ye'or writes on page 345 that the Turkomans attacked the Kurds there and killed them all by the sword and the race of the Kurds disappeared from all of Syria and Mesopotamia. [3] However, the Kurds later began to move back again to northern Mesopotamia (Assyria).

Ibn Jubayr (1144-1217) was born in Andalusia, the name given to present Spain and Portugal during the Arab Islamic rule of the Iberian Peninsula. He was a scholar in Islamic studies and of literature. However, what he is most famous for is the three long journeys he took in the Moslem world at the time. Later, he described his travel experiences in a book titled "The Journey of Ibn Jubayr." About the city of Nisibin in Assyria, Ibn Jubayr writes on page 215 that they visited the city for one day and upon leaving the city, they were cautious because of continuous attacks by Kurds who he described as the disease of the region from Mosul to Nisibin and to Dunaysir. The Kurds, writes Ibn Jubayr, brought decay and spoiledness to the region and they lived in the protected mountainous region nearby the cities mentioned above. Even the successive sultans, adds Ibn Jubayr, were unable to suppress and tame the Kurds who might have sometimes and during their raids reached the gates of Nisibin. [4] Here, Ibn Jubayr attests that the Kurds lived in the mountainous regions beyond the cities of Mosul and Nisibin. He states that these Kurds in their raids might have sometimes reached the gates of Nisibin. The last sentence here proves clearly that the Kurds were not dwellers of the cities in question but rather the mountains near by and that in their raids they might have and sometimes, and I stress 'might have and sometimes,' reached Nisibin.

Despite the Turkomans actions, the Kurds continued to increase in numbers and they always needed new lands to graze. They attacked the peaceful Christian Assyrians of northern Mesopotamia, continued to seize new lands, and advanced slowly but surely into Mosul region. Around the 1790s, Olivier gave the following estimates for the population of Mosul: (7000-8000) Christians, (1000) Jews, (25,000) Arabs, (15,000-16,000) Kurds, and about as many Turks, or say (70,000) in all [5]. Meaning, the Kurds were around 20% of the Mosul population around A.D. 1800. In the 1920s, and according to the British civil administrator and later by mandated Iraq, the population of non-Moslem minorities in Iraq was around (400,000) while the Kurds were estimated at (800,000) from a total of (3,000,000) Iraqis [6] On both accounts, regional and national, the Kurds did not make a majority. In fact, this has been the case throughout the history of northern Iraq, the heartland of Assyria.

Regardless to the fact that the Kurds origination is ambiguous in history, one fact remains unequivocal, and that is, they are not the indigenous people of northern Iraq (Assyria). Their presence in Persia (Iran) is described for example by Meisami. The author writes: "As for the Kurds of Fars, Ibn al-Balkhi notes that whereas in ancient times the indigenous Kurds were the glory of the Persian armies, with the coming of Islam they were all killed in battle or disappeared, except for a sole survivor who converted and whose descendants still live. The present Kurds of Fars were settled there by 'Adud al-Dawla, who brought them from the region of Isfahan." [7]

A. Hakan Özüglü states that there does not exist a fixed Kurdistan and a Kurdish identity. Although a "core region," which could be "imagined," defined as Kurdistan, exists and in relation to which the Kurdish identity is formed, the boundaries of perceived Kurdistan are always in flux. Therefore, the perceived identity of the Kurd constantly changes, corresponding the demands of time and space. [8] Scholars have been trying to find the link of the modern Kurds in history. One of the most cited works is an article by a British scholar G. R. Driver. The scholar finds early mention of the word Kurd in Sumerian clay tablet from 3rd millennium B.C., on which a land of Kar-da or Qar-da was inscribed. This land was the region of the south of Lake Van (in eastern Turkey) inhabited by the people of "Su" who were connected with the Qur-ti-e, a group of mountain dwellers. The evidence though is too inconclusive to rely on. [9] A] Vladimir Minorsky, the author of the entry Kurds in the "Encyclopedia of Islam" suggests that the origin of Kurds is from the Medes. However, he states that the origin of the Kurds is buried in ancient times. Thus, one can classify Minorsky as a member of the essentialist school.

Most reliable references to Kurds come with the invasion of Arabs of the 8th century. Hence, it is not a surprise to find that the modern word Kurd is of Arabic origin. Arab sources give systematic information concerning the distribution of the Kurdish tribes. The administrative term Kurdistan was used first by the Seljuk. In the 12th century, Sultan Sancar establishes the administrative region of Kurdistan in the eastern parts of the Zagros Mountains near Hamadan. The suffix –istan "the land of" is of Persian origin, hence, the earliest use of the name Kurdistan was its use by non-Kurds. Interestingly, the Arabs did not refer to Kurds as the inhabitants of Kurdistan, rather the inhabitants of Jabal (mountain), Zozan, Azarbaycan (Azerbaijan), and Armenia. The Arabs called collectively the people of unfamiliar Persian and Turkish languages as Kurds.

The earliest document that shows the perception of Kurdistan comes only in 1597-1598 from a book "Serefname" written by Serefhan Bitlisi, the ruler of Bitlis Emirate, located in present-time city of Bitlis. Serefhan in essence defines Kurdistan as the entire western Iran, including a line from Basra to Azerbaijan, little and great Armenia, southeastern Turkey, and to Malatya, most of Iraq, including Mosul and all the way to Diyarbakir. While this is most ludicrous since it seems that Bitlisi is considering the so-called Kurdistan every single region with Kurds in it, regardless to their population. It is silly to claim that most of Iraq, little and great Armenia or the Tur 'Abdin Christian region in northern Mesopotamia were in the past part of the so-called Kurdistan.

However, Ahmade Hani in his epic Mem-u Zin in the 17th century illustrates that the Kurdish conscious existed indeed. The Treaty of Kasr-i Shirin of 1639 between the Ottoman Turks and Safavid Persians gave certain Kurds relative autonomy. In the 18th century, the Safavid dynasty fell and the Ottoman government became centralized, this led to the rise of the Kurdish confederacies, like that of Botan dynasty, which includes Badir khan as one of her leaders.

In British source, there existed two Kurdistans: Turkish and Persian. A report by the British Political Department of the India Office describes Kurdistan as follows: "Kurdistan, (i.e. the Kurdish portion of Asiatic Turkey: there is also a Persian Kurdistan), as defined in the Foreign Office Memoranda—covers parts of the vilayets of Bitlis, Van and Mosul, but does not include the town of Mosul." (I. 5546/18) B. 303, December 14th, 1918, 'Kurdistan,' in Great Britain, British Policy in Asia: India Office Memoranda, Vol. 1, Mid-East 1856-1947, part 3 (London: Mansell, 1980). This is understandable since the Mosul Vilayet (Province) during Ottoman Turkish Empire in late 1800s was vast and was not even close to the present Mosul province of Iraq. On the other hand, the Kurdistan that Kurds propagate in many of the Turkish southeastern regions, was not known as so until World War I, some argue. In his remarkable work "Turkey in Europe," Sir Charles Eliot writes: "The name Armenia clashes to a certain extent with another local designation-Kurdistan- which is commonly applied to the vilayets of Erzerum, Van, Bitlis, and Diarbekir, and to an even more extended tract. It means simply the country inhabited by Kurds, just as Armenia means that inhabited by Armenians." [9 B]

Assyria and Kurdistan

Mosul (Assyria) and Kurdistan were never the same regions. In Issawi's book, we read that Mosul was one of the great markets of the Orient. Most of the fabrics, drugs and Indian wares that come to Basra and Baghdad pass through it, going on to Constantinople or spreading out in the interior of Asia Minor. The same holds for the coffee of Mocha and Persian goods. Mosul also served as an entrepôt for gallnuts, gum tragacanth and the wax of Kurdistan, as also for cotton from neighboring regions. [10] The Jewish Encyclopedia states under the sub-title: Babylonian and Mandæan Dialects, quote: "*In the region of ancient Assyria, Kurdistan, and Urumia dialects of Aramaic are still spoken by many Christians and by some Jews.*" Unquote. [11] Furthermore, under the sub-title Aramaic dialects page 189 from the Jewish Encyclopedia, we read, quote: "*...modern dialects spoken at Tur 'Abdin and in Kurdistan, Assyria, and Urumia.*" Unquote. [12]

Hormuzd Rassam, the well-known archaeologist, wrote a letter from Twickenham in January 1875 to Dr. John Newman, who was about to publish his book "The Thrones and Palaces of Babylon and Nineveh from Sea to Sea: A Thousand Miles on Horseback." Rassam's letter was included in Newman's book. In his letter, Rassam states on page 367, quote: "My Dear Dr. Newman,—Agreeably to your request, I have the

honor to communicate some information as to the Christian communities now existing in and around Mosul, and those scattered through Mesopotamia, Assyria, and Kurdistan." Unquote. [13] All the above historical references distinguish clearly between Mosul (Assyria) and Kurdistan as two different regions.

The Kurds have for around a century been referring to northern Iraq (Assyria) as Kurdistan. I guess they have repeated it for so long that even Iraqis have unconsciously begun to believe that what was one day Assyria, and some 150 years ago the Mosul Wilayet, is today Kurdistan.

Learning From the Past

The Kurds have learned from their past. From a wild people split into some 200 tribes, speaking different dialects of Persian, and inhabit the mountainous regions of southern Armenia and Persia, and who live in rude villages, and migrate with their flocks, and dwelling in tents [14], the Kurds have turned to people of a parliament and international recognition and support. From a group with little written literature, and a language that have no alphabet of its own, which was divided into so many widely different dialects from one another [15], the Kurds have flooded library shelves with publications. From tribes who have been always in serious conflict with each other, they have learned how to work together for the sake of that dream of the so-called "Kurdistan."

By the way, who said that the work of scholars and historians is objective? Scholars in general are paid to propagate a political and social agenda. In handling the Iraqi minorities, scholars have revealed not objectivity, but rather its opposite, i.e. the use of ideology to mask self-interest of one group over the other. The Kurds have great teachers for the last few decades, the Israelis. The Kurdish intelligence and high profile individuals have benefited tremendously from the training they received in Israel in the last 40 years or so. According to a former director-general of the Israeli foreign ministry, Israel's help and cooperation with Kurds was part of a strategy that sought alliances with other non-Arab nations in the region. Pro-Kurdish feelings were also reinforced by the assistance the Kurds provided in the 1950's when Iraqi Jews were fleeing to Israel. In 1980, Menachem Begin, the prime minister at the time, officially acknowledged Israel's clandestine relations with the Kurds. He confirmed that Israel had sent to the Kurds not only humanitarian aid but also military advisers and weapons. Even today, the state-owned Israeli communications company Bezek transmits broadcasts on behalf of the Kurdish Democratic Party in northern Iraq every evening. [16] Eliezer Tzafir, a former senior figure in Israel's Mossad intelligence service, said Israel kept military advisers at the headquarters of Iraqi Kurdish rebel chief Mula Mustafa Barazani from 1965 to 1975, training the insurgents and supplying them with light arms, artillery and anti-aircraft guns. He said the United States also took part in the campaign. In return, Israel received "a window onto an enemy Arab country," with access to intelligence the rebels gathered on Baghdad. [17]

One can find much similarity between the Kurds and Israelis in methods of controlling and seizing land; however, the Palestinians have been lately much resistant than in the early 1900s when they were simply selling if the price was right, contrary to Assyrians, who never saw any compensation for their lost lands and homes. The Kurds have succeeded to anchor the title "Iraqi Kurdistan" on a region that history never knew as such. The Kurds have succeeded to turn Mosul (Assyria) into part of the so-called Iraqi Kurdistan when they were not even the indigenous people of that region and when they still do not make a majority there. The Kurds said it and said it until everybody believed in it!

How did the Kurds increase so rapidly in the region of Dohuk for example, a region that was suppose to be assigned to Assyrians per the recommendations of the Special Commission of the League of Nations when the Iraqi-Turkish frontiers were being discussed in the 1920s? They controlled one village at a time. Throughout the 1900s, but mainly in the last few decades, small numbered armed Kurdish families have quietly yet methodically settled around the outskirts of Assyrian villages. Then they began to harass and terrorize the peaceful Assyrians of those villages and force them to vacate their lands and they moved in. [18] Yusuf Malek, who was an official in the Iraqi government, writes that the populations of the Mosul Liwa (province) in 1932 were as follows: Arabs (80,000); Kurds (80,000); Others (182,000) (others included Yezidis, Jews, Mandeans, al-Shabak, Armenians, and Assyrians). The Assyrians alone were tallied at (111,700) while the Yezidis were estimated at (40,000). [19] Not even in 1932, one year prior to the massacre of the Assyrians in 1933, the Kurds made a majority in Mosul.

The Acts of Deception

Deception is an art and the Kurds have perfected it. They presented themselves to the world through that democratic and civilized image (by allocating five seats for Assyrians in their Kurdish regional parliament in northern Iraq in 1992), however, they never stopped oppressing, killing, assassinating, kidnapping, raping, and terrorizing the Assyrians in north of Iraq. The indigenous Assyrians have no chances for survival in a religiously Moslem or ethnically Arab or Kurdish ruled region. History has proved this reality. The Turks did not keep their promises to protect the Assyrians as they promised the League of Nations through the Treaty of Laussane in 1923. The Iraqi governments did not protect the Assyrians as Iraq promised in 1932 before it was admitted to the League of Nations. The Kurds, as stateless people, have committed and are still committing today what the Turks and Arabs have committed earlier against the Assyrian Christians.

The way I see it, the Assyrian Christians of the Middle East must have some means to rule and administer themselves in order to ensure their survival. The introduction of an Assyrian region in northern Iraq (historic Assyria) within a federal Iraq system is vital to ensure that the indigenous Assyrians are safeguarded.

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