

Politics vs. Academics: Vision for Better Future or Jeopardizing Glorious History

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When it comes to Assyrians, the negative image I have about politics has overshadowed the very few glorious moments this word has ever acquired within the community. National and international political consequences have devastated the Assyrians throughout the 20th century. Therefore, it was natural that I cared less for it through much of my life. However, the name issue and the introduction of the various compromises regarding the Assyrian name has brought me ever close to the political aspects of the Assyrian name affairs. The further I thought about the name issue; discussed it; listened to other opinions; and considered the real situation on the ground, the clearer it became that resolving it could not be decided on emotional outburst and rhetoric especially at the present time because of well known rooted problems. I have looked at the matter from both the academic/historic and the political sides carefully. I can say confidently that I do understand the name dilemma and its ramifications on the future of Iraqi Assyrians and perhaps on the Assyrians around the world. Having stated that, I still found myself torn between the deeply rooted historic and academic facts available to us from one side and the political aspects of the name from the other.

When the latest name compromise issue became public, I felt obligated to write these thoughts and facts in order to give the readers a better opportunity to weight the issue objectively.

I have been a strong supporter of the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) in the last eight or nine years, in one shape or another. My conviction to support the ADM came very natural; it became stronger with time. The majority of Assyrians in north of Iraq who witnessed the ADM experience throughout the last 11 years support it. Of course the Assyrians in Baghdad, Kirkuk, Mosul, Basra and other regions, who were under the previous dictatorship did not have the same privilege and could not live the same experience. Hence the latter group is not in a good position to pass judgment on the ADM. One cannot win the support of people if he/she did not live up to their expectations. Hundreds of thousands of Assyrians in north of Iraq cannot be wrong, let us face it. One can fool ten, twenty, hundred people, not thousands. Hence, I have supported almost all the ADM decisions in Iraq, or should I say the known decisions we are familiar with here in the west, because the ADM is on the ground there and they know better what is best for Assyrians in Iraq. However, this should not mean that I must agree with every single decision the ADM makes. For example, the use of a compound name "AssyroChaldean" or "ChaldoAssyrian" introduced by the ADM recently, as part of the political compromise, misses several important considerations but it can suite current Assyrian political dilemmas in Iraq or certain other regions.

From the political point of view, and throughout the history of modern Iraq, established in 1921, Iraqi governments, and lately Kurdish political factions since 1991, have played and used the name issue against the Assyrians. Iraqi governments understood that they could not ignore the legal and legitimate rights of the indigenous Assyrians. Therefore, the Iraqi governments, and Kurdish leaders lately, have used the "Christian denominational" or "tribal" cards to undermine any Assyrian national or ethnic aspirations. On one side of the coin, they used few loyal "Christians" in certain governmental positions in order to prove to the world that they were tolerant of the "Christian" community. This policy has been used since the early 1920s. On the other side, they oppressed, persecuted, harassed, and terrorized the ethnic Assyrians, which explains why the majority of the Assyrian people are living in the Diaspora today.

Before I continue, allow me to throw in these questions. Are we politically matured to make a political decision? Do we have the vision to distinguish between what is beneficial for us and what is not? And most importantly, have the Diaspora Assyrians been politically active to dictate what is appropriate for the Assyrians in Iraq?

The United Nations through its Economic and Social Council organ has issued many resolutions calling for the protection, recognition, and promotion of rights of the indigenous people in its various plenary meetings. Such resolutions include:

- *Resolution 1982/34 in the 28th plenary meeting of 7 May 1982;
- *Resolution 1986/34 in the 19th plenary meeting of 23 May 1986;
- *Resolution 1988/35 in the 16th plenary meeting of 27 May 1988;
- *Resolution 1996/24 in the 46th plenary meeting of 23 July 1996, and others.

Are the Assyrians the indigenous people of Iraq? History says yes. If so, what have the Diaspora Assyrians, who have all the freedom in the world, done politically to acquire that status, which applies to them legitimately? What have the Diaspora Assyrians done to assure their Assyrian brethren's recognition and protection as the indigenous people of Iraq?

In addition, the United Nations has issued many resolutions that protect the minorities. Such resolutions include for example:

- *Resolution 1986/33 of 19th plenary meeting on 23 May 1986,
- *Resolution 1990/39 of 14th plenary meeting on 25 May 1990,
- *Resolution 1991/30 of 13th plenary meeting on 31 May 1991,
- *Resolution 1992/4 of 32nd plenary meeting on 20 July 1992,
- *Resolution 1995/31 of 52nd plenary meeting on 25 July 1995, and others.

Furthermore, numerous United Nations resolutions in regards to:

- *Social Justice: Resolution 1988/46 of 16th plenary meeting on 27 May 1988 and Resolution 1990/25 of 13th plenary meeting on 24 May 1990.
- *Human Rights: Resolution 1987/14 of 14th plenary meeting on 26 May 1987; Resolution 1988/5 of 12th plenary meeting on 24 May 1988; Resolution 1989/81 of 16th plenary meeting on 24 May 1989; Resolution 1990/48 of 14th plenary meeting on 25 May 1990; and Resolution 1992/11 of 32nd plenary meeting on 20 July 1992.
- *Compensation for Victims of Gross Violations of Human Rights: Resolution 1990/36 of 14th plenary meeting on 25 May 1990

All these resolutions entitle the Assyrians protection, freedom, social justice, national, civic, religious, linguistic, cultural, and political rights. What have the Diaspora Assyrians done to assure that these resolutions are transformed into the new Iraqi constitution? Did we prepare ourselves to face a day like today?

If we analyze the path of the Diaspora national movement, we could conclude that it has failed the Assyrian people. World affairs today are dictated by successful collaboration and effective communication with certain powers around the world. Since the Assyrians' mass migration that started some 30 years ago, how much time have the Diaspora Assyrians invested with the democratic and powerful governments around the globe? It is safe to say that the collaboration of the Assyrians with the western governments and international institutions in connection to their national affairs has been trivial. In general, the Assyrian political organizations and their respected leaders have been involved in petty matters. They have been indulging in senseless and meaningless arguments for so long. In their best moments, when Assyrian leaders got together to show a united stand, their meetings always proved in time a serious deficiency in real organization. In other words, their declarations did not spell defined strategy, did not address the ways and means to accomplish any points agreed upon, and most importantly there never were follow-ups to ensure compliance and progress. Consequently, declarations remained ink on paper and worthless. Furthermore, and in most cases, those meetings lacked one or another segment of Assyrian society, and hence a collective thought was always missing. Contrary to this, it seems to me that the Assyrians of Iraq, through the ADM, have positioned themselves politically to face the new challenges

despite unfavorable conditions. We wished for a meaningful and productive understanding between the Assyrians in Iraq and those in the Diaspora to face today's challenges together. This was very vital because the Assyrians in Iraq have been under great pressure from the various groups, whether Arabs or Kurds, and the political and moral support of those in the Diaspora was essential. But such support and understanding did not materialize, with the exception of non-significant monetary assistance.

Consecutive Iraqi governments and certain Kurdish political organizations and leaders realized that two major things needed to be done in order to undermine and marginalize Assyrians' rights. These rights were in conflict with the pan-Arab and pan-Kurdish movements. First, they kept the Assyrians busy in internal conflicts through the ever-popular rule of divide and conquer by using one religious denomination or organization against the other. Second, certain pan-Arab revisionists have in a malice way embarked on rewriting the history of Iraq and succeeded to obscure, marginalize, and distort the Assyrian presence in the region for some time and that we must overturn. Meanwhile, revisionist Kurds, since 1991, have begun an intensive campaign to rewrite their own history and mainly on the expense of the Assyrians'. How effective they have been on the international scene? That is not hard to figure out if we examine the outrageous publications about the Kurdish claims and their presence in Iraq that have been published in the West. The Kurds have effectively used the large sums of grants they have received in the last 12 years whether from European countries or the United States or through the millions of dollars they raised by controlling transit taxes through Iraqi borders that has been under their control since the establishment of the No-Fly Zone in 1992. One cannot ignore the numerous conferences organized by universities throughout the western world geared towards the Kurdish cause and the overwhelming publications in the same regard through such monies. One can easily assert that the Kurdish case has gained its worldwide publicity through the last 10 years or so. The power of money has much to do with it for sure. Can the Diaspora Assyrians afford to remain idle in allowing this to continue and what measures could be taken to limit the damage done already? Diaspora Assyrians must tackle such issues, which must be the core of their political work away from the continuous unfruitful bickering against one another.

From the historic point of view, Assyrians' history in the present region of Iraq is a glorious one. Historical, academic, archaeological, and church records speak loudly of such history, whether Assyrians were referred to as Ashuraye, Athuraye, Suraye, Suryaye, Nestornaye (Nestorians), or Yaqubaye (Jacobites), and most recently as Kaldaye (Chaldeans). Self-claimed historians today no longer can deny the rich Assyrian history in a reasonable argument. With the introduction of many previously unknown accounts and documents, the Assyrian history is finding its place among world academics today. Still, we cannot afford to rely solely on certain good scholars to defend our history; we too must work hard to reach the international community and familiarize it with our cause.

Individuals or people as a whole in various aspects of life have succeeded to survive because they learned how to make bold decisions in those moments when they faced critical times and periods of distress. The Assyrians are facing such moments in Iraq today. Realizing this, the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) has taken a courageous stand in order to stop the bleeding and the efforts of certain separatist groups who continue to work to undermine and marginalize Assyrians' rights. In its various steps, the ADM has positioned itself to ensure that Assyrians have their rightful place in future free Iraq. Many claim that by adopting the compound title "AssyroChaldean" or "ChaldoAssyrian," the ADM is emancipating a vision, a political vision. Is the ADM jeopardizing and marginalizing Assyrian history? I will leave that to the reader to decide after putting these thoughts about certain points for analysis.

I need to point to certain implications regarding these compound terms "AssyroChaldean" and "ChaldoAssyrian." A point worth understanding is whether we are treating the title Assyrian as a noun or an adjective.

The English dictionary defines:

1. A Noun as a word that is the name of a subject of discourse, i.e. person, place, people, etc.
2. An Adjective as a word that typically serves as a modifier of a noun.

When we say "ChaldoAssyrian," Chaldo here modifies the Assyrian. We can at the same token say Nestorian Assyrian, Jacobite Assyrian, Presbyterian Assyrian, Good Assyrian, faithful Assyrian, etc.

Meanwhile, when we say "AssyroChaldean," it is a new ball game all together. ChaldoAssyrian is less controversial because there was a term known as Chaldo or Kasdo (for Chaldean) in history, therefore saying ChaldoAssyrian does not take anything away from the historical word Chaldean. Of course, one must distinguish between the present day Chaldeans, i.e. Catholic Assyrians, and ancient Chaldeans; two words that have no connection historically and one must take into consideration the real meaning of the term Chaldean, defined as astrologer by many historians. Meanwhile, saying AssyroChaldean, "Assyro" here means nothing. I am not aware of anything known as "Assyro" in history. Therefore, by using AssyroChaldean we are doing the Assyrian name great injustice. Still, it worth mentioning that the compound title AssyroChaldean was used by the French authorities, because of the influence of the Vatican monks, mainly French, during World War I and later it was mentioned in the Treaty of Sevres of 1920, contrary to ChaldoAssyrian, which was not in use. With this, we face further complications. One simply cannot satisfy everybody; that is the sad reality.

Still, in both "AssyroChaldean" and "ChaldoAssyrian," the fact remains that we are forgetting the representation of the Suryoyo or Suryan segment of our society. One wonders, what was the U.S. Census 2000 mess then all about. Were those collaborating in the Census 2000 playing a temporary game to gain the support of the members of the Syrian (Suryan) Orthodox and Catholic Churches when they introduced the slashed Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac formula? Well, today, few leaders from both the Chaldean Catholic Church and the Assyrian side, who are propagating the "AssyroChaldean" term, are claiming that the population of the Suryoyo or Suryan is small in Iraq; hence, it is not that important to include them in the present formula? I found this very disturbing and I reject such thought completely. It is unforgiving to exclude the Suryoyo (Jacobite) Assyrians, Nestorian Assyrians, Presbyterian Assyrians, and few others at the expense of Chaldo Assyrians; there is no justification for this at all.

I have tried to address this issue from different points of view, and as the reader can see, none of the introduced compound names seems appropriate. Still, the point is, are we addressing this issue from the historical or political point of view?

Despite the fact that "Politics" and "Academics" might influence each other, they still are considered two different things. Sound policy-making demands vision and flexibility; a stiff young tree is bound to break against strong winds. Although the Assyrian national movement in Iraq is 80 years old, still, the organized movement is only 30 years young. This young Assyrian national movement cannot survive if it neglected and ignored the current reality and conditions on the ground. Fact remains that many Assyrians (known also as Chaldeans and Suryan) are still denominational, tribal, narrow-minded, and immature in their national thoughts and nature. Whereas education will overcome this mentality with time, today's politics, as claimed by the supporters of the new compound name, demand from all of us to accommodate such political compromise if we were to have a meaningful presence in future Iraq.

Do we want to see 1921 all over again? Do we want to propagate and promote separation or do we want to learn from the mistakes of the past? What is my message here? Am I re-evaluating my previous convictions that the congregations of the Church of the East, Ancient Church of the East, Chaldean Catholic Church, Syrian Orthodox Church, and many smaller Syriac-speaking churches, are not ethnically Assyrians? Let me assure the reader, not on my life and neither is the ADM in my opinion.

While Assyrian history is the writings on the wall, golden print that is immortal, politics, in general, are temporary measures meant in essence to assure the well-being of the people. Although part of me wants to support this new political compromise for sake of unity, still, certain reservations continue to haunt me. How would we be represented in the new Iraqi constitution? This is one question. Furthermore, one must

learn from the past. The "Chaldean side" promised unity through the Census 2000 slashed title Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac. However, we are aware what bishops Ibrahim Ibrahim and Sarhad Jammo and those few behind them did later! These same people ignored the presumably unifying Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac category they introduced earlier and submitted several requests to U.S. government officials demanding separate ethnic identification. Today, many of us expect that the term "AssyroChaldean" or "ChaldoAssyrian," to be accepted by many parties involved, however, one can ask for how long and what could the separatists do next? Iraq will be a democratic country. Democracy will ensure freedom for every thought and agenda across the spectrum. Even if the term "ChaldoAssyrian" or "AssyroChaldean" would find agreement within many of our people in Iraq, one cannot avoid the fact that certain groups will establish Assyrian only, Chaldean only, or other exclusive organizations, something that we must consider.

In conclusion, I need to emphasize on what I have stated already. I have been a supporter of the ADM and I still am because I have lived to witness much hope from this movement during the last 11 years. Yes, the ADM has not been perfect in certain aspects, but that is only expected from a young organization that has learned from its experiences and matured in some very unusual circumstances. But the question that I keep asking myself, should I believe in history and the fact that we are nothing but "Assyrians" or should I subscribe to this new "political compromise"?

There seems to be certain truth in the fact that various Assyrian segments are requiring a political compromise. What is my role here as an Assyrian not living in Iraq? What is the best for our people in Iraq? What is most important at this moment is that any compromise must assure the unity of Assyrians in Iraq, with all their denominations, because it would be a disaster if we compromised on our name today and still did not gain the political advantage sought by such compromise, through the constitution. Last thing we want to see is two separate names Assyrians and Chaldeans in the new Iraqi constitution.

I personally would have preferred the more historic "Assyrian" name or yet the inclusive "Assyrians (including Chaldeans and Suryan)" compromise in exchange for a better national future for all the Syriac-speaking people in Iraq. But the question remains, am I in position to speak on behalf of the Assyrians in Iraq? Well, may be not, still, this is my name and changing or altering it makes it my business.