

A Decision for the Centuries Ahead

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The influence of the Assyrian political groups on Assyrians in Iraq, especially since the 1991 Gulf War and the presence of somehow limited and restricted freedom in north of Iraq under the No Fly Zone established by the Coalition Forces, is yet to be studied and determined. Meanwhile, in the West, the Churches continue to have greater influence on Assyrians (also known as Chaldeans and Suryan and the latter are loosely called Syriacs) compared to the effect of political groups or national ideology. The latter has yet to mature under the divided Assyrian leadership that has proven to find comfort in the bosoms of ineffectiveness led by mediocre political groups.

A genuine grassroots national awareness has yet to find its way into Assyrians' mind and soul. Assyrians (also known as Chaldeans and the Suryan) continue to allow the Churches to meddle in their affairs and divide them just as they did centuries back. What would it take the Assyrians to draw that line and force the churches to pull their hands out of national issues? What would it take the Assyrians to force the politicians (who many of them legally have no support whatsoever from the people) to agree on a unified leadership and agenda? Is not the bombing of five churches in Baghdad and Mosul on August 1, 2004, the beheading and killing of Assyrians, and the fleeing of Assyrians from Iraq in thousands an alarming sign for these selfish self-claimed Assyrian leaders?

The largest Assyrians population continues to be in Iraq, the Assyrians' ancestral home. Obviously, the future of Iraq will dictate to greater degree the future of Assyrians, since their presence in the Diaspora is in great danger. Due to previous policies against the Assyrian people, present circumstances and the Assyrians' state of mind, it is safe to conclude that the Churches will continue to play a significant role in directing and determining this future in Iraq. If that is the case, one might ask: How is the Assyrian Church of the East (Church of the East) doing its part to assure a safe treatment and a just representation of Assyrians in the future Iraqi constitution, elections (census) and parliament? Few might say: "But why are we involving the church in such national matters."

The fact of the matter is that the Churches are involved greatly, whether we accept this or not, even though the religious leaders stress the separation of state and church every now and then. One can only read the many declarations, statements, lectures, and letters by our bishops of the various Assyrian denominations to prove this unwarranted involvement in national affairs.

If the Churches continue to be involved in the politics of our nation, then how are they cooperating with the Assyrian political groups in Iraq to secure Assyrians' rights in a free and democratic Iraq? How are the Chaldean Catholic Church or the Syriac Orthodox and Catholic Churches that have always stayed away from our national issues preparing for these changes? Is going their own way the path of wisdom?

Many Assyrians were looking forward to the August 23 – 30, 2004 Synod of the Church of the East that took place in Chicago. They expected the Synod to address the issues most important to Assyrians in these troubled times. It goes beyond saying that Iraq, its future, the conditions of Assyrians, and the relations with other Syriac-speaking Christians, Christians in general, and with non-Christians in Iraq, in this order of importance, are critical issues Assyrians face today. Then how has the Church of the East addressed these issues?

By reading the final statement of the Synod, it was surprising to see a complete avoidance of the topic of inter-relations with the Chaldean Catholic Church and the Syrian (Syriac) Catholic and Orthodox Churches. Why did the Church of the East neglect her sister church, the Chaldean Catholics? Can the "Nestorians" ignore their "Chaldean" and "Jacobite" brothers and sisters in these crucial moments? Is this to the benefit of Christians in Iraq? Why is the leadership of the Chaldean Catholic Church and the Church of the East so careless in their actions or should I say inaction in dealing with this issue.

With the liberation of Iraq, most of the average and law abiding Iraqis, including Assyrians, began finally to experience the gifts of freedom. On October 22-24, 2003 in Baghdad, the two biggest Assyrian political groups in the Middle East, the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) and the Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO), organized a monumental conference to reunite the various Assyrian denominations in order to face the challenges of future Iraq. In its final declaration, the conference made a bold and courageous decision to adopt the unifying title of *ChaldoAssyrian* for all the Syriac-speaking Christians in Iraq and demanded that the ChaldoAssyrians' administrative, cultural, and political rights be guaranteed. After many arguments and heated discussions, the Iraqi Transitional Administration Law (TAL) issued on March 8, 2004, recognized the rights of the ChaldoAssyrians. That was a good start. We should have taken advantage of and built on it; however, we did not.

Few months before the October Conference, news leaked about the intention to push for a compromise with the adoption of the title "ChaldoAssyrian." In mid 2003, the patriarch of the Church of the East, Mar Dinkha IV, called for two meetings in Chicago. The first was a gathering of the church leaders, representatives of the political groups and notable Assyrians from around the United States. The second meeting was with groups and individuals from Chicago alone. In that second meeting, a

few attendees relayed interesting information to me. They explained that the Patriarch asserted and stressed clearly his support for the ChaldoAssyrian name.

In California, AssyriaSat (a 24/7 Assyrian Satellite TV station and property of Bet-Nahrain Inc.), under the leadership of Dr. Sargon Dadesho, President of Assyrian National Congress, continues its opposition to this unifying title. In the beginning, it kept a moderate stand in showing its objection due to the ambiguous position of the Patriarch.

There is an intricate relationship between Mar Dinkha and Sargon Dadesho, who has at his disposal a powerful media outlet through the 24/7 satellite TV. It seems that after the two meetings mentioned above, the Patriarch had changed his mind and withdrew his support for the ChaldoAssyrian unifying title. This could have materialized because of the two-pronged influence from Dadesho in California and the Church of the East Archbishop in Baghdad, Mar Giwargis Sliwa. Mar Giwargis and Mar Addai II, Patriarch of the Ancient Church of the East, had attended the October 2003 Baghdad Conference and later expressed their opposition to the common understanding of the said conference. On March 27, 2004, Mar Giwargis, Mar Addai II, and Mar Syorious Hawa, Bishop of Baghdad and Basra for the Syrian (Syriac) Orthodox Church, issued a letter withdrawing their support of their Churches for the October 2003 Conference. This letter came in response to a letter by 19 Chaldean bishops and a statement by His Beatitude Mar Emmanuel Delly, Chaldean Catholic Church Patriarch, in an interview with Sawt al-Kildan (Chaldean Voice) radio station in Detroit. The interview aired on the eve of the signing of the Iraqi Administration Law for the Transitional Period in Iraq. Mar Delly, in this interview, declared the presence of a Chaldean nation on the land of Chaldo!

On August 12, 2004, Mar Giwargis and Mar Addai II returned to reaffirm their stand on the name issue and the policy of the Assyrian Democratic Movement (Zowaa). They sent a letter to Dr. Fouad Ma'soum, the President of the Preparatory Committee for the Iraqi National Conference, against the ADM's list of suggested representatives to the Interim Iraqi Parliament and recommending their own single candidate. This was clearly a move against the ChaldoAssyrian coalition.

In Iraq, Mas'oud Barazani and the leadership of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) realize earlier that the only legitimate threat to the so-called creation of Kurdistan in northern Iraq are the Assyrians, the true indigenous people of northern Iraq. Today's Kurds with their great numbers in northern Iraq (and I am not addressing here how they increased these numbers on Assyrian lands and since when) have certain rights, which could not be ignored. In world's politics today, the name of the game is beyond any doubt numbers and power. The Kurds realized that any unity for Assyrians (including Chaldeans and Suryan) would be a roadblock in the path of their expansion in north of Iraq. Therefore, the KDP created puppet groups and used

individuals from all churches, including bribing certain bishops in north of Iraq, to assure the disunity and division among the Syriac-speaking churches in Iraq.

In 1992, the KDP exploited Abd al-Ahad Afram and Yousif al-Qas Hanna, members of the Chaldean Catholic Church and the KDP, to establish the United Kurdistan Christian front to oppose the ADM in the 1992 regional elections in north of Iraq. More recently in 2003, following the same policy of divide and rule, the KDP helped create the Chaldean Democratic Party under Abd al-Ahad Afram, an organization that calls for a separate representation of the Chaldeans in the upcoming Iraqi elections and parliament.

The Chaldean Catholic bishops in the United States, namely Mar Sarhad Jammo and Mar Ibrahim Ibrahim, were initially behind the de-Arabization of the Syriac-speaking Catholics in Iraq. They promoted the title of Chaldean as separate from the Assyrian in U.S. Census 2000.

On September 3, 2003, 19 bishops from the Chaldean Catholic Church sent a letter to Ambassador Paul Bremer, Civil Administrator of Iraq at the time, demanding separate representation in Iraq. The bishops somehow did not have a vivid picture of the situation in north of Iraq and did not consider in their calculations the Kurdish power and influence. Today, Mar Sarhad and Mar Ibrahim are greatly concerned about the Kurdish threat to the indigenous Assyrian Christians (including Chaldeans and the Suryan). According to Zinda Magazine reports of the current "Petition Campaign," the two bishops have demonstrated their support for the ChaldoAssyrian title to counter that threat. Yet, interestingly, their current stand is in conflict with that to the other civic and political leaders in Detroit. Earlier, the letter of the 19 bishops had sent shockwaves to the moderate Assyrians and Church of the East. It seems here that Mar Dinkha decisively changed his mind about the unifying ChaldoAssyrian title. With the switching of His Holiness' position, AssyriaSat found the silent support it needed in the new position of the Patriarch and embarked on a vicious attack campaign against the ADM, its leadership, and the unifying ChaldoAssyrian political compromise. The senseless campaign continues to this very day.

The KDP had also used the services of Franso Harriri and appointed him as the governor of Arbil to express their good will to the world. According to another Zinda Magazine report, the Kurds used Romeo Nissan Hakkari and Sargis Aghajan and appointed the latter lately as Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance in the Kurdish Arbil regional government in northern Iraq. All these non-democratic policies by the powerful KDP may have weakened and undermined the Assyrian national unity in Iraq.

The unity of the Assyrian voice in Iraq has a monumental affect on their success in that country. While the two most powerful Kurdish groups of Barazani's KDP and Talabani's PUK have succeeded to put their differences aside and work together, Assyrians (ChaldoAssyrians in Iraq) continue to allow division to weaken their strong national claims in northern Iraq. I continue to ask: who benefits from the Assyrians' division? The answer is simple, the Kurds.

In 2000, Mar Dinkha visited Iraq, traveled to Arbil, and was a guest of Franso Harriri. Meanwhile, the Patriarch did not make any official or visible contacts with the most powerful Assyrian political group in the region, i.e. the ADM. He did not even visit any of the many Syriac-teaching schools in north of Iraq to give them his blessings. Did the KDP have anything to do with this behavior or is it the tribal nature of the Assyrian affairs? Or did the Patriarch avoid the wrath of the Iraqi Ba'ath regime by not visiting the Assyrian groups? If so, why then did he visit with Harriri, a known KDP associate?

The Patriarch is from the tribe of Nochiya as are many other Assyrians politicians in Iraq such as the late Franso Harriri, Sargis Aghajan, Fawzi Harriri, Romeo Hakkari, Kristo Yalda Torkhan (one time director of KDP central TV station), and many others. The KDP needed to lessen the influence of the ADM in North Iraq. It succeeded in demonstrating a detachment between the Patriarch and the most powerful Assyrian political group in Iraq by keeping His Holiness away from his people. The KDP was able to use certain of these individuals, affect the travel agenda of the Patriarch, and sadly keep His Holiness from the brokenhearted Assyrian school children in north Iraq.

The rejection of the term ChaldoAssyrian by the KDP has been on top of the Kurdish anti-Assyrian agenda, because it denotes the union of the Chaldean and Assyrian population in Iraq. The Patriarch's change of heart shortly after the second Chicago meeting came as no surprise. Neither were the Assyrian activists surprised at the Chicago parishes' decision last Sunday on avoiding the entire "Petition Campaign." No Assyrian Church of the East parishes allowed the distribution of the Petition guaranteeing the full rights of the ChaldoAssyrian Christians in Iraq. It seems that the Patriarch remains steadfast in his decision to avoid the use of the term ChaldoAssyrian.

As I have stated earlier, the two bishops of the Chaldean Catholic Church in the United States, Mar Ibrahim Ibrahim and Mar Sarhad Jammo, have lately endorsed a petition by activists in the United States to protect and guarantee the rights of ChaldoAssyrians in Iraq. However, according to latest reports posted on Ankawa.com, the powerful Chaldean Church in Iraq, while capable of doing so, is not using its influence to stop the efforts of the few to include Chaldean as a separate designation in the Iraqi upcoming census. Reports from Detroit indicate that the Chaldeans in the state of Michigan predominantly do not recognize the title ChaldoAssyrian and reject the title Assyrian. So the questions remains: Are the Chaldean Catholic Church

playing on two fronts? Are the bishops in the United States keeping the Assyrians in America in check while those in Iraq are planning their separation? The two bishops should do more. While they fought to de-Arabize the Chaldeans and separate them from the Assyrians at the same time, they need today to return and undo that separation from Assyrians. Assyrians and Chaldeans can then turn together and complete the de-Arabization process together.

If the bishops wish to be involved in the politics of our nation, then they should promote peace and harmony among all our denominations. They must rise above the occasion and actively encourage their members to sign the Petition which guarantees the rights of the united ChaldoAssyrians in Iraq. Otherwise, the double formula prescribed by certain bishops will backfire and the slow but promising cooperation between the Iraqi Chaldean Catholics and the non-Catholic Assyrians will be stamped out by our preference for religious or historic identities over the welfare of our people in our homeland.

My desperate plea is: What would motivate the Assyrian masses (including Chaldeans and the Suryan) to demand a change and unite this divided nation? The churches are within us; they belong to us and not to the bishops. It is time to tell the bishops what we want to be done and stop passively accepting the damage done through what these bishops have done and are still doing. It is also to mobilize a grassroots movement to take the church back and give it to the people.

The Kurdish groups want to change the ethnic balance in the North. As many as 500 Kurds are moving to the North every day, while as many Assyrians are leaving each week for Jordan and Syria. Now that better relations between the "Iraqi Catholics" and the rest of the Assyrian nation is restored, as well as our confidence in the Chaldean Bishops' good faith and ability to hitch it on to the "ChaldoAssyrian" wagon, why then is Michigan clung to the belief that the safety of the Christian in Iraq is less important than the Chaldean relations with the Arabs in the region? Apparently, building a commercial enterprise for a few concerned Chaldean businessmen living in Michigan appears to take precedence over the welfare of the Chaldean faithfuls in Iraq. Additionally, it is obvious that what matters for few Assyrian politicians and clergymen is not the big picture as they still need to learn how to look beyond the lush green grass in front of their comfortable homes in the West.

The politics of the Assyrian nation cannot and will not move forward by assumptions and suspicions. It is time for the "Chaldean" groups in Detroit to play it fairly. A second genocide of Assyrians like that during World War I or another 1933 Simele massacre should not be the motivation for us, especially the Chaldean groups, to act. Let us make a decision now and draw the final line to save the posterity.

