The Future of the Assyrians of Iraq: A Safe Haven vs. Self-Administrative Region

By Fred Aprim
March 23, 2006

The strategy of the Assyrians (ChaldoAssyrians) in Iraq shifted after the churches bombings in Baghdad and Mosul on August 1 and then other bombings that followed in September 10, September 11, October 16, November 8, and December 7, 2004. The churches bombings continued in 2005. A church was bombed on July 16 in Ramadi and another on November 2, 2005 in Kirkuk. Additionally, Christian business owners and students began to be targeted in their working places and in universities. Christian women began to receive threatening notes to wear the hijab (Muslim veil). Persecution against the Assyrian Christians increased considerably by Islamists and by Kurds who began to interfere in Assyrians' internal national and political affairs.

Several efforts to protect the Assyrians were organized worldwide, including:

1. On December 8, 2004 and in a 90-minute debate in the House of Commons, Stephen Pound MP called on the British government to help bring about the setting up of an autonomous administrative region in Iraq for the ChaldoAssyrians. Russell Brown MP and Dr. Robert Spink MP were among several MPs who backed Stephen Pound's call for much more support by the British government for Iraq's besieged Christians.
2. On Monday, January 24, 2005, Lord Carey, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, launched a campaign to save the ancient Assyrian people of Iraq from extinction. Lord Carey joined scholars and members of the Assyrian community in London at the House of Lords to launch a campaign raising awareness of the plight of Assyrians. He said: "In recent months and years churches and monasteries have been attacked and people have been killed. Professor Simo Parpola, an expert on Assyrian culture, told the meeting that the current violence was on a par with the massacres during the First World War when 250,000 were killed.
3. Chris Bowen, the Federal MP for Prospect in Australia in collaboration with the Australian branch of the Assyrian Universal Alliance (AUA) tabled a petition in March 2005 in Australian Parliament supporting a plan for a safe haven to be created in Iraq for persecuted minorities.
4. On July 6, 2005, the United Kingdom Branch of the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) in conjunction with the Jubilee Campaign via Lord Hylton organized a debate at the House of Lords. The following was the question tabled by Lord Hylton at the House of Lords: "Lord Hylton to ask Her Majesty's Government what steps they will take to protect the legitimate interests of the ChaldoAssyrians and other religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq."

As we see from the above examples that some of these efforts called for a safe haven while others called for a self-administration region in Assyrians' historic lands in Nineveh Plains, Nahla, Sapna, Barwari, Amadiya, Dohuk, Zakho, Arbil, and other historic Assyrian regions in northern Iraq. Few Assyrian nationalists went farther and demanded autonomy in Assyria (northern Iraq); they argued if Kurds have it, why not Assyrians!

The ADM, as the only legitimate representative of the ChaldoAssyrians in Iraq, through its landslide victory in 1992 in northern Iraq No-Fly-Zone regional elections and then later in the January 30 and December 15, 2005 Iraqi national elections, made its stand clear. The ADM and Mr. Younadam Kanna rejected the concept of a safe haven for the Assyrian (ChaldoAssyrian) Christians of Iraq. Other ADM leaders confirmed this stand by the ADM. William Warda lately rejected the safe haven concept, however, he welcomed a self-administrative region linked to the central government in Baghdad.

Safe Haven and International Law

The 1949 Geneva Convention concerning the Protection of Civilian Persons in Times of War is considered as the first attempt to define the guiding principles of a safe haven policy.

The 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention (UNRC) spells out the obligation of states toward refugees and the rights of refugees. Article 33 of the 1951 UNRC is very important, it states: "Contracting State shall expel or return ("refouler") a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion." The *non-refoulement* or the "Prohibition of Expulsion or Return" doctrine is central to refugee protection and is at the basis of asylum policy. However, in recent years the reliance on asylum policy as the main protection tool has been questioned, since many governments, including European, have shied away from their legal duty because of the high burden of refugees among other things.

The plight of the Assyrian refugees around the world and others who are categorized as "Internally Displaced Persons" (IDPs) within and outside Iraq must be resolved. IDP is defined as "persons who have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular, as a result of, or in order to avoid the effects of, armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights, or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border." Hundreds of Thousands of civilian Assyrians have been displaced from their original homes due to Kurdish/Iraqi Government armed conflict and the Arabization policies of Saddam Hussein. Later, it was because of the three Persian Gulf Wars of 1980-1988 (Iran-Iraq), 1991, and 2003 and finally by the Islamist threats on the Assyrians' personal lives and attacks on their churches.

Could the Assyrian refugees in Jordan and Syria and those displaced, whether by Iraqi governments or by Kurdish unfair policies, return to their original homes? Do the ChaldoAssyrian Christians in Iraq have a chance to live and coexist among Islamists and ultra-nationalists Kurds?

What is a Safe Haven?

A safe haven is a designated area that holds within its boundaries a threatened people. There are many contingencies with this plan including high security, disarmament, and movement of individuals.

Problems associated with safe havens, include:

1. The Assyrians, unlike with the Kurdish example of the 1991 safe haven, are scattered throughout Iraq; that would mean they would need to leave their homes and villages to live in what could be, but not necessarily, a tent city. The ones that don't leave their homes become isolated from the rest of the community and be targeted. Furthermore, other people could occupy the deserted Assyrian houses and the owners may find great challenges to reclaim their properties in the future.
2. The issue of protection is of great importance. The example of Rwanda, Somalia, and Bosnia must be considered. The ineffective disarmament of Hutus in Rwanda, for example, made the camp a security threat and led the Rwandan government to feel endangered by it.
3. The safe haven for Christians in Iraq could be interpreted as a Christian/Muslim conflict, which could inflame the already heated conflict around the world, especially after the Danish *Jyllands-Posten* Prophet Mohammad cartoons controversy. Chances are that it would have a negative ramification on Assyrians in neighboring Muslim states as well.
4. The safe haven is neither sustainable over time nor does it actually solve the problem. Many analysts have argued that the world community should scrap the current safe haven policy. Others have supported a restructured safe haven policy, one that is closer to its original 1949 definition, but surely not with its current applications. Safe havens can be a tool to reduce hardship, but they definitely do not resolve the original predicament that produces violence. The sustainability of a safe haven regime will depend on how quickly an agreement can be reached to resolve the conflict.

Safe Havens and the Recent Concept of the "Right to Remain"

On March 31, 2003, thousands gathered outside the Bosnian town of Srebrenica for a mass funeral, commemorating more than 7,000 men and boys slaughtered when the Serbs attacked the then U.N. designated safe area in 1995. The massacre highlights the uncertain value of safe haven operations throughout the 1990s. Of course, there have been successful safe havens, such as the one established in

Shanghai in the 1930s, during the Second Sino-Japanese War. That safe haven, which resulted from negotiations between the parties, sheltered a quarter of a million Chinese. However, such non-military zone, based on the consent of many parties, has not often been implemented or achieved in many other examples.

Safe haven policies have led the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to address the needs of people other than refugees. Indeed, in recent publications this international organization describes its policy as proactive, homeland oriented and comprehensive. This development is closely linked to the promotion of the concept of the "right to remain" over the more traditional "right to flee." This mechanism was designed to solve the problem of countries being increasingly reluctant to receive refugees on a large scale. It offered to eliminate the causes of refugee movement by protecting individuals in their homeland.

For Assyrians, the safe haven was more appropriate to pursue in 1991 and as the United States offered it to the Kurds. Today, it is not advisable by the U.S., Great Britain, and the United Nations.

Self-Administrative Region

The concept of self-administrative region for the Assyrians (ChaldoAssyrians) is much desirable and achievable since it is already guaranteed in the Iraqi Constitution. Article 121 of the constitution states: "This Constitution shall guarantee the administrative, political, cultural and educational rights for the various nationalities, such as Turkmen, Chaldeans, Assyrians and all other components. This will be organized by law." Mr. Warda's statement referred to in the beginning of this article was referring to the establishment of a new governorate to the Iraqi existing 18 governorates. This new governorate is to include the historic Assyrian towns and villages in Nineveh Plains where Assyrians could self-administer and protect themselves. Of course, there are some towns and villages around the Nineveh Plains that are not inhabited by Assyrians completely while other smaller Iraqi ethnic groups have a majority such as Yezidis and Shabak. This should not present any problems since the new governorate (Assyria), would be a geographically based and not ethnically based. Assyrians, Yezidis and Shabaks have lived in peace side by side for centuries unlike the Assyrians' experiences with the Kurds. The Kurds have massacred Assyrians and Yezidis and usurped their lands and homes. The concept of self-administrative region seems to be ideal.

Many Assyrians in Iraq assert that it would be better if the new governorate (Assyria) was protected by the United Nations or linked to the Central Government in Baghdad; however, recent sources indicated that it is more likely that it would be linked to the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). The option of a "Christian administrative region" is, according to NINA News, pushed by Barazani's KDP and Talabani's PUK. Few Christian KDP members in northern Iraq and certain Assyrian clergymen in the Diaspora back-up the plan. The plan is to have a "Christian region" linked symbolically to the KRG for a short period of time, but it would be annexed later completely to what would be Kurdistan because it would be easier for Kurds later to usurp that region and make it part of their future state since the Assyrians are weak, but if the region was linked to Baghdad central government it would be harder to overtake. In fact, the Kurds have initiated that plan already by opening KDP offices in towns that are of purely or majority Assyrians and even in certain towns that do not have Kurds in them, intimidating the local inhabitants, raising the Kurdish flags instead of the Iraqi flags, and forcing the Kurdish language on the Assyrians.

A March 2006 unscientific poll by Zinda magazine asked how Assyrians envisioned the status of the proposed Assyrian self-administrative region in Nineveh Plain. 586 people participated in the poll. The poll showed that only 4% of those who participated approved the KRG control, meanwhile more than 56% approved a UN supervision and 24% approved the link to Baghdad. The rest were not sure or have no opinion.

There is a lot at stake here and the Assyrians must evaluate this new development and decide who must be in control of the negotiations with the Allies and Iraqis. This is a political and national matter and it should be discussed through the Assyrian political institutions. Church leaders must not interfere with national matters. Patriarchs and bishops must not hold separate meetings about this issue with the Kurds or any other sides; however, their opinion should be considered as Assyrian individuals. Any concerns and ideas that clergymen might have should be communicated between the Assyrian politicians and the clergymen

themselves without the interference of any foreign elements. What we have seen unfortunately are separate meetings between Barazani and Talabani with various Church of the Assyrians leaders. Such meetings include that of November 2005 between Talabani and Mar Emmanuel Dally, Patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church, in the Vatican and the October 2005 between Barazani and Mar Dinkha, Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, in Washington D.C. and another few weeks back between Mar Dinkha and Sargis Aghajan, Deputy Prime Minister of KRG, in Chicago. If the patriarchs were negotiating with Kurdish political leadership, Assyrians (ChaldoAssyrians) could reasonably be considered as dhimmi people just as they were in the early Islamic, Sassanid, Abbasid, and Ottoman eras when patriarchs were the supreme head of the community and they negotiated the affairs of the community with the state. Again, this is an effort by the Kurds to undermine and marginalize the Assyrian national leadership in Iraq represented in the ADM, which won majority votes in three separate elections and would spell a disaster for future Assyrians as the map of the Middle East is being redrawn.

Final Thoughts

While the plan for a self-administrative region is achievable, other steps must be taken to bring the chapter to a closure. Nobel Prize Winner Nageeb Mahfooz wrote: "if the tyrant and his comrades do not stand trial before an international tribunal, then values have become meaningless in this life." Two tyrants in modern Iraq have contributed significantly to the Assyrian present pathetic predicament, Ba'athist Saddam Hussein and Kurdish warlords KDP's Mas'uod Barazani and PUK's Jalal Talabani. While an Iraqi court is in session to deal with the first, the second, while an Iranian born, is the president of the northern Iraq Kurdish regional government and the third is the President of Iraq. The KDP has not only been the reason for the loss of many historic Assyrian lands in northern Iraq, it has been the reason behind many still unresolved assassinations, murders, rapes, and acts of oppression and persecution against the Assyrians. The world must remember that it was Mr. Barazani who invited Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi army to enter Arbil in 1996 and murder many fellows PUK and other non-KDP Kurds.

References:

http://www.alitijahalakhar.com/archive/198/news.htm
http://www.zowaa.org/ns/n18306-3.htm
The News-Fairfield City Champion Newspaper. Issue of February 2, 2005
http://www.ninanews.com/indexar.php?akcija=article&no=6856
http://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/instree/v1crs.htm
http://www.unhcr.org.uk/info/briefings/basic_facts/obligations.html
Sophie Haspeslagh. *Safe Havens*. See http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/safe_havens
Notes by Gaby Kiwarkis on http://www.aina.org/bbs/index.cgi
www.zindamagazine.com
www.ankawa.com