

## **Sargis Aghajan: A Saint or a Wolf in Sheep's Clothing?**

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With the events unfolding rapidly in northern Iraq (historic Assyria), [www.ankawa.com](http://www.ankawa.com) began a series of interviews with Assyrian officials or heads of political groups who are members in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and/or its parliament. They were all asked the same selected questions dealing with the name issue, the fate of the Assyrian Nineveh Plains region, and the Kurdish constitution.

### **The Interviews**

On September 28, 2006, [ankawa.com](http://ankawa.com) interviewed Mr. Sargis Aghajan, a member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Minister of Finance in the KRG. Responding to one question, Aghajan stated that the constitution of KRG does not guarantee "our people" (referring to all Syriac-speaking Christians) to govern themselves in their historic lands in the Nineveh Plain. He promised to rectify that. He stated that the constitution divides our people into two groups: "Assyrian and Chaldean" and that was unacceptable. He added that he was with and for the compound name "Chaldean Suryani Assyrian" that guarantees the unity of our people. On September 30, 2006, Aghajan returned and stated to Ishtar TV that our people's rights will be noted within a month in the upcoming amended KRG Constitution.

On October 3, 2006, came an interview with Romeo Hakkari, General Secretary of Bet-Nahrain Democratic Party (BNDP) in Iraq, and a member of Kurdish parliament. Hakkari basically reiterated the answers given by Aghajan. He stated that nothing is forever and that the KRG draft constitution could be changed to our benefit in the future. He recommended joining the Nineveh Plain to KRG.

Then on October 7, 2006, was the interview with Jamal Chamoun, President of the Chaldean Cultural Center and a member of the Kurdish parliament. He said that we needed to add symbols in the Kurdistan flag, emblem, and anthem to emphasize on the Kurdistani identity of the entire nation living in Kurdistan region. Chamoun then expressed his support for the Nineveh Plains being part of Kurdistan and stated that our experiences, to be fair, with the Kurdish region in the last 15 years had been noticeably peaceful and comforting.

Next came the interview with Yasho' Majeed Hadaya, head of the Independent Suryan Gathering Movement. Reading the interview, we realize the lack of political savvy or maturity in his statements. Mr. Hadaya stated that the draft of the KRG constitution must guarantee all rights of the "Chaldean Suryani Assyrian" people, including their self-governing rights on their historic lands in

the Nineveh Plain. Then he said that the KRG law (constitution) would regulate the establishment of such regions or self-governing regions within the unified region of the KRG.

What followed was the interview with the public relations person in charge of the Bet Nahrain Patriotic Union in Nineveh. His statements were not any different than the rest.

It is interesting to observe that all those interviewed so far by ankawa.com have stated almost the same thing. I invite you to read the future interviews with the rest of those who are counted on the Assyrians and are members of the Kurdish parliament or with those influenced by the KDP. They will repeat the same exact statements, that the Kurdish constitution comes short from being fair to our people. They will say that the constitution must use the title "Assyrian Chaldean Suryan" and that it must remove the "and" used at this time that separates our people. They all will "recommend" that Nineveh Plain be joined to the Kurdish region because that is to our benefit. Should we be surprised? No, because they will state what may sound contrary to the statements made by the Kurds, otherwise they will not be taken seriously.

### **What They Cannot Say?**

Mr. Hadaya and others must understand that the Nineveh Plain towns and villages in question are part of the Qadhas (districts) of Hamdaniya and Telkaif. These two districts and others, wherein our people are concentrated, do not fall in, do not belong to, and are not part of the Kurdish region of the three governorates of Sulaimaniya, Arbil, and Dohuk. The two above districts for example belong rather to the Nineveh Governorate. His answers imply that the Kurdish region has already been expanded to include Hamdaniya and Telkaif, among others, and that the Iraqi constitution has approved that move. They insinuate as well that the local people in the two districts and others have approved of such expansion as well when that is not the case. As of today, the KRG constitution CANNOT decide the fate of a region that does not belong within its boundaries. Political leaders must understand the ramifications of what they are saying; otherwise they raise many questions about their intentions. This I say, understanding the additional fact that most of these Assyrian notables, officials, self-appointed or imposed leaders were not elected by the people; therefore, they have no right to decide the future of the people. This must be emphasized since there were two national elections in Iraq and the winner was the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM), but it has been marginalized by the empowered Kurds.

### **Why Aghajan? Learning from History**

There is a reason why many Assyrians say that Sargis Aghajan is for Kurds just as Tariq Aziz was for Saddam's Ba'ath regime. His role plays well as that of *malik* Khoshaba and his son Yousif Khoshaba who were for the Iraqi governments from

1930s to 2000. Individuals like Aghajan, Aziz and the Khoshaba's (father and son) before them were nothing but puppets used for a purpose. They had never accomplished anything in the past and will accomplish nothing for the Assyrians as a nation in the future. Aghajan will help establish the elusive Kurdistan, because he is a Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) official. He works for a party that has the goal of establishing Kurdistan over Assyria. Aghajan CANNOT show split loyalties with a serious issue such as Assyria vs. Kurdistan, because there lies a conflict of interest. Aghajan must abide by the national dreams of the KDP and the Kurds. He is for Kurdistan and for all of us to become Kurdistanis on the historic land of Assyria, the land of our ancestors. That is the long-term goal of the KDP. In the meanwhile, Aghajan's declarations, and those of the others mean nothing; they create temporary excitement for some simple-minded people. Aghajan, just as the late Franso Hariri, another member of the KDP and former Governor of Arbil could do nothing for the Assyrians as an ethnic group without the approval of the KDP. Therefore, whatever it is that Aghajan is doing is studied and approved by the KDP and falls within the religious work frame only and we will come to that later.

Furthermore, Aghajan must stop presenting himself as the savior of Assyrians by insinuating that the money he is giving away is his money. He might not be saying that, but the actions of those around him and the medals given to him try to mislead the people. We know that this money is part of Iraq's Reconstruction fund from the Iraqi oil proceeds channeled through the KDP and KRG. If these monies were Aghajan's own personal money, I would have said God bless you, but it is not his personal money. So what is the big deal then?

Is Aghajan really looking after the interest of the Assyrians as an ethnic group in Iraq? Where was Aghajan since 1992 when the first drafts of the Kurdish regional constitution were being circulating? Why didn't he say anything in public ever since? When the ADM was declaring that we are one people, why was Aghajan silent and why was his KDP Kurdish party undermining that statement? Why did the KDP create the phony Kurdish-backed Kurdistan Christian List to run against the ADM in the regional elections of 1992 in northern Iraq? Why was he silent when Abd al-Ahad Afram was establishing the new phenomenon of *Chaldeanism* in northern Iraq with the support of the KDP to divide the Assyrian people?

Could we then assert that Aghajan is working for the Assyrian case? Absolutely not. History will prove otherwise. We will not be fooled by his worthless declarations and the money Aghajan is giving away will not fool the true Assyrians. Let Ishtar TV continue its propaganda agenda for Aghajan and his followers, directly or indirectly. But let Aghajan understand that Assyrians will not be Kurdistanis in Kurdistan. We will remain Assyrians and northern Iraq will always remain Assyria in our hearts and souls and he can never take that away. Let Aghajan understand that the money he is distributing to buy people's minds and support will not work at the end. This is our money; the Assyrians' share from the oil sale proceeds of Iraq and Aghajan is not doing anybody any favors. He is nothing but a middleman.

## **The Kurdish Plans and Honoring Aghajan**

The fact is that the Kurds and Barazani have an eye on the Nineveh Plains and everyone who works for the KDP (including our people in the Kurdish parliament and cabinet, i.e. Aghajan, Fawzi Hariri, Romeo Hakkari, Jamal Chamoun, Nimrod Baito, George Mansour, etc.) are directly or indirectly conspiring to make that a reality.

But the question is why the Kurds are doing this now? Is the United States pushing the Kurds to go ahead with this plan? Is joining the Nineveh Plains to Kurdish region and giving it some sort of self-administrative rights that bad of an idea? It is if the plan is to have that scheme molded into a religious context, i.e., Christian region. We are Christian people, but we were Assyrians first and our national rights must not be undermined at the expense of our religious rights.

To sell Sargis Aghajan to the Assyrians and the world, the KDP needed a creative plan. Aghajan was, in a clever way, appointed by the KDP to be in charge of the reconstruction, i.e., building many churches, halls, and a few homes for the Christians in northern Iraq (Assyria), erroneously called Kurdistan. Then they used Kurdish controlled media to boost his image. First they used the KDP supported Ishtar TV to glorify Aghajan. Aghajan does not do that personally, but his aids direct these media outlets. This way he appears a humble man. Then, certain Assyrian singers, including Johnny Talia in his new tape "Matwate d' Atri", sing praises for Aghajan. I understand that a few others are scheduled to be shown on Ishtar TV singing for Aghajan in the future. I want to remind Zinda readers how Saddam Hussein used to pay singers to glorify his name in similar manner.

Then the attention of the planners move to the religious leaders who showered Aghajan with medals and praises. On August 29, 2006 Pope Benedict XVI honored Mr. Aghajan by naming him a Knight Commander of the Order of Saint Gregory the Great. Mar Emanuel Delly, Patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church awarded the medal to Aghajan on behalf of the Pope. Mar Ignatius Zakka I Iwas, Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, decorated Aghajan on October 2, 2006 with the medal of St. Ignatius Theophoros of the Degree of Commander, the highest medal of honor bestowed by the Syrian Orthodox Church. The Bishop of Mosul rewarded the medal on October 6, 2006 on behalf of his patriarch. During his visit to northern Iraq, Mar Dinkha IV, Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, continuously praised Aghajan in his speeches, including his speech on October 3, 2006 while visiting the Nahla region. On October 17, 2006, Mar Dinkha awarded Aghajan two medals. The first is a new medal, which the Church of the East created especially for Aghajan. It is in the degree of "The Successful Engineer" that is the first ever presented by this Church to any of its members. The second, the "Patriarchate Medal", was awarded to Aghajan due to his strong belief and love for his church, as stated by the patriarch. The award ceremony took place in Arbil and was attended by many bishops and priests. In his letter, the patriarch praised Aghajan, wished him well and blessed him.

One might ask, why all this attention to Sargis Aghajan and why is he being "pumped up"? Is he being groomed to become "our" leader? The KDP wishes to make Aghajan a popular figure to justify being installed as "The Christian Leader", just as Iraqi authorities in Baghdad made Yousip Khoshaba "archana" before. This will undermine any real Assyrian authority as the KDP continues implementing its future plans in northern Iraq and paving the road for the formation of Kurdistan. The Kurds want to have a puppet Christian serving as the leader of the Assyrians and the Christians.

### More Questionable Moves by the KDP

The KDP future plans involve not only promoting a puppet leader, but also crushing any opposition. According to Majed Eshoo, the KDP is involved in building an Assyrian army in northern Iraq by using few Assyrians loyal to Barazani. According to reports by Amnesty International, other KDP associates and/or supporters, including Praidon Darmo and Fawzi Hariri have been involved in certain arms dealings. Two important points here regarding this army:

1. Under whose command would this army be? What would it be used for? It seems to me that the KDP is planning to finish any resistance against its policies in northern Iraq. The only voices left in northern Iraq will be those voices that remain pro-KDP and Barazani. The Internet has made it easy to report immediately any wrongdoing against the Assyrians. On October 13, 2006, a group from the Kurdish militia belonging to the KDP attacked the Nineveh headquarters of the ADM's TV station, Ashur TV. Uproar against Barazani and the KDP ensued from Assyrians around the world. Imagine if an Assyrian militia or army made this attack. Could Assyrians around the world protest in such case in the future when one Assyrian faction attacks others?
2. We know well that there is a conflict between the various Kurdish factions in northern Iraq. How would the other Kurdish militias treat the Assyrians if this Assyrian army were used by or was under the KDP? Is it a sound policy to be seen as allies to one particular Kurdish faction?

The fact is that there were two national elections in Iraq in 2005. All groups had their own slates that participated in the elections. Our people did NOT vote for Aghajan, Hakkari, Afram, Hariri, Baito, Mansour, Hadaya, etc. to speak on their behalf; they voted for the Assyrian Democratic Movement. Why not allow the ADM be in charge of the money Aghajan is using or have an independent third party planning after consulting with the various Christian groups?

### **What Our people Need**

Building a few churches and halls in villages selected by Barazani and the KDP will not protect Assyrian Christians' rights in northern Iraq. Building Churches in

isolated villages where our population is insignificant do not mean much. Halls do not save an ethnic group from extinction. Furthermore, Assyrians will not be protected and will not survive in northern Iraq by empty words on paper or by dishonored constitutions as many previous constitutions have proved.

Of course there are good Kurdish intellectuals who have a better vision for northern Iraq; however, the clan of Barazani controls the political decision in northern Iraq's Arbil Kurdish government and it refuses to apply true democracy in the region. What the Assyrians expect must include, among other things, the followings:

1. Stop interfering in the internal affairs of the Assyrians.
2. Respect the results of the elections and allow the winners to represent the people and speak for them.
3. Return the Assyrian occupied villages and lands back to their original owners and stop building Kurdish homes in the Assyrian regions in order to dilute the demographic of those regions.
4. Allow the Assyrian schools to advance and allow Assyrians to print their own material and not force them to study twisted version of history that they impose on the students. Allocate more money to build more schools of various levels, provide more buses, dorms, student assistance, etc. Schools will graduate capable Assyrians who will lead the nation.
5. Concentrate on infrastructure projects such as domestic water networks, electrical power supply and distribution, irrigation and water channels, health care and medicines.
6. Allow equal opportunities for Assyrians to build factories that employ Assyrians in order to improve the quality of life and give those who have fled or the new comers to the region a chance to have a better life.
7. Honor, respect, recognize and support the national aspiration of the Assyrian people and deal with the Assyrians as the indigenous people of Iraq and allow a democratic and free society to flourish and the rule of the law to apply on all.
8. If a self-administrative region is created in northern Iraq (Assyria), then that must not be in the context of Christian region, but it must be a national region, an Assyrian region. The KDP must then allow a fair referendum so that the people will decide what they want. We do not want another interference by the KDP such as that during the Iraqi national elections where they rigged the votes.

## **Conclusion**

First, Barazani and the KDP, as a Kurdish national party, are struggling to establish a Kurdish homeland in northern Iraq (historic Assyria). It would be impossible for any non-Kurdish person, including Sargis Aghajan, to justify how he could work for the KDP and abide by the KDP's By-Laws and goals on one hand and work to benefit the national and ethnic rights of the Assyrians on the other. The Kurds have continued to usurp historic Assyrian lands in northern

Iraq since 1920; thus there is a legitimate question raised by Assyrians over the claims of Kurds on Assyrian lands. Aghajan could not struggle for the rights of the Kurds in one specific instance and then turn around and fight for the rights of the Assyrians. This is just impossible since there is a principle and major dispute over land between Assyrians and Kurds.

Secondly, the Kurds have gained much support from the USA and Europe in the past 15 years. They understand the dilemma many good Muslims are facing since 9/11, the attacks in London and Madrid. Lets face it: these attacks were made in the name of Islam and Kurdish political groups want to distance themselves from anything that links them to Islam. Therefore, it is not unusual to present themselves as the saviors of the Christians in Iraq. It is not unusual to build churches and halls. However, we understand as well what the Kurdish by-laws clearly state their vision for a future Kurdish region, i.e., a Kurdistan for all Kurdistanis, whether Muslims, Christians, Shabaks, Yezidis, etc. These religious sects are all Kurds as far as Kurds are concerned. Many Kurdish nationalists view Assyrians as Christian Kurds. Building churches and halls means something; however, being Christians alone will not save the Assyrian people as an national entity.

We must stop being naïve and we must stop parading someone before we understand why certain things happen in the first place. Until that day comes where Kurds respect the will of the Assyrians and show serious will and take serious measures towards granting the Assyrians their full rights in a democratic, pluralistic and secular system under the rule of a non-biased law, I personally will find it almost impossible to trust the Kurdish politicians. This I say because we must learn from our history. These are the same Kurds who murdered our Patriarch Mar Benyamin Shimun in 1918 and then turned years later to honor the warlord Simko who assassinated the patriarch cowardly. These are the same Kurds who have continued to push Assyrians out of their historic lands and bring Kurds from other regions and settle them on those Assyrian lands. These are the same Kurds whose leader, general Bakir Sidqi, led the Iraqi army to massacre Assyrians in Semele in 1933 and he armed other Kurdish tribes to exterminate the Assyrians. These are the same Kurds that corrupt history. These are the same Kurds that interfered in the internal affairs of the Assyrians and divided the Assyrian people and installed puppet leaders and ministers to satisfy the curiosity of the West. These are the same Kurds that abduct Assyrian girls, rape, and then kill them and none is brought to justice even when the perpetrators are identified. These are the same Kurds who have assassinated any Assyrian who dared to demand for our rights, including Francis Shabo in 1993.

We must heed history's lessons.