

ASSYRIANS IN THE NINEVEH PLAIN

The Assyrians form an ethnic and linguistic continuum that stretches across southeast Turkey, northeast Syria, northwest Iran and northern Iraq – as such, there are not only adherents of the Church of the East in Iran, Syria and (formerly) Turkey, but there are also significant communities of Chaldean Catholics in Turkey, Iran and Syria, as well as Syriac Orthodox Christians and Syriac Catholics in Turkey and Syria. Most of these Christians call themselves “Suraye” (Assyrians) and speak local dialects of Aramaic that have various degrees of mutual intelligibility called “Sureth” (Assyrian). Assyrian nationalism developed in Turkey and Iran in the late 19th century, based on this existing identity, and was taken up by a significant number of Chaldean Catholics until the first half of the 20th century.

Unfortunately, reactionary and sectarian separatist movements have been taking hold, largely among diaspora communities, since the 1970s, since the political movements are being seen as a rival and threat to the traditional hegemony enjoyed by Church hierarchies. The main tenet of this ideology is that each religious group constitutes a separate “nation,” based on the religious-nation or “millet” system popularized under the Ottoman Empire and continued by some Middle Eastern governments afterwards. According to this idea, the Chaldean Catholics form a “Chaldean nation,” Syriac Orthodox Christians and Syriac Catholics form a “Syriac nation,” and adherents of the Ancient Church of the East and Assyrian Church of the East form an “Assyrian nation.” This simplistic and unrealistic view not only ignores the fact that the majority of Chaldean Catholic and Syriac Orthodox Christians worldwide identify as Assyrians (or Assyro-Chaldeans) and are members of Assyrian political parties and organizations, but it also ignores facts on the ground in Iraq.

At present (2017-2018) the Christian population of the Nineveh Plain is estimated to number 40,589 (of whom only 2,755 are native Arabic-speakers). These all belong to Churches which employ Syriac as a liturgical language and, in order to largest to smallest community are as follows: Syriac Catholics (33.5%), Syriac Orthodox (33%), Chaldean Catholics (30%), Ancient Church of the East (3%) and Assyrian Church of the East (0.5%). These numbers pertain only to those currently living in their towns and villages and do not include those still internally displaced, or those who have decided to leave Iraq.

Syriac Orthodox Christians exclusively inhabit 6 towns and villages in the Nineveh Plain, as well as another three towns with mixed Christian populations. Their total population at present is roughly 13,331 (11,186 Aramaic-speaking and 2,145 Arabic-speaking). Syriac Catholics inhabit three towns in the Nineveh Plains with mixed Christian populations. Their total population at present is roughly 13,644 (13,034 Aramaic-speaking and 610 Arabic-speaking). Chaldean Catholics exclusively inhabit 7 towns and villages in the Nineveh Plains, as well as another two towns with mixed Christian populations. Their total population at present is roughly 12,221 (all Aramaic-speaking). Adherents of the Ancient Church of the East and Assyrian Church of the

East exclusively inhabit 6 villages in the Nineveh Plains, as well as another two towns with mixed Christian populations. Their total population at present is roughly 1,393 (all Aramaic-speaking).

Bearing this in mind, it would be helpful to analyze the political situation on the ground prior to the ISIL invasion in 2014. There were 22 political party offices active in eight of the towns inhabited by Christians in the Nineveh Plain. Of these, more than a third belonged to the Assyrian Democratic Movement, which had offices in 4 majority Chaldean Catholic towns, one in a majority Ancient Church of the East village, one in a majority Syriac Orthodox town, another in a majority Syriac Catholic town, and one in a mixed town) – they also possessed an office and broadcasting antenna for their TV and Radio stations in the majority Syriac Catholic town of Bakhdida. The Assyrian Patriotic Party and the Bet-Nahrain Democratic Party (another Assyrian party), each had an office in majority Chaldean Catholic towns. The “Ashur-Kaldo” (Assyro-Chaldean) Communist Party additionally had two offices in majority Chaldean Catholic towns.

In contrast, the Chaldean Democratic Union Party, which espouses the idea of a separate “Chaldean nation,” only had offices in two Chaldean Catholic majority towns; and the Democratic Syriac Union Party, which similarly espouses the idea of a separate “Syriac nation” only ever had an office in one majority Syriac Catholic town. In fact, these political movements and ideologies were not as popular as diaspora activists would lead one to believe. This is made all the more evident when one discovers that less than a third of the active political party offices in the Nineveh Plain prior to 2014 belonged to the Kurdistan Democratic Party, which had offices in 3 majority Chaldean Catholic towns, one in a majority Syriac Orthodox town, another in a majority Syriac Catholic town, and two in mixed towns.

Politically, therefore, it is evident that at least 45.5% of the Christian population in the Nineveh Plain, regardless of Christian denomination, aligned itself with Assyrian political parties and further 9% with the Assyro-Chaldean Communist Party. On the other hand, 9% aligned itself with “Chaldean” political parties, and 4.5% with “Syriac” political parties, whereas 32% of the population may have aligned itself with the Kurdistan Democratic Party through the well-documented system of patronage and intimation initiated by them in the region. Had the local Christian population in these towns and villages been against the Assyrian identity, they would surely have driven the Assyrian political parties out and not allowed them to operate freely within them and gain members from among them. This was obviously not the case.

It is also helpful to note the military situation on the ground since the IS invasion, and the mobilization efforts for the liberation of those Christian towns and villages in the Nineveh Plain that were occupied by them. As part of this effort, up to 9,050 local Christians joined local militia. Overwhelmingly, the majority of these local Christians joined forces linked with Assyrian political parties. The Nineveh Plain Protection Units, for instance, aligned with the Assyrian

Democratic Movement, boasts 5,000 conscripts, a training facility in a majority Chaldean Catholic town and an important base in a majority Syriac Catholic town. Another 300 local fighters belonged to the Dwekh-Nawsha, aligned with the Assyrian Patriotic Party, and 200 belonged to the Nineveh Plain Forces, aligned with the Bet-Nahrain Democratic Party; these forces are now defunct.

On the other hand, 2,500 conscripts are known to have joined the Nineveh Plains Guard Forces of Nineveh Plains Security Forces (also known as Tiger Guards), aligned with the Chaldean-Syriac-Assyrian Popular Council (which believes in the ethnic unity of these three groups) and works closely with the Kurdistan Democratic Party and Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government. Another 1,000 fighters are aligned with the Babylon Brigades, which espouses the ideology of a separate “Chaldean nation”, but at least 90% of its soldiers are in actuality Shia Arabs or Shabaks; and less than 50 belong to the Syriac Sons’ Brigades (also known as the Spirit of God Jesus son of Mary Brigades, a Christian wing of the Imam Ali Brigades), which espouses the ideology of a separate “Syriac nation.”

Militarily, therefore, it is evident that at least 61% of the Christian population in the Nineveh Plain, regardless of Christian denomination, has aligned itself with militia tied to Assyrian political parties and further 27.5% with militia tied to an organisation that promotes the ethnic unity of Chaldeans-Syriacs-Assyrians. On the other hand, 11% aligned itself with militia that had an openly “Chaldean” separatist agenda, and 0.5% with militia that had an openly “Syriac” separatist agenda. Had the local Christian population in these towns and villages been against the Assyrian identity, they would surely have not joined militia tied to Assyrian political parties or to organisations espousing Chaldean-Syriac-Assyrian ethnic unity.

The above data is evidence that the Chaldean Catholic, Syriac Orthodox and Syriac Catholic communities on the ground do not oppose the idea of being part of a larger Assyrian ethnicity, and only a few espouse separatist tendencies based on sectarianism, hatred and ignorance. On the contrary, the majority of individuals at the grass-roots level are open to the idea of belonging to a unified Assyrian ethnicity, not the least because of their location for centuries within the geographical heartland of Assyria. This is evident through their political and military leanings since the fall of Saddam Hussein’s Ba’ath regime in 2003.

It goes without saying here that there is no unified Iraqi Christian leadership (let alone one representing the Nineveh Plains), and any group of religious leaders or clerics that purports to be so, and which supports separatist ideologies, must be completely alienated from the will of their own adherents and members at the grass-roots level. What’s telling is that there is no secular political “Chaldean” or “Syriac” leadership outside of religious institutions. The only legitimate Christian Iraqi political leadership is that voted in by a majority of Iraqi Christians. This can be gauged from the current Christian representatives in the parliaments of Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan:

In Iraq's current national assembly, of the five seats reserved for Christians, two are occupied by members of the Assyrian Democratic Movement – Yonadam Yousif Kanna Khoshaba (for Baghdad Governorate), and Imad Youkhanna Yaqou Youkhanna (for Kirkuk Governorate). Another is occupied by Joseph Sylawa Sabi (a Chaldean Catholic from Ankawa in Erbil Governorate), who belongs to the al-Warkaa Christian Bloc and the Ashur-Kaldo (Assyro-Chaldean) Communist Party. The remaining two are occupied by Ra'id Ishaq Matti Daoud (Syriac Orthodox from Bartillah in Ninawa Governorate), and Louis Garo Bandar Mansour (a Chaldean Catholic from Zakho in Dohuk Governorate) – both members of the Chaldean-Syriac-Assyrian Popular Council, which believes in the ethnic unity of these three groups.

In the Iraqi Kurdistan assembly, of the five seats reserved for non-Armenian Christians, two are currently occupied by members of the Assyrian Democratic Movement – Ya'qub Gorgis Yaqo Klya and Lina 'Azarya Bahram Shabo al-Bazi. Another is occupied by Suhood Salim Matti Yusuf Maqdissi (a Chaldean Catholic from Ankawa), who belongs to the Sons of Mesopotamia Political Entity (an Assyrian political organisation). The remaining two are occupied by Kamal Yalda Marqoz Damyanus Kaka (a Chaldean Catholic from Ankawa), and Wahida Yaqo Hormiz (a Chaldean Catholic from Zakho) – both members of the Chaldean-Syriac-Assyrian Popular Council. No members of "Chaldean" or "Syriac" separatist parties have been voted into any of Iraq's parliaments by Iraqi Christians in order to represent them.

Furthermore, what belies the organic nature of the Chaldean identity formation is the fact that its main, and almost exclusive benefactor is the Kurdistan Democratic Party. The identity politics surrounding the Chaldean (and Syriac) identity expressed in its visceral form by its modern-day proponents are refracted through the state policies of the KRG, and the outcome is a process that has the aim of weakening the unifying, indigenous identity of the Assyrians to remain as one, which is what they are and always have been. A wide array of political and civil society organizations espousing a Chaldean or Syriac identity were established over the course of the past decade either by the KDP or with the KDP's support, financially and otherwise.

The KRG's intervention as a government authority on the side of division and destruction of the Assyrian identity by propping up sectarian identities, raises the idea of 'cultural genocide.'