

# Assyrian Ethnic Identity in a Globalizing World

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## Abstract

This article is focused on the manifestations and changes of the Assyrian ethnic identity especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Assyrian nation is divided into three basic religious branches which are religiously and partially linguistically distinct from each other and which have different political ambitions. In some cases, the Assyrian identity is even discarded by some people considered Assyrians. Nowadays, intra-Assyrian rivalry is globalized because of the existence of numerous diasporas and thematic web pages around the world. The quarrels between Assyrian subgroups complicate advocating national interests and the disunity is often misused by their political opponents. The present paper attempts to explain the roots of intra-Assyrian rivalry, to present various arguments and activities of members of Assyrian groups and scholars and to reveal the political importance of Assyrian identity debate.

**Key words:** Assyrians, identity, globalisation, transnationalism, conflict

## Introduction

In spite of the wide-spread geographical imaginations of the Middle East as an Arabic and Islamic monolith, supported by Western mass media and some Middle Eastern states' high politicians, the Middle East is quite a heterogeneous region. This region comprises numerous ethnic, national, religious, linguistic or ethno-religious groups. The relation between majorities and minorities is the major source of various conflicts in the Middle Eastern area. Most of recent armed conflicts in the Middle East had undoubtedly roots in unsolved minority problems (Maoz 1999). Suffice it to mention the impact of the Iraq-Iran war on the Assyrians living in the Middle East or the Iraqi and Turkish anti-Kurdish military actions and the civil war between quarrelling Kurdish fractions in Iraqi Kurdistan. It appears that most of post-Ottoman states have not yet evolved a national identity which would encompass their multi-ethnic societies in their entirety.

The theme of contemporary Assyrians is highly politicized and controversial, because Middle Eastern states usually consider the treatment of minorities as their internal question, deny any discrimination or deny the existence of any type of minorities in their territory. Middle Eastern states' attitude is understandable, because the question of discriminated minorities could be misused as the instrument of foreign policy made by Western powers (Kumaraswamy 2003). However, not only national states complicate Assyrian self-determination. The Assyrian nation is divided into three religious sub-groups which have different political interests. In some cases, the Assyrian ethnicity is even discarded by some people considered Assyrian which in turn is taken advantage of by age-long opponents of Assyrians.

## Globalisation and identity

Globalisation is a process of the integration of economic, technological, political, social and other activities at global level. Globalisation creates connections between distant places and time and space are compressed due to technological advances. Some authors even speak of the end of geography (O'Brien 1992). Globalisation is not only the uniting power which attempts to create one global nation, but it also creates, protects or proliferates various identities which could be quite traditional. We can speak about the globalisation of local indigenous culture. Globalisation contributed to the erosion of identities such as citizenship and replaced them by an identity based on ethnicity, language etc. This process of erosion of national identity along with the dissemination of human rights means a threat for repressive national states pretending to be homogenous.

Since the 1990s, we can observe a global rise of emancipation activities of downtrodden national, ethnic, linguistic, religious and ethno-religious groups. Unfortunately, these activities often involved images of past suffering, injustices and political symbolism and resulted in armed clashes. From a socio-cultural perspective, globalisation builds a transnational relationship between various locales, especially because of the expansion of the mass media and the internet. These conquests of the postmodern era contributed to the de-centering of identities. An individual became more involved in the process of increasing mutuality of the world and became engaged in many dialogues, often contradictory and hardly intelligible. This has a direct impact on individual's identity (Croucher 2003).

### **Basic facts about Assyrians**

Assyrians are an ethnically, linguistically and religiously distinct minority in the Middle Eastern region. Assyrians are the only autochthonous Middle Eastern Christian group without own state. Assyrians constitute autochthonous minorities in Iraq (600 000 Assyrians in the so-called Assyrian triangle in the north of Iraq and in Baghdad and Mosul), Syria (120 000 Assyrians in al-Jazeera district), Iran (50 000 Assyrians in the Urmiya region and in large cities) and Turkey (20 000 Assyrians in southeastern vilayets and in Istanbul). The cited numbers are estimates based on author's analysis made in 2008. The accessible censuses are usually outdated and untrustworthy, because the surveyed states pretend to be homogenous. On the other hand, churches tend to exaggerate the number of their members. Middle Eastern Assyrians inhabit the territory occupied by their age-long rivals the Kurds who do not have their own state either, but who have a stronger backing by world powers. Assyrians also live in diaspora in the USA, Sweden, Jordan, Germany, Australia, Canada, Russia and Armenia.

Assyrians are probably descended from the Arameanized and Christianized ancient Semitic Assyrians; however, for my research the feeling to be Assyrian, rather than genetic or cultural origin, is important and connects the majority of Aramean-speaking people. Assyrians have been relatively successful in resisting long-term islamization, arabization, turkization, persization, and kurdification and in keeping alive their authentic languages, religious and cultural traditions and a sense of national belonging. Assyrians speak various dialects of Neo-Aramean (all these languages are derived from old Aramean which was the lingua franca of the Middle East), nevertheless in the Middle Eastern region bilingualism is typical for the Assyrian people. In some cases Neo-Aramean dialects were replaced by the language of the majority in daily communication and in liturgy too. Nowadays, the Assyrian community, as other Middle Eastern Christian minorities, faces many hardships. The biggest problem is presumably massive emigration to the neighbouring countries and then to the West caused by the unsatisfactory social status in Middle Eastern countries. Assyrians are often the target of discrimination, especially in post-war Iraq and surprisingly in Turkey which attempts to enter the EU.

### **Assyrians and their alternative names**

The numerous troubles Assyrians experienced during the centuries of Islamic superiority did not unite all Assyrian subgroups (Lewis 2000). Nowadays, Assyrians are also known as Chaldeans, Syriacs or Syrians (not to be confused with the Syrian nationality), Jacobites, Nestorians, Syro-Chaldeans, Assyro-Chaldeans, Chaldo-Assyrians (with or without a hyphen) and Chaldean Assyrian Syriac people. These different names have religious, historical and doctrinal backgrounds and some of them represent only a part of the Assyrian people. The emergence of Assyrian nationalism and the revival of the name Assyrian is connected with the excavations of ancient Assyrian monuments in Mesopotamia and with the activities of the Roman Catholic, Protestant or Russian Orthodox missionaries in the 19th century. The Assyrian nationalism always stood in a direct opposition to Pan-Arabism or Pan-Turkism. There are many heated debates about the identity of the Assyrian people among Assyrians and among academics from various social sciences – no consensus has been reached on the question of whether Assyrians form one group, or if they form multiple groups of people with different identities.

I will prefer to use the name Assyrians in this article, as the Israeli orientalist Mordechai Nisan does, because this short name, in my humble opinion, embodies the collective ethnicity of Aramean-speaking Christians and includes the primary religious groups under one Assyrian nation which existed long time before Christianity (Nisan 2002). I appreciate the words of the Chaldean patriarch Mar Raphael I. Bedawid who said: 'I am Assyrian. I myself, my sect is Chaldean, but ethnically, I am Assyrian. That does not mean I should mix everything.' (Petrosian 2006, 117) On the other hand, the Chaldean American scholar Shak Hanish prefers the name Chaldean Assyrian Syriac people which does not superordinate any of Aramean-speaking groups (Hanish 2008). This term is becoming more popular and it was used in the last US census. It is obvious that Hanish as a Chaldean Catholic denies Assyrian nationalism. In 2003 the Iraqi political party ADM (Assyrian Democratic Movement) officially started to favour Chaldo-Assyrian compromise term, but this term was rejected mainly by the Middle Eastern churches.

### **The division of Assyrians**

The Assyrian nation is divided on religious grounds into three subgroups:

- Nestorians (Assyrians) – adherents of the Assyrian Church of the East and the Ancient Church of the East
- Chaldeans – adherents of the Chaldean Catholic Church
- Syriacs – adherents of the Syriac Orthodox Church (Jacobites) and the Syriac Catholic Church

This division is based on religion which still plays an important role in Assyrians' life. Although there are some atheists among Assyrians, they are usually associated with specific communities based on the adherence to a concrete religious sect.

Syriacs and Chaldeans sometimes break the Assyrian unity and deny their Assyrian ethnicity, they do not want to be marked as Assyrians and they construct their own ethnic identities which will be closely analyzed in the following text.

### **Nestorians**

Nestorians (Assyrians) are adherents of the dyophysitic Assyrian Church of the East, one of the oldest Middle Eastern Churches, or adherents of the Ancient Church of the East (approximately 5 % of Nestorians) which was separated from the Assyrian Church of the East because of the reforms of new patriarchs. The patriarchal see of the Assyrian Church of the East is located in Morton Grove in Illinois since the 1930s, because of the massacres of Nestorians committed in interwar Iraq. The patriarchal see of the Ancient Church of the East is placed in Baghdad (Nisan 2002). In daily communication Nestorians use the language called

*sureth* (Assyrian or neo-Aramean). Nestorians are a coherent group which steadily declares Assyrian ethnicity, which is considered to be the heritage of the glorious Assyrian Empire, and often includes non-Nestorian groups under Assyrian ethnicity. Assyrian antiquity was also demonstrated by introducing the Assyrian calendar and the Assyrian national flag.

Nestorians are undoubtedly the most active group in supporting Assyrian nationalism (Assyrianism), Assyrian emancipation, Assyrian territorial rights and Pan-Assyrian ideas. They are also extremely active in human rights campaigns and they attempt to make public all anti-Assyrian violence. They supported the idea of an independent Assyrian state for Nestorians, Chaldeans and Syriacs after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and nowadays they initiate Assyrian autonomous tendencies in northern Iraq. Nestorians were always known as great warriors and persistent opponents of Islamic central governments. Nestorian tribal armed groups (Assyrian Levies) were used by the British to control Mesopotamia and to suppress Arab and Kurdish rebellions during the Iraqi Mandate (Petrosian 2006). This Nestorian stance increased the hatred of Muslims against Nestorians which led into anti-Nestorian pogroms in the 30s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These massacres caused massive Nestorian emigration to the West. Afterwards, Chaldean Catholics became the largest Christian group in Iraq. For example, Saddam Hussein did not like rebellious Nestorians, but he had quite good relations with Chaldeans who defined themselves as Arabs. Nestorians were members of the INC (Iraqi National Congress), organization composed of Shia Muslim, Kurdish, Assyrian and Turkmen opposition groups with US support. Assyrianism meets resistance as the result of the confessional differences of Assyrian people. Especially Chaldeans usually fight against the idea of Assyrianism. Nestorians view disloyal Chaldeans as the traitors of the Assyrian nation, as the collaborators with Arabs or as the agents of Vatican. We should realize that Chaldeans signed an union with Rome and were separated from the Assyrian Church of the East.

Assyrianism is politically represented by the ADM (Assyrian Democratic Movement), the BNDP (Bet-Nahrain Democratic Party) in Iraq, the ADO (Assyrian Democratic Organization, Mtakasta) in Syria and globally by the the AUA (Assyrian Universal Alliance) which is a member of the UNPO (Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization). Apart from these organizations, there are many others, especially in the USA and the EU and their members lobby Western governments effectively.

### **Chaldeans**

Chaldeans are members of the Chaldean Catholic Church which fully recognized papal authority in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The patriarchate of the Chaldean Catholic Church is located in Baghdad. Chaldeans use the Chaldean language (Chaldean neo-Aramean), but in Arab countries they are often arabized. The term Chaldean was chosen to distinguish them from the adherents of the Assyrian Church of the East. Chaldeans were an ancient Mesopotamian nation which destroyed the Assyrian Empire. Contemporary Chaldeans were usually more loyal to their rulers than Nestorians. The Chaldean Tarif Aziz, a Baathist, was the prime minister of Iraq and a close collaborator of Saddam Hussain (Nisan 2002). The notorious Iraqi dictator employed many Chaldeans who opposed the US led invasion to Iraq. Generally, many Chaldeans are vehement opponents of Assyrian nationalism and they identify themselves with the Chaldean nation or they describe themselves as Arab Christians. For example, Chaldeans accuse Nestorians of blasphemy because of their heightening of old Assyrian pagan heritage and traditions. Chaldean nationalism (Chaldeanism) is politically represented by the CDUP (Chaldean Democratic Union Party) in Iraq.

### **Syriacs**

Syriacs are members of the Syriac Orthodox Church (Jacobites) or the Syriac Catholic Church. The patriarchal see of the Syriac Orthodox Church is located in Damascus and the see of the Syriac Catholic Church is located in Beirut. The Syriac ancestral language is turoyo (Syriac), but nowadays they use mostly Arabic (in Syria and Iraq) and Turkish (in Turkey). Syriacs face repressions especially in Turkey which was never a congenial home for Christians. Turkish struggles against Kurdish guerrillas persuaded many Syriacs to flee the country. Turkish Syriacs are forbidden to teach their language. Syriacs are divided over the question of identity, some of them are loyal to Assyrianism, others support the idea of the Aramean identity for all Aramean speaking people (Arameanism). Arameanism considers even Lebanese Maronites as Arameans (Aramean Democratic Organization 2009). We can also note the self-description as Arab Christians. Arameanism is politically represented by the international organizations ArDO (Aramean Democratic Organization) and SUA (Syriac Universal Alliance).

### **Inter-Assyrian conflicts in cyberspace**

Assyrians have their own satellite television channel broadcasting from the USA, the Ashur TV, which is close to the ideas of Assyrianism. There are hundreds of websites concerning the question of the Assyrian identity, not only official web pages of Assyrian political organizations, but also various blogs, forums and chats. Communities from various parts of the world are connected by the internet and they share their opinions and identities. We can speak about digital diasporas. Assyrian emigrants are extremely active on the web where they support their oppressed brothers living in the Middle East, nevertheless it is usually a solidarity of Nestorians with Nestorians or Chaldeans with Chaldeans. Intra-Assyrian conflicts are widespread on the web where members of rival groups are viewed as traitors and propagandists.

### **Political consequences of Assyrian disunity**

The Assyrian disunity complicates advocating interests of the Assyrian people, too many Assyrian organizations exist and attempt to push their particular interests. Nowadays, the Assyrian disunity is noticeable in Iraq where Assyrians want to establish the Assyrian autonomous area in Niniveh Plains. Assyrians often point out the example of Kurdish autonomy. The reasons for which Kurds in Iraq got the right of self-determination could be applicable for Assyrians, a distinct people which have a cohesive identity minimally as long as their Kurdish neighbours. Article 125 of the Iraqi constitution deals with *'administrative, political, cultural and educational rights of various nationalities, such as Turkmen, Chaldeans, Assyrians, and all other constituents'* (Iraqi Constitution 2005). The autonomous region should be a safe haven for Christians from the entire Iraq. Nestorians support this proposal, but this plan has many opponents among Syriacs and especially Chaldeans who speak about an Assyrian ghetto. They claim that Christians should be present among the non-Christian population, fulfill religious missions and participate in interreligious dialogue. However, the Assyrian autonomous area should not be a safe home only for Christians, but also for moderate Muslims and minorities like Yezidis, Shabaks, Turkmen and Armenians. Nevertheless, the Assyrian autonomous region is still an ambitious project, although some rather concrete proposals exist. A clear Assyrian attitude and approval by the central parliament are still needed for it to come into existence.

### **Conclusions**

Assyrians pre-date state formation in the Middle East and they overcame many hardships. Nowadays, Assyrians and their survival in Middle Eastern region are evidently endangered by their increasing emigration and persisting disunity. Assyrian subgroups have



too often opposite interests in specific affairs and they are limited by a long hostility too. It is paradoxical that a minority nation which is a target of Islamic hostility for centuries is so fragmented although there exists some weak Pan-Assyrian solidarity. Nowadays, intra-Assyrian rivalry is enhanced by nationalist mass media and websites. There are also some unifying activities, such as the proposal for a compromise national term Chaldo-Assyrian, but they are not much successful. I suppose that the term Chaldean Assyrian Syriac people could become the solution of terminological controversies. The preservation of the Assyrian demographic integrity still belongs to the main goals of this ancient nation.

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