

Assyrian Nationalism

a Mechanism for Survival

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The Assyrian nation currently stands at a cross-road; its very survival will be determined in the next few decades by the road it embarks upon. The vicissitudes experienced by our nation have served to harden it, and our nation has survived many cataclysmic events in its long history. Yet, as I shall argue in this paper, the survival mechanisms which have been developed in the past six thousand years, and which have served our nation so well in preserving its entity, are the very cause of its current decline and, if left unchanged, its eventual extinction.

As will be shown in this paper, the Assyrian nation has adopted new survival mechanisms several times in its history, and it can do so again in the present time. New survival mechanisms are needed to insure the survival of our nation in this new world it finds itself in. These survival mechanisms must have certain basic properties.

A survival mechanism is an ideology, a set of principles which lead from abstract doctrines to concrete actions. I use the word *mechanism* deliberately, to reinforce the notion of a *process*. For our nation to survive, it must work for its survival, it must engage in mechanical actions geared towards enhancing the survival of its people. These actions are dictated by the ideology, i.e., the survival mechanism.

Survival Mechanisms: Historical Perspective

To enumerate the various survival mechanisms used by Assyrians, it is convenient to divide Assyrian history into five periods:

1. From the emergence of Assyrians to 2400 B.C.
2. From 2400 B.C. to 612 B.C.
3. From 612 B.C. to 33 A.D.
4. From 33 A.D. to 1300 A.D.
5. From 1300 A.D. to 1918 A.D.

From the Emergence of Assyrians to 2400 B.C.

The earliest Assyrians lived in loosely connected agricultural societies. As time passed, these societies united in a common cause of self defense against nomadic and barbaric peoples, who would periodically invade and loot the land. Here we see a survival mechanism at work: a society of farmers forming a loose federation. Beneath this there is a shared ideology; it is an agrarian ideology which separates the sedentary, farming class from the nomadic class. This agrarian ideology leads to concrete actions: the establishment of irregular militias to defend against nomadic invasions.¹

As the agrarian societies grew, they consolidated and became larger, eventually forming large cities. At this point there arose a need for a form of central municipal administration. This manifested itself in the form of monarchies.²

From 2400 B.C. to 612 B.C.

This period of Assyrian history includes the development of two important survival mechanisms: city-states and empires. The agrarian ideology, which was the foundation upon which city-states were built, is modified to accommodate the development of professional classes, such as potters, artisans, soldiers, and clergy. This municipal ideology encompasses not only the agrarian class, but the newly developed professional classes. It is an ideology based on interdependency. The professional agrarian class supports the professional militia, in return for protection, while both soldiers and farmers support the religious class in return for vital spiritual services. Here again is a new survival mechanism, rooted in the agrarian ideology, but made more expansive; it is an evolutionary change, not a revolutionary change, but a change none-the-less.

The culmination of the municipal ideology is the establishment of the empire. Here we see the municipal ideology taken to its next logical level; it becomes an imperial ideology. Once again, it is an evolutionary change. This imperial ideology becomes a powerful survival mechanism in the hands of the Assyrians. Of course, the Neo-Assyrian empire ended in a cataclysmic event in 612 B.C.. This should not, however, be taken to mean that the imperial ideology failed; on the contrary, it succeeded for eighteen hundred years (since Sargon I). The collapse of the Assyrian empire can be seen as a result of competing survival mechanisms, namely, of the Medes, Scythians, and Babylonians, and the Assyrians. The Assyrians just happened to have lost.

From 612 B.C. to 33 A.D.

The collapse of the Neo-Assyrian empire marked the end of the imperial ideology (for Assyrians). This did not mark the end of the Assyrians, it marked the end of the civil, political, and military institutions the Assyrians had established. Not much is known about the Assyrians in the period 612 B.C. to 33 A.D., more because of a dearth of research into this period rather than inactivity by the Assyrians. The available evidence shows that the Assyrians continued living on their ancestral homeland under successive Kingdoms.³ The survival mechanism during this time seemed to have been based on a ritual of living from day to day, while remaining inconspicuous and out of the way of the authorities. This passive ideology was starkly different from the previous imperial ideology. The Collapse of the Neo-Assyrian empire was a traumatic event, and the passive ideology was an equally traumatic, and revolutionary, change of survival mechanisms.

The cataclysmic collapse of the Assyrian empire, and the holocaust that was the destruction of Nineveh, had a profound effect on the Assyrians, in the form of the passive ideology, and, in my opinion, is still being felt to this day, as I shall show below.

From 33 A.D. to 1300 A.D.

A permanent effect of the imperial ideology, an effect that survived the disappearance of the ideology itself, and the collapse of the Assyrian empire, was the unification of the Assyrians under one common nationality, reinforced by living for hundreds of years in their own state, and the shared experience of the loss of that state. The effect of the Assyrian empire was to mold a unity based on a common language, culture, and heritage, to wit, a nation. It is this nation that survives the disappearance of the imperial ideology and the Assyrian state, and it is this nation that adopts the passive ideology.

It is this nation that accepts Christianity in 33 A.D.⁴, although there remain to be Ashur worshippers until 256 A.D.⁵ The acceptance of Christianity is facilitated by the passive ideology present among the Assyrians, for there is a certain synergy between the passive ideology and Christianity. The passive ideology is not changed by Christianity, but it is given a new interpretation in a Christian context, which

rejuvenates it and the Assyrians themselves, setting the Assyrians on a new enterprise, a missionary enterprise whose consequences would have far reaching effects.

The passive ideology is modified, but it is not its fundamental nature that is changed, it is its character that is redefined. Recall that the passive ideology dictated a subservient attitude on the part of the Assyrians toward their rulers, without active engagement by the Assyrians (as a whole) in unfolding world events. This passive aspect of the passive ideology is now modified to be an active element. Once again, the Assyrians become active participants in local and global affairs, this time not through imperialism, but through an ecclesiastic missionary enterprise. The passive ideology becomes a missionary ideology. This missionary ideology, as a redefined passive ideology, becomes the foundation of a new kind of empire by the Assyrians: a religious empire spanning all of Asia, from Syria to China and Japan.⁶ It is an empire founded on divine revelation and Christian brotherhood. The missionary ideology even survives the fragmentation of the church itself.⁷ The achievements of the Assyrian missionary enterprise are well documented elsewhere.⁸ Here we are concerned with when this missionary ideology ends, and why.

From 1300 A.D. to 1918 A.D.

The Assyrian missionary enterprise, which had been so successful throughout the Asian continent, came to an abrupt end with the coming of Timurlane the Mongol. The indiscriminate destruction leveled by Timurlane against the civilizations he encountered put to a permanent end the Assyrian missionary enterprise, by both the Eastern and Western Churches.

A large segment of the Assyrian population escaped the ravages of Timurlane by fleeing into the Hakkary mountains (present day eastern Turkey); the remaining Assyrians continued to live in their homelands (presently North Iraq and Syria), and Urmi. New survival mechanisms were adopted. The active element of the missionary ideology was extinguished by Timurlane, and the western Assyrians (Syria), central Assyrians (North Iraq), and Urmi Assyrians reverted to a passive ideology, while the Hakkary Assyrians adopted an isolationist ideology. For the first time in its history, segments of the Assyrian nation had simultaneously adopted different survival mechanisms. This turn of events, I shall argue, is what has saved the Assyrians from cultural extinction in the twentieth century.

The four Assyrian communities, over time, begin defining themselves in terms of their church affiliation. The western Assyrians, all of whom belonging to the Syrian Orthodox Church, began identifying themselves as "Jacobites". The remaining communities belonged to the Assyrian Church of the East. After the division of the Church of the East in 1550 A.D., the Chaldean Church of Babylon, a Roman Catholic Uniate, is created, and members of this church begin to call themselves "Chaldeans". This way of identifying one's self, by his church affiliation, is what I shall term the denominational ideology. By the end of the nineteenth century, these three communities no longer saw themselves as one and the same.

The geographical isolation of the Hakkary Assyrians, imposed upon them by the rugged and nearly impassable mountain terrain, also forced upon them a cultural isolation. The price they paid for this was high: the loss of institutions, the loss of intellectual vitality, as the population fell to illiteracy, and the church itself became formalist and stagnant. They also fragmented into Ashirats, or independent tribes; to this day this tribalism is still a significant influence in some of the Ashirats. But the reward for the isolation of the Hakkary Assyrians was the preservation of a distinct Assyrian culture and a distinct Assyrian language. The Assyrians of Urmi, by sheer majority of numbers, also managed to preserve their culture and language.

The Story for the western and central Assyrians is quite different. Living in open plains, these communities could not resist the pressures of urbanization, Arabization, and Islamization. By the end of the nineteenth century, all of the western Assyrians were speaking Arabic (with the exception of the Inhabitants of Tur Abdin, who speak Turoyo). The central Assyrians suffered the same fate, but to a slightly lesser degree. While it is hazardous to make predictions, it is very likely that all traces of Assyrian culture would have completely vanished from the western and central Assyrian communities in the twenty first century, as they had already lost their language, and their liturgy was mostly in Arabic. They had, for all intents and purposes, become Arab Christians. The fate of these two communities is still unclear, but there is hope that they will be recovered, a hope brought about by a cataclysmic world event.

World War I

The traumatic events of WW1 had a profound effect on the Assyrians. The most significant event was the [genocide of 750,000 Assyrians](#) by Turks and Kurds, and, as a result, the extirpation of the Hakkary Assyrians from their mountain homes. Assyrians fled from the genocide by moving directly south, to Lebanon, Syria, North Iraq, and to Urmi. The Hakkary Assyrians brought with them a fierce sense of independence, and a conscious awareness of a distinct identity, which was reinforced by their language and Christian heritage. They knew that they were not Arabs, nor Kurds, nor Turks, nor Iranians. At about this time, Assyrian intellectuals⁹ in Urmi and Turkey and North Iraq were rediscovering their Assyrian heritage, returning to their roots in Sargon, Ashurbanipal, and Nineveh. These intellectuals began articulating a conscious Assyrian nationalism. This was eventually adopted by the Hakkary Assyrians, whose fierce independence and distinct identity found a natural fit in the idea of a separate nation. The alert reader will immediately recognize this as a new survival mechanism: a nationalistic ideology.

From 1918 A.D. to the Present

In the twentieth century, the nationalistic ideology has been accepted by the eastern Assyrians (of the Church of the East), and by segments of the western Assyrians (of the Syrian Orthodox Church), and eastern Catholic Assyrians (of the Chaldean Church of Babylon). One hundred percent saturation has yet to be achieved. Despite its success, the nationalistic ideology is in competition with the denominational ideology, and it is not by all means clear as to which will emerge victorious. Here we must consider the three Assyrian denominations individually.

The Assyrians of the Church of the East have completely accepted the nationalistic ideology. Every member of this community identifies himself as Assyrian. This rediscovery of their heritage has taken permanent root, and has survived systematic attacks by the Iraqi regime. However, the internal problem of tribalism still persists.

In the Syrian Orthodox community, the nationalistic ideology has reached fifty percent saturation.¹⁰ However, there continues to be a bitter struggle between denominationalists and nationalists. Other fringe ideologies are also vying for acceptance (including the "Aramean" ideology). But by far the most powerful ideology, on the grass roots level, is Arabism. To complicate matters further, this community has also split into Orthodox and Syrian Roman Catholic denominations. The Syrian Catholic community is small in number.

The community of the Chaldean Church of Babylon considered itself Arab only a short time ago. There has been a steady movement away from this ideology towards two competing ideologies: Assyrianism and Chaldeanism. The Chaldean ideology appears to be gaining.

The Denominational Ideology Revisited

So powerful is the denominational ideology, it has resisted attempts to unify the three Assyrian communities under one Assyrian nationalism. While it is true that these communities have moved to redefine their identities in nationalistic terms, each has chosen a different identity. This is a recipe for disaster.

The Technological Threat

In the past two millennia, the Assyrian nation has endured hardship and suffering in defense of its culture and Christian faith; from countless genocides to forced conversion, and -- more damaging than the worst pogroms -- the Jizzeyah, a tax imposed on Christians by the Arabs. Until fifty years ago our nation endured these hardships, in its homeland, for the simple reason that there was no where else to go, and even if there were, there was no practical method of mass migration. In the second half of the twentieth century, this is no longer true. While the hardships for our nation are still there, there is now an escape mechanism: the jet airplane.

We live in a unique period in human history. In no other era could a man travel to any location in the world in less than twenty four hours.¹¹ The Implication for Assyrians is clear. When life in our homeland becomes unbearable, it is natural for our people to seek better living conditions, and they do, as 1.5 million Assyrians have already departed to the West. This emigration, facilitated by man's great technological triumphs, is the greatest short term threat to our nation's survival. The harsh economic conditions in the middle east, and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, coupled with a high standard of living in the Christian West, join to form a Western black hole into which our nation is inexorably pulled, and which it cannot resist. As already stated, 1.5 million Assyrians have left for the West, and the remaining 2 million continue to leave.

The technological threat comes not only from jet airplanes, it comes from television, radio, computers, CD players, video games. Take television as an example. What is shown on television? If an Assyrian child watches television in America, or England, or Sweden, which culture does he absorb? We see that technology is not the source of the threat, but an instrument of cultural projection.

The Threat of Cultural Immersion

Technology is but one of the many tools used in indoctrination into a culture, the others being educational, governmental, civil, social, and business institutions. When everyday activities, such as shopping in a grocery store, require one to assume a different culture, the dominant culture of the land, then the battle for one's own cultural survival is doomed to ultimate defeat, because one's own culture will lose its survival utility. This threat of cultural immersion is just as true in middle eastern countries as it is in western countries. It is clear that cultures that own the technological and social institutions of a land are the cultures who can project themselves, and quickly absorb other cultures within that land. Assyrians cannot escape from cultural immersion (and absorption) no matter where they go to, simply because they cannot, at the present time, project their culture.

Can Assyrians survive in the West, as Assyrians speaking their language and preserving their culture? No. Assyrians will not be able to indefinitely resist the pressures of assimilation. Can Assyrians survive in the middle east? No, for the just stated reason. How, then, can Assyrians survive in the middle east? The answer is not difficult, but its implementation is difficult, and it will be the greatest challenge faced by our nation.

Assyrian Nationalism: a Survival Mechanism

The Assyrian nation today stands at a crossroad; ahead of it lie two paths. The path it takes will determine its future survival. The path it is currently on is littered with these sign-posts:

Denominationalism and fragmentation of the Assyrian nation

Islamic fundamentalism and Islamization

Cultural immersion and absorption into Arab societies

Mass emigration to the West, and absorption into Western societies

All of these will combine to overwhelm our nation and bring it to its end in the next century. This is what lies ahead on the current path. We will not survive as a nation if we remain on this path.

Is there a path that leads to the survival of our nation? Yes! It is a long and difficult path, but it is open to us now, and it can take us into the twenty first century and beyond!

The Assyrian Nationalistic Ideology

A survival mechanism is an ideology, a set of principles which lead from abstract doctrines to concrete actions. Given this, I propose the following as the axiomatic doctrines of the nationalistic ideology:

The Assyrian people, including the Church of the East, The Chaldean Church of Babylon, the Syrian Orthodox Church, and the Syrian Catholic communities, constitute an integral Nation, indivisible and sharing a common language, culture, beliefs and attitudes.

It is the birth-right of every Assyrian, regardless of his birth-place, to claim his homeland Assyria and to be allowed to return to it and to live in it.

These axiomatic doctrines are self evident truths. No stronger foundation can be laid down other than by these two simple, elegant doctrines. To what actions do these doctrines lead us, given the technological and cultural threat to our nation? Here is a list:

Unify the four Assyrian denominations under one Assyrian national identity. It is clear that our nation cannot resist the pressures of cultural assimilation if it is divided. There are only 3.5 million Assyrians worldwide; even this number is perilously low (it should be a policy of church and community leaders to encourage the formation of large families).

Establish zones of Assyrian cultural dominance, areas where Assyrians are the majority and where all of the technological, governmental, civil, educational, social, and business institutions project the Assyrian culture.

Stop emigration of Assyrians from the middle east. While it is true that the threat of cultural immersion is just as real in the middle east as it is in Western countries, the rate of assimilation is much slower in the middle east. Remaining in the middle east buys our nation more time to address the true source of the threat: the lack of zones of Assyrian cultural dominance.

Support Assyrians who study fields related to the Assyrian question. Establish scholarship funds, and academic, political, professional, and philosophical societies. Encourage the pursuit of Assyrian studies in all aspects of Assyrian history, politics, and culture.

Conclusion

The Assyrian nation has adapted itself to new circumstances several times in its history, and it must do so again in this century if it is to survive into the future. I have shown that the denominational ideology is the greatest internal threat to our nation, and cultural absorption into Arab and Western societies is the greatest external threat. Our nation cannot combat the threat of cultural immersion if it remains divided along denominational lines, the job is simply too big for each little denomination to tackle alone. It is, therefore, imperative that these four denominations are brought under the umbrella of Assyrian nationalism, to maximize their survival chances. This new survival mechanism, Assyrian nationalism,¹² must be adopted immediately. Time is running out. . .

References

- ¹ H.W.F. Saggs; *The Might That Was Assyria*; Sidgwick and Jackson; 1984; pp 8.
- ² *ibid*, pp 17.
- ³ Patricia Crone, Michael Cook; *Hagarism: the Making of the Islamic World*; Cambridge University Press; 1977; pp 55-56.
- ⁴ Samuel Moffet; *History of Christianity in Asia: Volume One, Beginnings to 1500*; Harper Collins; 1994. This is an excellent history of Asian Christianity, and of the various Assyrian Churches.
- ⁵ W. W. Tarn; *Cambridge Ancient History: The Roman Republic, 133-44 B.C.*; Cambridge University Press; 1985; pp 597.
- ⁶ *History of Christianity in Asia*. See also John M. L. Young; *By Foot to China: Mission of the Church of the East, to 1400*; Grey Pilgrim Publications; Lookout Mountain, GA; 1991.
- ⁷ *History of Christianity in Asia*.
- ⁸ *ibid*.
- ⁹ Benyamin Arsanis, Fraidon Bet-Oraham, Baba Parhad, Ashur Yoseph, Naum Faik, Youseph Malek, Mar Toma Odo. See Robert DeKelaita; *On the Road to Nineveh: Brief History of Assyrian Nationalism, 1892-1990*; *Journal of the Assyrian Academic Society*; Volume 8, No. 1; 1994.
- ¹⁰ This is based on estimates from members of the western Assyrian community.
- ¹¹ Geographers call this phenomenon time-space convergence, where, as a result of technological progress, humans are constantly nearing each other spatially and temporally, but not culturally. See Harm j. De Blij and Peter O. Muller; *Geography: Regions and Concepts, Fourth Edition*; John Wiley & Sons; 1985; pp 177-181.
- ¹² This Assyrian nationalism is the right of self determination of Assyrians, and cannot be questioned by non-Assyrians. In his book *The Church of the East and Church of England*, Dr. Coakley, in footnote number 12, refers to Assyrian nationalism as a "bogus ethnology". This is purely an orientalist statement and is completely beyond the scope of the book or Dr. Coakley's right to comment upon.

