

The Fate of the Assyrians

Perspectives of Development

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The contemporary Assyrians -- indigenous and in Diaspora -- constitute a nation that is aware, conscious and constantly holding on their identity which they had inherited from their forefathers. They have, since the lamentable collapse of their Empire in 612 BC, survived many tribulations. They have; meantime, attempted time after time to reinstate their authority in their ancestral land -- Assyria.

The National Question Theory, which is a survival kit for unrepresented people, classifies existing groups according to their social status; i.e., a nation or a state. In case of the Assyrians, we recognize them, as they stand today, as a nation because the elements that, scientifically, go into the definition of a nation, are unequivocally constant in their communities. These elements are:

1. A language
2. An ethnic relationship
3. A culture including customs, traditions, and folklore
4. A common history
5. Consanguinity or blood relations

The Assyrians, fortunately, are not an extinct nation as a few scholars believe but a stateless national group. Their population today is over 3.5 million and the majority continue as the indigenous nationals in their ancestral homeland Assyria -- present Iraq. Others are in Diaspora dispersed to 40 different countries including the United States and Russia.

The Assyrians as a nation are entitled to:

1. Claim a legitimate form of self-determination
2. Reinstitution of their authority as a continuation to their past rule

These two legal solutions require an authoritative entity that functions within a given or defined territory.

Today the Assyrians, as a nation, can not and do not have any political implication such as prestige or influence. In the United Nations and in Iraq, itself, they are registered, recognized as a socio-religious group and as such they are not eligible to assume or attain the status of a national or ethnic minority. If they really desire or want to promote their communities, if they are prepared to stand up for their political rights, unshaken and steadfastly, they must work hard and hand in hand, cooperate, and persist on their legitimate claim to autonomy which entitles them to ascend to the level of a statehood.

A state's edifice according to the International Law stands firm on these two fundamentals:

1. Territory
2. Government or ultimate authority within the territory

As to the Assyrians, an autonomous state is their ultimate object, and to reemerge or to revive their past rule, they have to push forward and develop their social status from a national to a state level that has political implications. This means that their standards will be elevated to a strata or level parallel to other minorities.

Under the prevailing situations, the right of the Assyrians to self-determination can be basically classified to categories that fit into their social and political reality. These categories are:

1. Self-determination of the indigenous Assyrians who are still residing in their ancestral homeland and holding on to their identity as Assyrians.
2. Self-determination of the dispersed or Assyrians in Diaspora who play an integral role in the promotional process and development of self-determination claim of their indigenous brethren in homeland.

The Assyrian quest for a political entity in their ancestral homeland Bet Nahrain must be relevant to

1. Domestic or local policies of the regime in Baghdad
2. Strategic interests and concerns of the big powers and especially the USA.

The foremost and most controversial factors that should be addressed in this respect are the following:

1. How strongly the Assyrian nation at large is supportive of the idea of autonomy?
2. Are they as a nation and at this stage committed to a perpetual ideology?

In the affirmative case, the Assyrians must, and I repeat, must reconsider, reshuffle, and marshal their classes under a progressive party organization that will resemble, according to International Law, an authority in exile that spear-heads their patriotic efforts. This role, in my opinion, is being performed to a large extent by the Assyrian Universal Alliance.

3. They must create a corporate will or solidarity in support of their claim and must give up their old ways and rivalry in favor of a united stand and an undivided leadership.
4. They have to rely mainly on intellectuals and technocrats who can flexibly apply pragmatic and practical strategies that inclusively can benefit the whole nation.
5. They must accumulate a budget in order to sustain the work that promotes their claim to autonomy and this action requires that they conduct fund raising campaigns depending on the generosity of the Assyrians.

Now let us turn to the domestic scene or local politics of Iraq and the central regime in Baghdad. The Assyrians are the third national group after the Arabs and the Kurds. The regime as is today does not allow the rise of a representative democracy in Iraq; therefore, Baghdad is not prepared at all to accept an Assyrian political entity even on basis of a simple autonomy or self-rule.

There are two ways that help solve this problem.

1. Pluralistic democracy that would secure the political rights of the minorities in Iraq and an active participation on their behalf as an ethnic or national group.
2. Autonomy accepted by the Central Regime in Baghdad and recognized by the United Nations.

Either of these two solutions fits in Category (1) mentioned above; i.e., Self-determination for indigenous Assyrians still residing in their ancestral homeland.

As to the position of the dispersed Assyrians or Assyrians in Diaspora, their contributions in this respect come via their participation as active citizens in local politics of their countries. But as Assyrians linked to their indigenous brethren through the national ingredients; i.e., common history, language, etc., they are obliged to provide moral and material support to promote their claim on international level; in the United Nations, UNPO-- Unrepresented Nations and People's Organization, and domestically through their governments as we do in the United States.

This position fits into Category (2) mentioned above; i.e., self-determination of the dispersed or the Assyrians in Diaspora.

We now move to the other point which is the strategic interests and concerns of the big powers and especially the U.S.A. The Assyrians and likewise the other minorities in Iraq, as we are aware, are claiming autonomy which perfectly coincides with the democratic aspirations of the Iraqi people at large. In my opinion, there are four important implications here:

1. How much their demography or population size in Iraq can afford to contribute or dedicate to the idea of an autonomy or self-rule?
2. To what extent they enjoy or exercise the privilege of self-decision making and independently controlling their ancestral territory?
3. What is the volume of the contributions made by the Assyrians in Diaspora to the question of promoting their claim to self-determination? Will there be a reverse migration to the homeland to strengthen and solidify the claim to autonomy?
4. How smooth and polite are their relations and communications with other national groups in the North? To my knowledge their present status in Dohuk is preserved only within the de-facto autonomous areas protected by the No Fly Zone.

The Central Regime in Baghdad is not happy with the situation in the North. What might happen in future can be only projected or inferred from the development of events in the Region and from the strategy of the United States.

When Desert Storm was launched in 1991, the aim of the coalition was to restore Kuwait to its status before the invasion by Iraq. The liberation of Kuwait was the face card and the Desert Storm was basically launched to strengthen United States role in the Region and to accomplish certain U.S. vital objectives under the auspices of the United Nation's Resolution No. 678 to liberate Kuwait. There wasn't any consideration in the calculations to accord or grant the minorities of Iraq autonomy, neither were the Kurds or the Assyrians a part of the solution. They are today in the North maintaining a tiny self-styled autonomy which is exclusive of the ingredients that go into the formation of nation-states.

The following are a few questions that the Assyrians should consider and address:

1. Are the Assyrians an indispensable and a meritorious asset in the United States Middle East overall strategy?
2. Do they possess the capabilities such as man power and other resources that may provide them with prestige and power to influence the flow of events in the Region?
3. Are they eligible and qualified to be considered as an alternative buffer that can

counterbalance and quell unfriendly fundamentalist upheavals?

The answer to these questions is “No.”

Under such circumstances, the United States national interests make it impossible for the Administration to choose between alternative interpretations on ground of legal correction. Although the Assyrians as a minority have a legal right, according to the above points, they don't possess the vital preferences that can attract or convince the United States to support their quest for self-determination. On basis of such an interpretation or analysis, we can foresee in the horizon no opportunity or a glimmer of hope for a revival or reemergence of the Assyrians as an autonomy under the present circumstances in Iraq and in the Region, especially after September 11 and the deterioration of the relations between Israel and the Palestinians.

To promote themselves and to strengthen their solidarity and establish broader means of communications, we suggest that the Assyrians should wind up with:

1. An effective World campaign to assert themselves as a thriving union of people.
2. A national press center, news agency, and a capable lobby to publicize and attract world-wide support for their claim.
3. A strong solidarity and a unified or affiliated endeavor that will firmly assert their existence as indigenous people of Mesopotamia under the guidance and leadership of a vanguard of intellectuals and technocrats.

The only prospect for them is to collaborate and actively participate in the on going joint efforts to transform Iraq to a representative democracy that will make it possible for the next central regime in Baghdad to accommodate self-determination or autonomy claims of the Assyrians and other minorities. Such an undertaking becomes a legal binding force in form of a legislation unanimously approved by all concerned and made an integral item in the new constitution that will recognize Iraq as a multi-national country.

Therefore, the immediate task, the urgent responsibilities of the Assyrians at this stage are as follows:

1. Reshuffle their classes on basis of an elected leadership that includes representatives from the homeland and from Diaspora.
2. Revive the close relationship they had with the Allies, reminding them of their vital role as the “Smallest Ally.”
3. Apply a secular policy while pursuing their goal. This procedure will induce the Assyrians of all denominations to participate in the national effort.
4. Get wealthy, wealthy, and wealthy. Money is the magic key to solve social problems constructively and successfully.

Finally, I urge the Conference to:

1. Act now, be vigilant and prompt and act now.
2. Setup a professional and career-oriented committee that will study and evaluate their present situation in light of their past performance. This committee will precisely estimate and find out whether their present capabilities can endure or

withstand a protracted pursue or folow-up of their political aspirations.

Today is the hour. Let us translate our words to actions and to a universally unified Assyrian front.

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