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Honey and Vinegar: Attitudes toward Iran's Assyrian Christians By Eden Naby

Even as the number of Assyrians in Iran diminishes toward the point of extinction, the attitudes about them appear to harden into chauvinistic prejudice. The recent remarks of a high cleric in Urumiyah NOT to buy Assyrian property because they are all leaving and then the property will be free, symbolizes the latent prejudice against non-Muslims. To see similar sentiments expressed by Muslim Iranian émigrés is nothing short of disgusting.

Outright disinformation, hopefully born of genuine lack of information and not prejudice, permeates Internet writing about this last substantial Aramaic speaking population of the world. Most of this writing comes from the keyboards of recent Iranian émigrés, who with basic professional education derived from pre-Islamic Revolution universities, have succeeded in transferring their lives to the West. Some of the attitudes they express about Assyrians are patently offensive though not infrequently coated in honeyed condescension.

In some recent writing on Iranian.com ["Cold & dark"], Assyrians are being called Nestorian Kurds, thus denying their ethnic uniqueness. The review of Dr. Rami Yelda's book, *A Persian Odyssey: Iran Revisited* (New York, A. Pankovitch Publishers, 2005) is particularly replete with assertions based on a clear inability to read a well-written and sophisticated book. Indicative of this tendency is the misspelling of the author's name, "Yalda" for Yelda, and then a play on the Persian borrowing of an Aramaic/Syriac word referring to "birth."

Yes, we all know that shab-e yalda is the celebration of the longest night of the year, the winter solstice. The reviewer misspells the author's name, and then proceeds to associate his name with "cold and dark." For most of us shab-e yalda is a fun family time of stories, family albums, candles and raisins and walnuts. The cold and dark is not in the author's heart, as the reviewer asserts on the basis of a misspelling of his name, but grows out of her own prejudices against a Christian, with a Christian name, writing about the homeland that has historically shunned people of his ethnicity and faith.

And she continues in this distasteful vein with the claim that Dr. Yelda carries a chip because his "great great grandfather" had been killed. No, Madame. The author speaks of "both of his mother's grandfathers" being killed in the streets of Urumiyah during World War I. Those gentlemen were just two of the hundreds of old men and women cut down in revered old age by fanatical thugs. My Assyrian grandfather was dragged out of his home in 1914 in the rich village of Golpashan (a satellite village of Urumiyah), together with all males over 12 and butchered at the Christian cemetery. The attractive girls were carried off, including his daughter, my sixteen-year-old aunt, to a rape camp from which most did not return. These memories are not thousands or hundreds of years old. They are part of the first genocide of the 20th century.

For most Assyrians, Dr. Yelda represents the Iranophile trend in the Assyrian community in the West. He loved Iran as is obvious to any reader not blinded by prejudice. He does not fawn over the current state of affairs, especially the application of Shari'a law to women -- about which he writes from the perspective of Muslim women activists he interviews -- as does Iranian.com. Nor is he happy with the discriminatory treatment of Christians, (or Jews, Zoroastrians and Bahais) whether they are ethnic Assyrians or not. Who but the most rabid of fanatical extremists would be happy with the application of medieval religious law to minorities or society in general? Isn't this application of Shari'a law the reason Muslims too escape to the West? Europe and the West have passed through this phase of discrimination based on faith-sanctioned superiority although rearguard action by throwbacks demands constant vigilance.

Why should an Assyrian author not point to warts in recent Iranian history as well as the problems in the present? Because he is not Muslim? If he converted to Islam, would it then be OK to criticize the evil he sees?

The reviewer's attempts to wrap her vile and unfounded slamming of this book with the implication that it represents some form of Islamophobia is perhaps the most damaging of the attitude toward Iran's Christians and the émigré Assyrian population that has found a home in Chicago and elsewhere in the United States. The first Assyrians who left Iran during the second part of the 19th century came to study and return. Then came those who departed "Persia" due to the discrimination they encountered in employment. If they converted to Islam, then all jobs opened to them. And some did convert among Assyrians as well as Armenians.

Due to the work restriction, many young men made multiple trips to the United States as labor immigrants and returned before WWI to buy orchards, vineyards and fields with which to make a living for their families. Most of those who had not returned to Iran by 1914, and thus become part of the slaughtered, sent money back to bring what remained of their families out of the Urumiyah- Salamas area.

2/3rds of the Assyrians of the Middle East died in that War, including those living in northwest Iran. To their credit, the Muslims of Tabriz stood fast against the killing, raping and looting of Christians in that town. Not so west of Lake Urumiyah.

If Iran had been less discriminatory toward Assyrians, as both the embodiment of a part of Iranian culture, and as indigenous Christians, the approximately 100,000 Assyrians (of all denominations) that lived in Iran in January 1914 would have grown at a rate similar to that of the country as a whole. Iran was then about 10 million. Assyrians were about 1% of the total population. If they were 1% of the population today, they should have been close to a million. Instead they are about 7-15,000. The most precipitous decline, after WWI, came following 1979.

When the fanatics came for the Assyrians in WWI, few defended them. (A few Muslim families did in fact, at great danger to themselves.) In 1979 they came for the secularists, the moderates, the Jews and the Bahai's. When information about Assyrians is so widely available on the Web (AINA.org for one) why should an émigré Iranian feel entitled to misrepresent Assyrians in such misinformed

tones?

Iranians, Muslims or not, especially in their comfortable Diaspora professional lives, should not shrink from looking at the dirty laundry of history. To attack the revelation of the painful Assyrian history by trying desperately to shoot the Assyrian messenger smacks of denial of reality. And when did denial lead to improved attitudes?

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