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ARTICLE

"Propaganda of the Victims": Atrocity Denial, Ethnic Nationalism, and the Disparagement of Assyrians in Middle East Studies

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Abstract

Atrocity denial suffuses the bedrock of the academic field of modern Middle East studies. One of the most frequently cited works about modern Assyrians is a 1974 revisionist account of the 1933 massacres of Assyrians in Iraq. Its author, Khaldun S. Husry, dismisses Assyrian recollections of the violence as "propaganda of the victims." Examining how Husry's article came to be published reveals that the editor who published it, Stanford Shaw, promoted its logic as part of his denial of the Armenian genocide. As a result of the influence of this denialism, Assyrians—who continue to face displacement and dispossession over a century after hundreds of thousands of them, alongside Armenians, were killed by the Ottoman Empire—are systematically demeaned in academic literature. Scholars routinely treat Assyrians as problematic, questioning their legitimacy through racist lines of inquiry. They then claim, as moral licensing for their contempt, that their aim is to critique ethnic nationalism and colonialism. Analyzing the disparagement of Assyrians in the Middle East studies field offers lessons about what good and bad critiques of ethnic nationalism look like, how to avoid historiographical and citational pitfalls when writing about marginalized people, and why revisionist histories of atrocities are profoundly harmful.

Keywords: Armenian genocide; Assyrians; atrocity denial; ethnic nationalism; historiography; Iraq; Seyfo

In the town of Simele in the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq, there is a nondescript mound that Assyrians visit to pray, cry, and mourn.[1] They come

[1] Simele (the town's name in Assyrian), near the city of Dohuk, is known as Simel in Kurdish and al-Sumayl in Arabic.

from other parts of Iraq and from the many far-flung places in the world, including the Americas, Europe, and Australia, where displaced Assyrians now live. Most Assyrians presume, based on local memory, that this is one of the sites where hundreds of victims of the Assyrian massacres of 1933, perpetrated by the Iraqi army and local irregular forces, were hastily buried. According to some accounts, many of those killed in Simele were thrown into a shallow mass grave. Visitors to the mound have reported seeing what appear to be human bones protruding from the dirt.[2] These remains have never been studied to ascertain their provenance or their age.

The mound is identified by Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) authorities with a sign that labels it, generically, an "archaeological hill," indicating that the KRG officially considers it to be a tell—an artificial hill formed by accumulated ancient settlements. There is a telecommunications tower on top of it, precluding direct access by visitors. Local authorities have not only neglected the site: they also have allowed portions of it to be excavated, potentially doing irreversible damage to any future attempts to identify and rebury Assyrian dead. If the KRG grants access in the future for archaeologists to search for ancient artifacts or ruins in the tell, prevalent practices would likely lead them to dispose of anything they found in upper layers from the modern era. In such circumstances, there would be no basis, nor any support, for examining bones forensically to determine if they were human, what their attributes (like sex and age) were, and what time period they were from. Because Ottoman-era sources give no evidence of a graveyard at this site, any human remains found in the upper layers would very likely belong to Assyrians and date to 1933. The Iraqi archaeologist who verified all these facts to me did so on the condition of anonymity.[3]

Mass atrocities are routinely denied by those who must account and take responsibility for them. The Iraqi government and KRG do not fully acknowledge the massacres of Assyrians that took place in 1933 at Simele and elsewhere.[4] Indeed, non-Assyrian Iraqis today commonly argue that the operations in which these massacres occurred were necessary and justified. Should they wish to validate that stance, state officials and other Iraqis can point to numerous works published by reputable scholars in English—books from major university presses by respected historians and peer-reviewed articles in high-impact journals—that confirm, in some form, a version of the events that was initially circulated by supporters of the Iraqi state position. According to this account, British colonial sources (and Assyrians themselves, whose perspective is considered

[2] See, for example, Taiyo Davis, "Kurdistan Continues to Neglect Gravesite of Massacre That Inspired the Term 'Genocide,'" Truthout, May 27, 2018, https://truthout.org/articles/kurdistan-continues-to-neglect-gravesite-of-massacre-that-inspired-the-term-genocide.

[3] Iraqi archaeologist, interview, July 26, 2022. The archaeologist is personally familiar with the Simele site.

[4] Very recently as of this writing, the Iraqi government and the KRG have, after decades of denial, signaled movement toward recognition of the massacre at Simele. It is not yet clear how thoroughly historically accurate (or conditional) this recognition of the events of 1933 will be, nor is it clear how substantively this recognition will constitute restitution for Assyrians. See, e.g.: "Duhok Governor Reaffirms Shared Destiny as Foundation Stone Laid for Assyrian Genocide Memorial," *Kurdistan24*, January 4, 2026, accessed February 6, 2026, https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/885179.

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interchangeable with the colonial one) exaggerate the number of dead for orientalist or Islamophobic reasons; the Iraqi state was acting in self-defense against an uprising; the casualties were nearly all combatant men who were an invasive entity originating in Turkey; and any unjustifiable killings that took place were the unfortunate but expected excesses of junior Iraqi troops and disorganized local combatants, without any involvement by high-level officials.

Nearly all the works that repeat a variation of this narrative rely heavily on a single two-part article published in 1974 in the world's top Middle East studies journal, the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (*IJMES*).[5] More than a half-century after its publication, that article is still widely regarded as the definitive academic study of the events of 1933. Within its text, the author, Khaldun S. Husry, laments that accounts of the events that are based on Assyrian recollections of the killings are "propaganda of the victims." Husry characterizes the massacres as a tragic but normal occurrence. He compares the Iraqi state's actions, which he argues were necessary, to those of the United States in Vietnam. He even fondly remembers celebrating the massacres alongside other citizens of Baghdad at the time that they occurred. The editor of *IJMES* at the time, Stanford Shaw, was a denier of the Armenian genocide who presented Husry's article as support for his revisionist stance on violence against certain groups of indigenous Christians in the Middle East. Despite these, and other, patent indications that any scholar reading the text should proceed with caution, those who rely on Husry usually accept his work at face value, repeating his ideas with little to no qualification and without serious regard for the perspectives of Assyrian survivors.

To understand fully this decades-long historical malpractice, it is necessary to acknowledge and examine the systematic disparagement of Assyrians in the academic literature of Middle East studies. Historians and other scholars routinely treat Assyrians as problematic, questioning their legitimacy through colonial, racist logic. They pathologize changes in identification, communal practices, and political mobilization—the kinds of changes that groups of people make and undergo as the definitions of community shift over time, particularly under state pressure—as unacceptable discontinuities that prove that Assyrian communal fashioning is, to use terms that have appeared in peer-reviewed scholarship, "bogus" or "hogwash." In the context of Iraq in particular, these scholars persistently characterize Assyrians as outsiders and as a colonizing force in the early years of the state; the Assyrians they are referring to when they write this (who did not constitute all the Assyrians in Iraq) were refugees from a genocide committed nearby. If Assyrians reply to these charges by describing any links they can ascertain to their continuous presence on Mesopotamian territory, Middle East studies scholars accuse them of being deluded. They claim, as moral licensing for their contempt, that their aim is to critique Assyrians' alleged ethnic nationalism or chauvinism from a reasoned, academic perspective.

[5] Khaldun S. Husry, "The Assyrian Affair of 1933 (I)," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 5, no. 2 (1974); Khaldun S. Husry, "The Assyrian Affair of 1933 (II)," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 5, no. 3 (1974).

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Assyrians are a people native to northern Mesopotamia and nearby regions who speak a modern language descended from Aramaic and are traditionally Christian.[6] Middle East studies scholars unduly treat the question of whether Assyrians were created by Western missionaries in the nineteenth century as the single most essential debate in modern Assyrian history, regardless of their answer to that question. As a result, racist scrutiny of Assyrians' purported origins pervades the academic literature on modern Assyrians. Scholars could pursue other lines of inquiry about Assyrians that assume the basic premises typically accepted in academic studies of other people bound by an identification and subject position: that they exist, that change over time occurs, and that people's endonyms can be respected.[7] There are good and bad ways to write the history of ethnic identity formation and to critique nationalism. Scholarly mistreatment of Assyrians reveals the shoddiness of some modes of this allegedly critical practice. There are more substantive and thoughtful methods for writing about the communal mobilizations of indigenous peoples, minoritized groups, and survivors of mass violence.

The harmful historiography on Assyrians also illustrates just how high the stakes can be when writing about people who have suffered mass atrocities. The Ottoman Empire killed a third or more of Assyrians during World War I in a genocide Assyrians call Seyfo, alongside the larger scale and better-known systematic killings of the Armenian genocide.[8] Seyfo was as brutal as the Armenian genocide and equally catastrophic for the people it targeted: regions in southeastern Anatolia were permanently emptied of their indigenous people and villages, entire dialects of the Assyrian language (or Neo-Aramaic) became extinct, and most surviving Assyrians struggled as refugees, many of them

[6] Today, Christianity is not necessarily a constitutive element of Assyrian peoplehood and personal identity for all Assyrians. Some Assyrians are atheists, for example, or practice the religion of a non-Assyrian parent or spouse, but speak the Assyrian language and participate in other community practices. This is one of the many ways that the meaning of being Assyrian has changed as most of the community has moved away from its places of origin. It is also one of the reasons the word Christian (as in Iraqi Christian, Iranian Christian, and so forth) cannot be prescribed as a substitute for Assyrian to avoid the allegedly problematic nature of the latter term. This point is discussed in the second section of this article.

[7] This point about endonyms might raise the question: what about descendants of Aramaic-speaking Christians who are considered Assyrians by those who self-identify with that term, but who do not themselves identify that way, given that many such people use the endonyms Chaldean, Syriac, Aramaean, or simply Christian (not to mention a variety of endonyms in Arabic and other languages)? In this article, I use the term Assyrian broadly to include all the people who call themselves *suraye* or *suryoye* in their own native language. I do so nonprescriptively and without chauvinism. For a more detailed explanation of this nonprescriptive usage of the term Assyrian, see Alda Benjamen, *Assyrians in Modern Iraq: Negotiating Political and Cultural Space* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 1–26. I contend that sectarian and appellative differences among *suraye/suryoye* —although salient elsewhere—do not affect the arguments I am advancing here. The central problem I am examining is the pervasive scholarly problematizing of Assyrians qua Assyrians, not the dispute over (for example) whether self-identified Chaldeans also should be called Assyrians.

[8] Key works on Seyfo include: David Gaunt, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim-Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia during World War I* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2006); and Joseph Yacoub, *Year of the Sword: The Assyrian Christian Genocide; A History*, trans. James Ferguson (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016).

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orphaned children.[9] Then, the 1933 massacres in Iraq largely targeted Seyfo's refugee survivors and their young descendants. Both atrocities are today denied by successor governments, and either widely disbelieved or simply unknown by the broader populations, in the places where they occurred. The lack of acknowledgment combined with active denial lays the groundwork for continued dispossession. Violence against Assyrians persisted on and off through the twentieth century, then intensified in the wake of the US-led coalition invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the civil war in Syria that began in 2011. These conflicts drove most remaining Assyrians out of their homes entirely. Assyrians' fight for recognition of their dead is therefore also a fight for present-day survival.

How Not to Write about Atrocities

The ways that academics discuss Assyrians today were shaped by the fact that one of the most widely cited works in modern Assyrian history was written by an apologist for the Iraqi state's massacres of Assyrians in 1933 and published by a denier of the Armenian genocide. The assumptions and harmful tropes about Assyrians found in that article have been repeated uncritically in many influential works of history since.[10]

Khaldun S. Husry was the son of Satiʿ al-Husri, an Arab nationalist intellectual of Syrian origin who was serving as the director general of Iraq's ministry of education at the time of Khaldun's birth in 1923, and Jamila al-Husri, a Turkish-born elite related to the Ottoman dynasty. Both Satiʿ and Jamila al-Husri were personally close to the Hashemite royal family and in particular to Iraq's first king, Faysal I, who had been installed as part of the process of establishing the British mandate over Iraq. Husry married into the family of Rashid ʿAli al-Gaylani in 1950. Gaylani was a former prime minister of Iraq who had led a coup against a British-linked Iraqi government in 1941, during which time he briefly aligned with the Axis powers. Gaylani was then overthrown by a British invasion of Iraq the same year.[11]

[9] The language modern Assyrians speak, usually called Assyrian (or Sureth or Surayt) within the community, also is described in English as Neo-Aramaic, especially by academic linguists, or as Syriac. The latter term, used by some Assyrians themselves, is common because of the resemblance of the language to classical Syriac and its use of Syriac script. Syriac, however, is a literary form of Aramaic that is distinct from Assyrians' modern written and spoken language. Linguists generally observe that what they call Neo-Aramaic derives directly from a pre-Syriac ancient vernacular from northern Mesopotamia, not from Syriac itself. See, for example, Geoffrey Khan, *The Neo-Aramaic Dialect of the Assyrian Christians of Urmi*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 7–28.

[10] The adoption of Husry's work in Middle East studies has previously been critiqued by Sargon Donabed, whose work on the massacres of 1933 I cite later in this section. For Donabed's commentary on the role of Husry's work in the field, see Sargon Donabed, "The Existential Threat of Academic Bias: The Institutionalization of Anti-Assyrian Rhetoric," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 54, no. 3 (2022): 547–53.

[11] Husry describes these personal details in the front matter of his PhD dissertation; Khaldun S. Husry, "Iraq, From Independence to Coup d'Etat: 1930–1936" (PhD diss., American University of Beirut, 1972), vii. The context, events, and aftermath of Rashid ʿAli al-Gaylani's 1941 coup are

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Husry pursued graduate-level study in history in his late thirties and through his forties, earning a master's degree and a PhD from the American University of Beirut (AUB).[12] His PhD dissertation, a history of Iraq from 1930 to 1936, was filed in October 1972. As Hana Sleiman has demonstrated, AUB was a primary site where Arab history–making developed between the 1920s and 1950s as a professionalized, scientific discipline under the leadership of Constantine Zurayq and other scholars. In their own self-conception, Arab historians emerged as impartial arbiters of knowledge, excavating and interpreting facts about the past in order to determine the Arab future.[13] The politics intertwined with these new scholarly trends among both faculty and students were strongly influenced by Arab nationalism. Iraqi students had been present at AUB, and had formed a key component of Arab nationalist thought there, since at least the 1920s.[14] Beginning in the late 1960s, radical leftist student activists, shaken by the Arab world's events of 1967 and inspired by the global movements of 1968, roiled the campus with protests. The younger leaders of these movements pulled back somewhat from traditional currents of Arab nationalism more common to Husry's slightly older generation—for instance, they deprioritized the role of Gamal Abdel Nasser as an Arab leader. Their concerns were simultaneously local, demanding greater influence over affairs on campus; regional, underscoring solidarity with Palestine; and global, protesting the American invasion of Vietnam and other imperialist violence.[15]

Husry developed his account of the 1933 Assyrian massacres in this milieu. Trained in the new approach developed by AUB historians, Husry emphasizes in his PhD dissertation that he has tried only to ascertain the facts about what happened between 1930 and 1936 in Iraq, differentiating this narrative from his "personal views."[16] At the same time, he renders judgments about the agents involved and the causes and effects of historical events—claims that, by design, had direct contemporary applications in Iraqi politics. When writing about what he calls "the Assyrian affair," Husry situates his history-writing as a critique of colonialism in Iraq, a political stance consistent with both Arab nationalist and anti-imperialist trends in his environment. However, he also employs a heavy-handed empiricist method, relying almost entirely on the content and logic of the British colonial archive. The presumptions he makes about the fundamental truth of this archive's holdings lead him to muddled, self-contradictory, and racist reasoning. Despite his posturing, some of Husry's comments on Iraq and the Assyrians evince views at odds with the radical politics of many of his fellow AUB scholars.

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complex; a summary is found in Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 97–104.

[12] Khaldun S. el-Husry, "Three Reformers: A Study in Modern Arab Political Thought" (master's thesis, American University of Beirut, 1962).

[13] Hana Sleiman, "History Writing and History Making in Twentieth Century Beirut" (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2021).

[14] Betty S. Anderson, *The American University of Beirut: Arab Nationalism and Liberal Education* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2011), 131.

[15] Ibid., 151–82.

[16] Husry, "Iraq," viii.

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Husry's 1974 *IJMES* article on "the Assyrian affair," based on this PhD research, summarizes most of the major occurrences leading to the massacres of Assyrians in 1933 by the Iraqi army and irregular local combatants. In the following retelling of that summary, I have put Husry in conversation with Sargon Donabed, who wrote his account of 1933 as a corrective to the prevailing version of these events, and Mariam Georgis, who uses the analytic of indigeneity to understand the position of Assyrians in Iraq.[17] After the independence of the Iraqi state from the British mandate in 1932, longstanding disputes among the state, Kurdish and Arab communities, and Assyrians in Iraq descended into catastrophe. Assyrians were among the minoritized peoples in the new state, along with Kurds, Turkmens, and Yazidis, who were wary of the consequences of the end of the mandate and sought to preserve some kind of independent communal sovereignty, often through nationalist movements. The Assyrians in Iraq, many of whom were survivors of either Seyfo in the Ottoman Empire or the agonizing death march from Urmia in Iran, had faced numerous smaller-scale acts of violence at the hands of Arab and Kurdish neighbors in the years since World War I.[18] During the mandate, thousands of the community's men had been armed as part of British-commanded security forces, the Iraq Levies (which also included several thousand Muslim non-Assyrians), and, in turn, had committed acts of violence against other people in Iraq in that capacity.[19] Their search for autonomy also was shaped, of course, by ideas about Assyrian nationhood that had been forming since the nineteenth century. This was the context in which a faction of Assyrians who were loyal to Mar Eshai Shimun (1908–1975), the patriarch of the Church of the East, sought autonomy in northern Iraq—and considered the possibility of achieving this elsewhere, such as in the French mandate of Syria—under the patriarch's leadership.

Non-Assyrian Iraqis generally regarded Assyrian refugees as a threatening external force in Iraq, a fifth column originating in Turkey and loyal to Britain.[20] But these Assyrians were moving within lands that their families had traversed for generations and therefore did not see themselves as outsiders within newly drawn colonial boundaries, nor as distinct from Assyrians already living in Iraq.[21] Furthermore, thousands of the British-commanded Iraq Levies

[17] Sargon George Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History: Iraq and the Assyrians in the Twentieth Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 93–124; Mariam Georgis, "Nation and Identity Construction in Iraq: (Re)inserting the Assyrians," in *Unsettling Colonial Modernity in Islamicate Contexts*, ed. Siavash Saffari, Roxana Akhbari, Kara Abdolmaleki, and Evelyn Hamdon (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2017), 67–87.

[18] For instance, in one 1923 incident that distressed the community greatly, two Assyrian children were killed in Mosul; Arbella Bet-Shlimon, *City of Black Gold: Oil, Ethnicity, and the Making of Modern Kirkuk* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 59.

[19] An estimate of around one thousand Assyrians in the Iraq Levies as of 1931 comes from David Omissi, "Britain, the Assyrians, and the Iraq Levies, 1919–1932," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 17, no. 3 (1989): 312. The levies had been majority Assyrian earlier in the mandate, but eventually included many non-Assyrians. The most infamous attack by the Assyrians in the levies against non-Assyrians took place in Kirkuk in 1924; Bet-Shlimon, *City of Black Gold*, 57–65.

[20] Husry, "Assyrian Affair of 1933 (I)," 161–66.

[21] Georgis, "Nation and Identity Construction in Iraq."

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had been non-Assyrians, the Arab Iraqi monarchy had been created by Britain, and the predominantly Arab Iraqi military was armed by Britain. In these changed post-mandate circumstances, Assyrian refugees did not assume that they had the backing of the British Empire any longer. Assyrians responded to these new circumstances in different ways. Mar Eshai Shimun and his loyalists, for their part, adopted a strategy of appealing repeatedly to international powers via the League of Nations for assistance in creating and settling an autonomous region.

At one point in late July 1933, a group of armed Assyrian men crossed into French-controlled Syria, then returned to Iraq's northwestern border, where they faced Iraqi troops. Those armed Assyrians fought a battle with Iraqi troops on August 4 and 5, 1933. Iraqi sources, to which Husry lends credence, claim that the Assyrian combatants mutilated several Iraqi troops whom they had killed in the battle. In retaliation for this reported act, Iraqi general Bakr Sidqi ordered the summary execution of fifteen disarmed Assyrian men who had been brought to him by Kurdish irregulars.[22] This was the beginning of many summary executions of Assyrian men and attacks on Assyrian villages by Arab and Kurdish Iraqis. Thousands of Assyrians, many of whom had no association with Mar Eshai Shimun or the Church of the East, fled their homes amid killings, kidnappings, sexual violence, and looting. The largest single killing was the massacre of hundreds in Simele, where many displaced Assyrian civilians had taken refuge, on August 11, by a machine-gun detachment of the Iraqi army. By the end of the month, the Iraqi military and irregulars had attacked over 120 villages. British aerial surveillance photographs even show evidence that the Iraqi military, using British-manufactured warplanes and bombs, bombarded some locations from the air.[23] The massacre at Simele and the other massacres of Assyrians in 1933 were a shattering blow to people who had already survived a genocide, triggering community-wide fear and grief that has persisted for generations.

The central argument in Husry's article is that the Iraqi government bore no responsibility for the mass murder of Assyrians. Husry attributes the massacre in Simele exclusively to a lower-level army officer, going so far as to suggest that the officer's men inadvertently found themselves amid a "melee" in the village that was already in progress.[24] Husry scarcely mentions the widespread violence against Assyrians in other villages that continued through August 1933. He also downplays the total number of dead.[25] Having minimized the violence and absolved the Iraqi state of responsibility for any "terrible excesses" that might have happened, he then, in an obvious self-contradiction, closes the article by asserting that those excesses were necessary to save the Iraqi state from dissolution.[26] As atrocity deniers typically do, Husry characterizes the atrocity he is denying as both insignificant—a sad but minor aberration, not a deliberate

[22] Husry, "Assyrian Affair of 1933 (I)," 175–76.
[23] Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History*, 106–23.
[24] Husry, "Assyrian Affair of 1933 (II)," 346.
[25] Ibid., 353–54.
[26] Ibid., 360.

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crime consistent with systematic violence—and as something that its victims deserved. He bolsters the latter stance by characterizing those victims with bigoted language: Assyrians, collectively, were "swaggering . . . conceited and self-willed"; Mar Eshai Shimun was "obdurate" and "arrogant"; Surma Khanum, the aunt of Mar Eshai Shimun, was a "fanatic."[27]

Much of Husry's argument rests on the assumption that the Assyrian perspective is interchangeable with the British colonial one because many Assyrian men had once served in the Iraq Levies; and, correspondingly, that British colonial sources must be expressing views sympathetic to Assyrians. Therefore, he reasons, if British sources are disparaging Assyrians, those comments must be impartial facts that can be repeated without qualification and used as proof of the truth of a pro-Iraqi-state claim. For instance, Husry blames the Assyrians for provoking their own killings because armed Assyrian men started the confrontation with Iraqi troops on the Syrian border, presenting the British colonial account of the episode as the definitive verification that it must have happened that way.[28] He approvingly repeats British military officer R. S. Stafford's characterization of Assyrians as having a "natural conceit . . . [that] has no bounds," claiming that Stafford's writing gives accurate insight into Assyrian "psychology." Astonishingly, Husry characterizes Stafford as a pro-Assyrian source.[29] He maintains this stance even while writing about British military support for the Iraqi violence and about how British complicity in brutalizing Assyrians was controversial in Britain.[30]

Many other egregious examples of poor reasoning permeate the text. For instance, Husry compares the Simele violence to the then-recent massacre committed by American troops at My Lai in Vietnam in 1968 by way of arguing that such events are tragic but normal. Husry—who almost certainly witnessed protests on the AUB campus of this very atrocity after it became public knowledge in 1969—dismissively writes, "the world has sadly learned since 1933 that My-Lais occur in modern wars." He then affectionately recalls how, as a child in 1933, he had celebrated the Iraqi soldiers who had carried out the "operations" when they returned to Baghdad by showering them with freshly picked flowers from his family's garden.[31] (An American diplomat at the time reported that an Assyrian man, a former officer of the dissolved Iraq Levies, was lynched in Baghdad amid this victory parade.[32]) Husry, in other words, defends imperial violence despite positioning the article as an anticolonial critique.

[27] Husry, "Assyrian Affair of 1933 (I)," 166–70.

[28] Ibid., 174–75.

[29] Ibid., 164. As also noted below, Stafford's account of the 1933 violence is frequently cited as a pro-Assyrian perspective to this day despite its grave flaws. For example, in addition to his bigoted language describing Assyrians, he blames Yazidi tribes for participating in the massacres, a claim that is inconsistent with what is known about Assyrian–Yazidi relations and for which he appears to be the sole source. R. S. Stafford, *The Tragedy of the Assyrians* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1935).

[30] Husry, "Assyrian Affair of 1933 (II)," 355–58.

[31] Ibid., 347–52.

[32] Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History*, 122.

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Husry's *IJMES* article was unusually long by an academic journal's standards—around 18,000 words including notes, such that the journal had to publish it in two parts across two issues in an era when it was constrained by the limitations of print. *IJMES* was, at the time, a new journal that had been conceived and inaugurated as part of the establishment of the Middle East Studies Association of North America in 1966. Its founding editor was Stanford Shaw, a historian of the Ottoman Empire and Turkey at the University of California, Los Angeles. The journal's first issue (volume 1, no. 1) was published in January 1970.[33] The first half of Husry's article appeared in volume 5, no. 2, and the second half appeared in the next issue (no. 3) of the same volume.

The article's length indicates that Husry did not initially write it for the journal and did not significantly modify it from its original form for publication. The article that appeared in *IJMES* in early 1974 is, in fact, almost identical to the fourth chapter of the dissertation that Husry filed at AUB in late 1972. There is only one meaningful difference between the two texts: the dissertation chapter includes a short paragraph describing a few of the particularly cruel acts that Iraqi troops committed against women and a child in Simele, but this paragraph does not appear in the *IJMES* article.[34] The other differences are, for the most part, very small omissions of the dissertation text (not enough to substantially reduce the word count), corrections of typos, or minor changes to the wording and grammar to bring the original text in line with *IJMES* style. Even some phrasings like "as we shall later see," referring to content upcoming in later chapters in the dissertation (which, of course, are not in the journal), were not caught in edits and appear in the *IJMES* article.[35] It is difficult to determine with certainty what kind of editorial process the article was subjected to, including whether it went through blind peer review, a new practice at the time.[36] Nevertheless, the close similarity and completion timing of the two texts indicates that Husry mailed a mostly or entirely unmodified typescript of the chapter from Beirut to Los Angeles for review soon after completing it and that it was accepted for publication with minimal edits and without substantial corrections or revisions.

In an editorial essay introducing volume 5, no. 2, Shaw explains that his selection of articles for the issue reflected his views of the benefits and costs of the Ottoman Empire's "*millet* system" for managing "various ethnic, social, and religious groups." He writes:

> Every individual and every *millet* had a place, contact and conflict were avoided, and social peace was maintained. . . . Of course this social peace was

[33] Zachary Lockman, *Field Notes: The Making of Middle East Studies in the United States* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 173–81.

[34] Husry, "Iraq," 146. The paragraph does not appear on the corresponding page of the *IJMES* article; Husry, "Assyrian Affair of 1933 (II)," 344.

[35] Husry, "Assyrian Affair of 1933 (II)," 355.

[36] *IJMES* does not maintain editorial archives. Despite many inquiries over several years, I have not been able to locate anyone with firsthand memory of the article's publication (or anyone willing to share that memory), nor any personal papers of members of the journal's editorial board at the time that contain relevant material.

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> achieved at a price. There were problems at times, the greatest of which was mutual scorn.[37]

To contextualize Husry's article along with the others in the issue, Shaw then expounds at length on what he sees as the primary cause of that "mutual scorn"—European imperial intervention, which, he says, non-Muslims welcomed. He argues that this influence also spurred non-Muslims' identity formation as communities antagonistic to Muslims, leading tragically to back-and-forth violence:

> For those *millets* which were not of the faith of the Ruling Class, a tendency also developed to identify with those nations of Europe who shared the same religion and which, in the age of Ottoman decline, had achieved political, military and financial power. Those nations, in turn, as part of their efforts to take advantage of the declining Ottoman state . . . starting early in the nineteenth century, encouraged this identification as much as possible, championing the causes of particular minorities . . . As the nations of Europe began to take rule over one part of the Middle East after another, members of these native non-Muslim *millets* became the principal local agents of the conquerors, identifying themselves even more with the latter at the expense of the scorned Muslims, who were now at the bottom of the ladder of the nations they had once ruled. The scorn and hatred which resulted led to massacre and counter massacre in the decades between 1890 and 1920, to a large extent the direct result of the intrusion of European imperialist ambitions and ideologies.[38]

Conspicuously, Shaw's periodization of 1890 to 1920 for the time of tumultuous mutual violence includes the Hamidian massacres, the Armenian genocide, and Seyfo.

The claims Shaw makes in his editorial note are familiar from the historiography of the Ottoman Empire. At the time, the theory of a "declining" Ottoman state in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was common. So was the assumption that the Ottoman state was adept at managing difference, and the accompanying claim that any violence that occurred in the empire must have been a result of minoritarian bigotry or foreign meddling. In particular, Shaw's coauthored book with his spouse Ezel Kural Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, volume 2, published in 1977, is notorious for justifying the pre–World War I massacres of Armenians and denying the Ottomans' World War I genocides. In their work, the Shaws minimized the number of Armenian dead through dubious interpretations of population statistics; blamed the mass killings on the fact that Armenian militias sided with Russia in the war; and suggested that the Ottoman Empire's brutalized and displaced indigenous Christian communities in fact held power over the Muslim majority because of imperial intervention.[39]

[37] Stanford J. Shaw, "The Editor's Desk," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 5, no. 2 (1974): 121.

[38] Shaw, "Editor's Desk," 121–22.

[39] Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1977). For the sections of the book making these claims, see especially 200–6, 313–17.

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Stanford Shaw's editorial note for the *IJMES* issue in which he chose to place Husry's article therefore frames the articles within it as contiguous with his own then-ongoing revisionist scholarship. Shaw's promotion of Husry's article on the Assyrians was not merely linked to his more infamous denial of the Armenian genocide—it was a preview of the same line of reasoning. Most strikingly, in their 1977 book, the Shaws ended up using identical terminology to that in Stanford Shaw's 1974 essay introducing Husry's work—"massacre and counter massacre"—to obfuscate intention and responsibility for the annihilation of Armenians.[40] Furthermore, the preliminary sketch of Shaw's genocide denial theory, evident in his framing of Husry's article, is predicated on the idea that Europeans "encouraged" the distinct "identification" of native minoritized Christians.[41] The latter idea is central not only to denial of the Armenian genocide, but also to the denial of Assyrian peoplehood outside of the context of nineteenth-century nationalism. I will address this point in the next section of the present article.

Shaw also identifies in his editorial note what he believes to be a crucial contrast: the treacherous Christians who sided with the imperialists, like the Assyrians discussed by Husry, versus the assimilated Arab Christians who adopted anticolonial ideologies alongside their Muslim compatriots. He writes approvingly that one of the articles in the issue, Donald M. Reid's "The Syrian Christians and Early Socialism in the Arab World," which appears immediately after Husry's, is about the latter, more admirable group of Christians:

> Reid . . . discusses the role of those Syrian Christians who accepted the new order in their homeland, identified themselves with the aspirations for independence on the part of their Muslim brothers, and instead of attempting to join the imperialists attempted to apply what was best in European ideologies of the time to the particular situation and problems of the Arab world.[42]

In an interview, Reid told me that he had submitted "Syrian Christians" to *IJMES* in 1970 alongside another article and that both articles were accepted at that time, but that the journal held "Syrian Christians" for a few years prior to publication. Reid does not own a copy of the full issue and therefore did not know until I told him in 2022 that his article had been published back-to-back with Husry's in this manner. When I read the relevant portions of Shaw's editorial essay aloud to him, Reid reacted with surprise and described it as "a pretty loaded interpretation" of his work.[43]

[40] Shaw and Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire*, 204.

[41] For a book-length analysis of some of these discourses, including Shaw's claims in his own work, with specific attention to the role of Turkish Jews and Jewish historians, see Marc David Baer, *Sultanic Saviors and Tolerant Turks: Writing Ottoman Jewish History, Denying the Armenian Genocide* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2020).

[42] Shaw, "Editor's Desk," 123; Donald M. Reid, "The Syrian Christians and Early Socialism in the Arab World," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 5, no. 2 (1974): 177–93.

[43] Donald M. Reid, interview, August 2, 2022.

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It is Husry's article—written by the scion of a prominent and wealthy family close to the Iraqi establishment, packed full of racist calumny, self-contradiction, and faulty reasoning, and published under the auspices of a well-known genocide denier who promoted the article as coterminous with his revisionist stance—that all too often serves as the basis of accounts of the events of 1933 in Iraq. Even recent scholarship that includes endnotes referring to responsibly written histories of Assyrians nevertheless reproduces many of Husry's principal claims without so much as mentioning that massacres of Assyrians occurred in places other than Simele, as though the more credible sources cited were not actually read.[44] Indeed, in some cases, this barely edited PhD dissertation chapter from the early 1970s is one of the only works primarily about Assyrians cited at all in books about Iraq by nonspecialists.[45]

The consequences of this choice are evident throughout the historiography that relies on Husry. Multiple histories of Iraq published by academic presses repeat verbatim Husry's characterization of the Assyrians as "swaggering," for example, without any critical distance or quotation marks.[46] They also repeat without qualification Husry's description of Assyrians as foreigners in Iraq, disregarding the Assyrians who already lived in Iraq.[47] Like Husry, they conflate the movements of armed men with the movements of the entire community of refugees, using language that suggests that the migrants were inherently threatening and suspect.[48] They follow his lead of neglecting to mention that the Assyrians in Iraq who were refugees were survivors of a genocide—a genocide that, for decades, was widely denied in the Ottomanist literature. This omission occurs even in works published long after the Ottoman studies field largely came to recognize the genocide.[49]

These reiterations of Husry's main points have continued into the present despite the development in recent years of a robust body of scholarship on Assyrians in modern Iraq that calls those points into question. To some extent,

[44] See, for example, Ussama Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 156–60, 250–51.

[45] The other work frequently cited alongside it, apparently presumed to be the definitive pro-Assyrian counterpoint perspective, is British military officer R. S. Stafford's 1935 account of the events of 1933; Stafford, *Tragedy of the Assyrians.* As discussed above, that presumption (which Husry himself makes) is dubious, as Stafford uses racist language to describe Assyrians and tries to absolve Britain of blame in the massacres. For books that cite only these two Assyrian-focused sources when discussing Assyrians see, for example, Ali Allawi, *Faisal I of Iraq* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), 605; Phebe Marr and Ibrahim al-Marashi, *The Modern History of Iraq*, 4th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2017), 356; Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett, *Iraq since 1958: From Revolution to Dictatorship* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1987), 316–17; and Reidar Visser, *Basra, the Failed Gulf State: Separatism and Nationalism in Southern Iraq* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction, 2005), 223, 229.

[46] See, for example, Allawi, *Faisal I*, 554; and Reeva Spector Simon, *Iraq between the Two World Wars: The Militarist Origins of Tyranny*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 113.

[47] See, for example, Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence*, 156.

[48] See, for example, Daniel Silverfarb, *Britain's Informal Empire in the Middle East: A Case Study of Iraq, 1929–1941* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1986), 34.

[49] See, for example, Johan Franzén, *Pride and Power: A Modern History of Iraq* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021), 52; and Sami Zubaida, "Contested Nations: Iraq and the Assyrians," *Nations and Nationalism* 6, no. 3 (2000): 372.

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the persistence of Husry's influence is a familiar problem found in many other cases of repeated scholarly error—a self-perpetuating citational habit promoted by nonspecialists who continue to refer to a widely cited text because they infer from its ubiquity that it is probably the most important work on a certain topic. But benign mistakes are not the only explanation for this problem. I know from personal experience that many of my colleagues deliberately disregard, and even disdain, Assyrian perspectives. Their behavior is no surprise; after all, most of the works they read and cite from major journals and university presses over the course of their careers treat Assyrians as deluded chauvinists whose very origins are so suspect that they should be repeatedly challenged.

How Not to Critique Ethnic Nationalism

To understand the shoddy academic treatment of the 1933 Assyrian massacres in Iraq, it is necessary to examine the attacks on Assyrians and basic aspects of their existence that retain purchase in scholarly literature. That phenomenon, in turn, will not make sense if the reader is not aware from the outset that it is interlaced with pervasive interpersonal hostility toward Assyrians in academia, particularly in Middle East studies. The mundane combativeness faced by Assyrian scholars and students has seldom been documented and exposed because it is difficult and professionally risky to do so. These risks are compounded by the precarious status of most Assyrian academics. The majority of Assyrians producing academic knowledge are graduate students, contingent researchers, untenured faculty, or independent writers and activists who have to maintain cordial relations with those within the academy (especially the Anglophone academy) to publish and present their work in peer-reviewed venues.

As a tenured professor, I am an exception to the rule and can speak more freely on this topic. There have been innumerable instances over the course of my career in which a colleague has, in a professional setting, responded with unease, contempt, or mockery when I simply use the word Assyrian to describe myself. Often, they then try to convince me that being Assyrian is not a real thing, and that describing myself that way makes me a nationalist or a bigot. On one memorable occasion, a distinguished senior professor of Arabic literature fought me for several minutes, forcefully maintaining that I am an Arab (even though nobody in my family lived in an Arabophone region or spoke Arabic with native fluency until my parents' generation) and that calling myself Assyrian was "Islamophobic." Every time I relate these stories to fellow Assyrians who have studied or worked in higher education, from college students to fellow faculty, I hear similar stories from them in return.

Helpfully, one historian, Adam Becker, documented in an academic article an instance in which he badgered an Assyrian colleague in this manner, describing the term Assyrian as "hogwash." Becker's admission—rare among the academics who engage in this behavior—permits a closer look at the practice from the view of the perpetrator. In his telling, while traveling in Turkey, Becker encountered a fellow visitor from Boston named Sargon. He was initially pleased to be able to speak English after days of speaking a "pigeon [sic]

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English-Turkish" with the locals. Then, he proceeded to have a "friendly but persistent disagreement" with Sargon. The disagreement was over whether Sargon's self-description as "Assyrian" was more accurate than if he called himself, as Becker prefers, "East Syrian," "Nestorian," or "Syriac Christian." Becker then describes himself as a historian critical of nationalisms in the tradition of Benedict Anderson or Eric Hobsbawm, contrasting himself with Sargon. In a footnote, Becker identifies his interlocutor as Sargon Donabed, who was a graduate student at the time.[50]

Becker's interpersonal behavior is key to understanding his argument in the article, which reflects widespread patterns in the literature when discussing modern Assyrians. After remarking smugly that "clearly some modern Assyrians feel threatened" because people like him are examining their history, he writes:

> The issue is in part one of semantics: "Assyrian" was a term that Aramaic-speaking Christians employed to refer to themselves for centuries, but does this make them Assyrian? I would like to present a compromise position . . . [that] would not please some Assyrian nationalists . . . This positioning vis-à-vis an Occidental Other does not find its origin in the nineteenth century, but rather in the sixth century and even before.[51]

Notably, Becker acknowledges that there have long been endonyms in Neo-Aramaic that can reasonably be understood as linked to the term "Assyrian"—well before the existence of the concepts of ethnicity or nationalism. That is, these endonyms are not dishonest fabrications. Of course, the same continuity of terminology (however partial and variable it may be) is found among many other groups that have since adopted a particular modern notion of themselves. Becker even admits in the article's closing that his own preferred term, Syriac, is "ironically . . . a modern, Western term only taken up of late by some parts of the 'Syriac' community" (quotation marks in the original).[52]

Becker also positions himself as a moderate in the debate over Assyrian origins, adding nuance to the common thesis that Assyrians first came into existence when American and European missionaries forged that appellation based on the name of an ancient empire and then applied it to some tribes of Christians they came across in the Ottoman Empire and Iran in the nineteenth century. The proponents of the maximal form of this thesis describe the term Assyrian as "false" or even as orientalist propaganda.[53] In her well-known book

[50] Adam H. Becker, "The Ancient Near East in the Late Antique Near East: Syriac Christian Appropriation of the Biblical East," in *Antiquity in Antiquity: Jewish and Christian Pasts in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Gregg Gardner and Kevin Lee Osterloh (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 394–98.

[51] Ibid., 397–98.

[52] Ibid., 415.

[53] Emil Christian Anton, "Why Christians Who Speak Jesus' Language Can't Agree on Their Name," *Christianity Today*, March 1, 2021, https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/march-web-only/assyrian-christians-iraq-aramaic-chaldean-syriac-pope-visit.html; for a summary of these kinds of claims, see Hannibal Travis, "The Assyrian Genocide across History: Collective Memory, Legal Theory, and Power Politics," in *The Assyrian Genocide: Cultural and Political Legacies*, ed. Hannibal Travis (London: Routledge, 2018), 8–9.

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on Assyrians in London, Madawi al-Rasheed supports the missionary fabrication thesis at length but shows more sympathy for the missionaries, explaining that the Assyrians exhibited "poverty, ignorance and backwardness" and that the Anglican mission "was above all a humanitarian and educational enterprise the purpose of which was to ameliorate their life conditions."[54] As established above, the idea that colonizers were the primary force behind the identity of Assyrians and other minoritized indigenous non-Muslims in the Muslim world also is favored by deniers of the Armenian genocide and Seyfo because it allows them to attribute violence against Christians in the Ottoman Empire to imperial meddling.[55]

There is no reason to believe that Becker or al-Rasheed are genocide deniers like Stanford Shaw. So why, having established that Assyrian self-identification is not a propagandistic fiction or a delusion planted in the minds of backward oriental Christians by missionaries, does Becker proceed with a "compromise position" on Assyrian origins? Why should someone inserting himself uninvited into Assyrians' conversations have any say whatsoever in setting the standard for what "make[s] them" Assyrian? Why does he dismiss anyone displeased with his engagement in the debate on Assyrian origins, and his insistence that Assyrians could only have come into existence "vis-à-vis an Occidental Other," as an "Assyrian nationalist"? Why does this debate, which smacks of colonial race science, still exist?

It is alarming how often Middle East studies professors cannot resist pulling out their calipers when they encounter Assyrians. Michael Gunter writes, when first introducing who Assyrians are, that they "claim descent from the ancient Assyrian Empire . . . [but] a substantial proportion of the Assyrians probably come from the same *racial stock* as their Muslim neighbors" (emphasis added). This assertion appeared in a book published by an academic imprint not in the heyday of eugenics, but in 2011.[56] Preeminent works of Iraqi history routinely open any discussion of Assyrians by noting that they are "Nestorians" who "claim descent from the ancient Assyrians."[57] Nestorianism is a theological position; not all Nestorians are Assyrians, and not all Assyrians are Nestorians. The most recent major survey of modern Iraqi history in English, written by Johan Franzén and published by Oxford University Press in 2021, opens a discussion of Assyrians by calling them "an unusual ethnic group . . . claiming descent from the ancient Akkadian kingdom of Assur."[58] I have not yet located an example of these authors introducing any other ethnic or national group—

[54] Madawi al-Rasheed, *Iraqi Assyrian Christians in London: The Construction of Ethnicity* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998), 38–39.

[55] Shaw, "Editor's Desk."

[56] Michael M. Gunter, *Historical Dictionary of the Kurds*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2011), 42–43.

[57] See, for example, two books that use this phrasing verbatim: Marr and al-Marashi, *Modern History of Iraq*, 14; and Silverfarb, *Britain's Informal Empire in the Middle East*, 33.

[58] Franzén, *Pride and Power*, 52. Moreover, it is not clear what Franzén means by the "ancient Akkadian kingdom of Assur."

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including those with elaborate nationalist myth complexes—with similar language.

Ironically, the scholars who introduce speculation about Assyrians' racial origins the moment they mention them are following in the tradition of the nineteenth-century missionaries whose colonial activities they believe they are questioning by using this language. In 1841, American physician Asahel Grant used the race science he had learned in his medical training to hypothesize that the Assyrians he was proselytizing to in Urmia were descended from the "Lost Tribes of Israel" because "the physiognomy of the Nestorian Christians bears a close resemblance to that of the Jews of the country in which they dwell."[59] In 1850, Anglican missionary J. P. Fletcher claimed, based on his physical observations, that the "modern inhabitants of the plain of Nineveh" shared "strong features of affinity" with "sculptural representations of the ancient Assyrians."[60] Works like Grant's and Fletcher's have now spawned two centuries' worth of racist speculation about Assyrians at a frequency that is not found in recent work on dominant ethnic and national groups in modern Middle East studies, where such arguments, although once common, have largely been discredited.[61] Other modern communities in the region that exhibit some kind of linguistic or geographical continuity with well-known ancient peoples also have been put through this kind of pathologizing scrutiny. Notably, modern Greeks were subject to stereotypes and questions about their origins, similar to those aimed at modern Assyrians, in works by twentieth-century classicists and historians of the Byzantine Empire as late as the 1960s. As Maria Mavroudi has documented, some of these works are still in print and regularly reissued.[62] The bigoted treatment of Assyrians is unusually persistent, however, and continues to appear in newly written literature.

But today, rather than trying to prove that Assyrians have an unchanged ancient "physiognomy," racist scholars usually argue the opposite: that a group of people who speak and express a distinct indigenous language and culture are wrong to claim that distinction, and should be limited to describing themselves with terms like Nestorian that refer to only some of their ancestors' theological positions, because any ancient bloodlines they might be descended from are too diluted to permit them to have any other kind of communal identity. For instance, J. F. Coakley argues that even though "the name 'Assyria' was

[59] Asahel Grant, *The Nestorians, or the Lost Tribes* (1841), as quoted in John Joseph, *The Modern Assyrians of the Middle East: Encounters with Western Christian Missions, Archaeologists, and Colonial Power* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 21.

[60] J. P. Fletcher, *Notes from Nineveh and Travels in Mesopotamia, Assyria, and Syria* (1850), as quoted in Joseph, *Modern Assyrians of the Middle East*, 21.

[61] On the development of genetic-nationalist science in and on Middle Eastern populations and how it has influenced the development of population genetics worldwide, see Elise Burton, *Genetic Crossroads: The Middle East and the Science of Human Heredity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021). Social-scientific arguments based on population genetics, however, are not usually credible in the humanities and social sciences today.

[62] Maria Mavroudi, "The Modern Study of Selfhood in Byzantium Compared with Medieval Europe and the Islamic World: Parallel and Diverging Trends in the Construction of 'East' and 'West,'" *Palaeoslavica* 30, no. 1/2 (2022): 236–237, 236n7, 237n8.

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remembered from ancient times," along with the appellation Assyrian, and "continued to be applied" in Syriac and Neo-Aramaic to people and places in northern Mesopotamia, the fact that people using those terms are not "the actual descendants of the ancient Assyrians" makes their communal identity a "bogus ethnology."[63] This position may appear at first glance to be more progressive than Grant's and Fletcher's, but it is equally rooted in discredited race science.

Many Assyrians, including me, find arguments about bloodlines and "racial stock" harmful and avoid them. But some other Assyrians have accepted their premises and engaged in them, enthusiastically seeking ways to prove that they are, in fact, direct descendants of ancient imperialists, sometimes to embarrassing effect. The recent embrace of race science among some Assyrians is reciprocal to the relentless imposition of a racist standard on them by academics. If calling themselves Assyrian and living in a place they call Assyria (or variants thereof) for centuries does not really "make them" Assyrian to their critics, they reason, maybe comparing their physical attributes to those of ancient Assyrian kings will do so.[64] Furthermore, this tendency is hardly unique to Assyrians, as the popularity of commercial DNA testing in the United States and its attendant questionable ideas about race, ethnicity, and descent from royalty amply demonstrate.[65]

Race science and myth complexes of magnificent lineage are common to many nationalisms. This is also true of the territorial nationalisms within the states Assyrians inhabit as a transnational indigenous community, such as Iraqi nationalism and Iranian nationalism. Consider the common insistence on referring to Assyrians as "Iraqi Christians," revealing the assumption that the term Iraqi, though equally associated with a potentially chauvinistic form of nationalism (and unquestionably a modern construction), is more objective than the term Assyrian and needs no avoidance or modification.[66] In other words, critical scholars today do not usually use the existence of problematic claims of origin to induce speculation about other groups' racial origins routinely before proceeding to other lines of scholarly inquiry. They also do not habitually use this fact to

[63] J. F. Coakley, *The Church of the East and the Church of England: A History of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Assyrian Mission* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1992), 366.

[64] For instance, one Assyrian author describes an incident in which his father, while arguing with a tour guide at the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute who was dismissing him as "one of those Iraqi Christians," compared his nose and beard to those on ancient Assyrian reliefs. Odisho Bet Ashur, "You Can't Be An Assyrian!!!" *Nineveh* 14, no. 1/2 (1991): 7–9.

[65] Indeed, when Assyrian American broadcaster Nineveh Dinha recorded a local news segment in Utah about commercial DNA testing with an apparently non-Assyrian genetic testing company representative, the two of them bonded over the fact that their test results revealed a common link to the Romanovs, Marie Antoinette, and other royalty. "Assyrian DNA—Fox News: Know Your Roots 2," November 16, 2008, accessed August 4, 2022, https://youtu.be/ptaT0Rmjzeg.

[66] See, for example, an article by an academic that refers to a self-identified Assyrian group as "Iraqi Christian" and criticizes their "Assyrian" self-description: Sinan Antoon, "Dwekh Nawsha: A Christian-Iraqi Militia," Jadaliyya, April 16, 2015, accessed December 20, 2025, https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/31950. "Iraqi Christian" is an inaccurate and inadequate substitute for "Assyrian" because most Assyrians globally are not Iraqi; because there are Iraqi Christians who are Armenian, Arab, or otherwise non-Assyrian; and because, as noted earlier, not all Assyrians today are necessarily Christians even though Christianity has historically been a constitutive element of Assyrian peoplehood.

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insist on creating new terms for people because they belong to a community whose members make such claims about their ancestry.

The exceptional pathologizing of Assyrian identity formation, then, is central to the disparagement of Assyrians in modern Middle East historiography. Although the literature on the meanings and origins of ethnicity and nationalism is voluminous and often contentious, there is a broad consensus around some points. For instance, scholars accept that ethnicity and nationalism are modern concepts, and that they prioritize a complex of shared attributes among a wide range of people who do not know each other, superseding smaller-scale ties like kinship and locality. Correspondingly, it makes sense to observe that Assyrians, like other people, did not consider themselves an ethnic group or a nation, and did not consistently prioritize the idea of being Assyrian over other ties, until the nineteenth century. It is also reasonable to examine changes in the meanings of terms that we now translate as "Assyrian," the vexing problems Assyrians have faced with self- and communal appellation, and the impact of colonial encounters and state-building on Assyrian communities. Assyrian scholars themselves have examined these and many other issues.[67]

But Middle East studies scholars too often insist on excluding Assyrians from the assumption that they participated in the transformations of modernity the same way their neighbors did. They instead assert that there is something "unusual" (in Johan Franzén's wording) about how they came to be. If Assyrians' immediate ancestors were more likely to self-identify as Christian than as Assyrian in the early modern era, that is consistent with known patterns—so why does J. F. Coakley lament that Assyrians' current self-appellation is "unfortunate"?[68] Concepts like ethnicity and nationalism are known to form in response to shifting material conditions.[69] A historical analysis cannot be rigorous, or even basically sound, if it proceeds from the assumption that evolutions and discontinuities are abnormal.

Equally puzzling is Madawi al-Rasheed's 1990s ethnographic work on Assyrians, which continues to be cited as standard scholarship. Her book, a work of social science that aims to draw broader conclusions about ethnicity as a social construction, is built on the premise that Assyrian ethnic formation is abnormal. She argues, from an evidentiary base of interviews with twenty Assyrian families in London in the 1990s, that the development of Assyrian national consciousness a century prior did not follow the patterns identified by Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner in association with print culture and capitalism because it was

[67] See, for example, Naures Atto, "Hostages in the Homeland, Orphans in the Diaspora: Identity Discourses among the Assyrian/Syriac Elites in the European Diaspora" (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2011); Aryo Makko, "The Historical Roots of Contemporary Controversies: National Revival and the Assyrian 'Concept of Unity,'" *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* 24, no. 1 (2010): 58–86; and Eden Naby, "The Assyrians of Iran: Reunification of a 'Millat,' 1906–1914," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 8, no. 2 (1977): 237–49. For a summary of debates among Assyrian authors about Assyrian identity formation (including a few, like John Joseph, who endorse the missionary fabrication thesis), see Benjamen, *Assyrians in Modern Iraq*, 10–13.

[68] Coakley, *Church of the East*, 6.

[69] With regard to the region Assyrians come from, this is a central argument of Bet-Shlimon in *City of Black Gold.*

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imposed by an array of outside forces, especially missionaries and British mandate authorities in Iraq.[70] It is even more difficult to take this thesis seriously after reading al-Rasheed's admission in her book's introduction that, at the outset of her research, she was surprised to learn that there were self-identified Assyrians in Iraq and that they had been there prior to the 1991 Gulf War. She had initially assumed the Assyrian appellation was a local diasporic reaction in London to the recent demonization of Iraqis in the Western press.[71] We repeatedly find ourselves justifying our peoplehood to academics who maintain that Assyrians are some kind of malformation, but who keep revealing from the outset that they do not know what they are talking about.

Adam Becker, too, wrote a book on the roots of Assyrian nationalism, some years after his article about his "compromise position" on Assyrian origins. By the time that book, *Revival and Awakening: American Evangelical Missionaries in Iran and the Origins of Assyrian Nationalism*, was published in 2015, Becker was less indebted to Anderson and Hobsbawm than to Talal Asad's ideas of "the secular." In Asad's conception, modern secular formations associated with colonialism, like nonreligious nationalisms, are not necessarily distinct from the sacred, especially when they develop in settings in which the concept of religion "has not yet been formulated within the discursive processes of secular modernity."[72] Relying on Asad, Becker constructs an argument about how American Christian missionaries, through a religious mission, "stimulated" racialized secular nationalism among the "East Syrians" in Iran whom they aimed to influence and transform.[73] Notably, Asad endorsed Becker's book, describing it as an excellent study of how "the American Protestant project of moral and religious reform helped to stimulate the development of 'Assyrian' national consciousness"—placing the word Assyrian in scare quotes.[74] In his own scholarship, Asad does not, for example, put the word Arab in scare quotes when discussing the formation of Arab national consciousness.[75]

To be clear: Becker's approach is more sophisticated than those of Coakley or al-Rasheed. His conceptualization of how Christian missionaries shaped secular nationalism could, if presented somewhat differently, be a substantive addition to the literature on global missionary history. The book also offers a thorough examination of seldom studied Neo-Aramaic periodicals that are linguistically difficult to contextualize and interpret. Unfortunately, Becker's lack of expertise in modern Assyrian history leads him to some basic factual

[70] Al-Rasheed, *Iraqi Assyrian Christians in London*, 26–27.

[71] Ibid., xvii.

[72] Adam Becker, *Revival and Awakening: American Evangelical Missionaries in Iran and the Origins of Assyrian Nationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 69.

[73] Ibid., 1–36.

[74] Talal Asad, as quoted in ibid., back cover. Sargon Donabed also has noted and critiqued the habitual use of scare quotes, or antilambda, whenever Assyrians are mentioned in Middle East studies scholarship; Donabed, "Existential Threat of Academic Bias."

[75] See, for example, Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 195–201.

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errors, as documented by Eden Naby in a self-published review.[76] But there are larger problems. In the book, Becker briefly considers the possibility that "East Syrians" may have been influenced by other forms of ethnic and national formation that were "in the air" around them at the time. Such ideologies presumably include Armenian, Kurdish, and Arab ethnicities and nationalisms, as well as the nation–state citizenship ideologies of Qajar Iran and the Ottoman Empire, although these ideologies only come up in passing (if at all) throughout the book. Becker then dispenses with the notion that Assyrian identity formation could have occurred in association with these other ideologies as a "vague" one without directly engaging with any work on the subject.[77]

Regardless of the subtler language Becker introduces into his work via Asad, he maintains as he did in his previous article that Assyrian nationalism is the constitutive bond of Assyrian communal identification—that there is, essentially, no substantial way of being Assyrian aside from the nationalist one—and that this bond was forged primarily in the nineteenth-century colonial encounter. Any record of the use of terms like Assyrian and Assyria prior to this encounter, or outside its immediate influence, is, he insists, an aberration from the historical norm.[78] And any use of these terms *after* the colonial encounter must be, through a neat loop of question-begging, a nationalist exercise in colonial-style race science.[79] Becker frequently accompanies these tendentious claims with disrespectful asides, as when he quips about Assyrians who dress up in costumes for vernal equinox celebrations.[80] The Assyrian festival he is referring to, Kha b'Nisan, has often been banned by repressive governments in Assyrians' places of origin, and Assyrians who wear ostentatious clothes in public to celebrate it are doing so as an act of political resistance.[81] Becker's approach and tone betray the insincerity of his repeated reassurances that he has "no need to squabble about the foundations of Assyrian identity"—especially when, in a

[76] No Assyrian scholar or specialist in Assyrian history was given the opportunity to review *Revival and Awakening* for a peer-reviewed journal; all such reviews of the book were written by non-Assyrian scholars specializing in other subjects. I thank Sami Jiries for this observation. Naby posted her review pseudonymously to the website of the retailer Amazon, where she purchased the book: Khavurta, "A Scholar Out of His Depth," November 26, 2015, https://archive.ph/R3Zm5, accessed December 20, 2025), originally found at https://www.amazon.com/revival-awakening-evangelical-missionaries-nationalism/dp/022614531x, accessed December 20, 2025. Naby has verified to me by personal communication that Khavurta ("friend" in Assyrian) is her pseudonym and that she wrote this review, and that Becker is aware of that fact.

[77] Becker, *Revival and Awakening*, 31. Becker occasionally alludes to Assyrian contact with other indigenous communities, for example, in a passage summarizing Wolfhart Heinrichs's work on the origin of the endonyms *asuraya* and *atoraya* as potentially related to Armenian terminology for Assyrians; ibid., 302.

[78] Ibid., 303.

[79] Ibid., 299–300, 337–38.

[80] Ibid., 354.

[81] See, for example, Katherine Zoepf, "Turkey Allows a First New Year for a Tiny Minority," *New York Times*, April 4, 2005, https://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/04/world/europe/turkey-allows-a-first-new-year-for-a-tiny-minority.html.

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previous academic publication, he boasted about starting such a squabble with an Assyrian graduate student of his own accord.[82]

As Hussein Omar observes when discussing the adoption of the identification of "minority" among Egyptian Copts, "If the minority discourse was indeed foreign in origin, naming it as such, I argue, will not, and did not resolve the issue that gave rise to its plausibility in the first place."[83] Omar further contends that theories like Asad's have been used condescendingly to assert that such groups today, when asserting their rights, "inadvertently perpetuate the imperial objectives" of their forbears who were influenced by colonial actors.[84] Peoples like Copts and Assyrians, through this reasoning, are inherently suspect from an anti-imperialist academic perspective. Becker's book is a prime example of scholarship that adopts and adapts Asad's approach with all the baggage of contemptuousness that the theory carries. Doing this is a choice.

Others have made different choices. Mana Kia, for instance, has studied the prenationalist logic of Persianate peoplehood in West and South Asia that relied on notions of linguistic community and lineage through conduct. This logic was not necessarily linked to modern ethnicity or racialization, opening up new research questions for scholars studying premodern communal formations.[85] With regard to Assyrians, Michael Sims has written about Assyrian nationalism as a contingent development of the nineteenth century while taking local and regional politics seriously—like changes in the Ottoman Empire and the formation of other ethnic nationalisms—and avoiding the kind of speculation about origins that so frequently gives way to race science.[86] Alda Benjamen has extensively documented numerous forms of Assyrian mobilization in the twentieth century, steering clear of approaches that presume from the outset that Assyrian politics took the form of a separatist nationalism. In doing so, she reveals the many ways that Assyrians have negotiated with neighboring communities and the states they live in.[87]

A good critique of ethnic nationalism is one that is conscious of the political work of knowledge production. Conceptualizing ethnicity and nationalism as

[82] Becker, *Revival and Awakening*, xiii.

[83] Hussein Ahmed Hussein Omar, "Minorities Are Like Microbes: On Secularism and Sectarianism in English-Occupied Egypt, 1882–1922," *Critical Historical Studies* 9, no. 1 (2022): 68.

[84] Ibid., 70. Assyrians, like Copts, have faced the question of whether to voluntarily adopt the communal identification of "minority" in their places of origin given the detrimental effects of minoritization; for a discussion of this issue, see, for example, Mikhail Benjamin, "The Assyrians of Iraq: An Indigenous People or a Minority Population?" *Assyrian Podcast*, May 16, 2023, https://www.assyrianpodcast.com/listen.

[85] Mana Kia, *Persianate Selves: Memories of Place and Origin before Nationalism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020). Kia's understanding of the Persianate, which describes a universalizing identification through an imperial language (and also cites Asad), is different from how most scholars would conceptualize the phenomenon of premodern identification amid minoritization as in the case of Assyrians. Nevertheless, one could think through her scholarship about the forms that self-fashioning and communal fashioning took prior to nationalism in the regions Assyrians lived in, suggesting paths that could be pursued in future research.

[86] Michael Sims, "'Without a Purpose, Misfortune Will Befall Our Land': Discourses of Nation in Late Ottoman Kurdistan" (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2023).

[87] Benjamen, *Assyrians in Modern Iraq*.

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modern formations forged in particular contexts allows us to view them as processes contingent on recent circumstances rather than as primordial categories. This understanding opens the possibility of modifying those concepts—or, where necessary, abandoning them for new ways of being in community—to end violence perpetrated along ethnic and national fault lines. The critical study of ethnicity and nationalism should, in other words, aim to help dispossessed people live freely. It must account for differences in power between dominant, oppressive ethnic nationalisms that undergird state-sponsored mass violence and the communal mobilizations of those resisting elimination. It is not a bludgeon to coerce minoritized people to adopt state-endorsed descriptors like "Iraqi Christian" that erase their language and heritage because their own peoplehood is allegedly bigoted. It is not a game in which academics prove how clever they are by locating discontinuities among the ancestors of genocide survivors to win squabbles they choose to pick with those they baselessly deride as nationalists. That is not what Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm did, and it is not what anyone citing them today should do. That is an amoral and intellectually vapid exercise.

Conclusion

Atrocity denial is in the bedrock of modern Middle East studies. The field has not yet reckoned with the full implications of the fact that one of its most prominent exponents of denial, Stanford Shaw, was the founding editor of its most prestigious journal. As the ubiquity of Khaldun S. Husry's "The Assyrian Affair of 1933" shows, the revisionism Shaw published during his years presiding over the journal remains highly influential more than a half-century later.

It has been decades since denial of the Armenian genocide and Seyfo was conclusively discredited by responsible scholars who accorded respect to survivor perspectives and pursued multinational, multilingual archival research. Nevertheless, many of the ideas favored by genocide deniers like Shaw remain pervasive even among those who are not themselves genocide deniers—including the notion that the identities of minoritized indigenous non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire and Iran were fabricated by Western colonizers. The treatment of Assyrians in Middle East studies sheds light on the persistence of such ideas. Even scholars who consciously distance themselves from the most extreme forms of the missionary fabrication thesis continue to repeat subtler versions of it under the pretense of critiquing ethnic nationalism or colonialism. Their disdainful treatment of Assyrian colleagues and students betrays the fact that, even if they acknowledge the mass atrocities of World War I and 1933, they have not fully unlearned the flawed ideas that they were trained in through a prior generation of scholarship.

Middle East studies scholars today are working within and against overwhelming systematic denial of the genocide committed by Israel in Palestine since 2023. Many other, similar forms of revisionism have long been prevalent in

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academia.[88] It has never been more urgent to scrutinize denialist reasoning in the academy in order to repudiate it comprehensively. For historians of the Ottoman Empire and the modern Middle East, and for historians of ethnicity and nationalism more broadly, the extensive disparagement of Assyrians reveals that such a repudiation will require rethinking, reframing, and perhaps even abandoning entire lines of scholarly debate.

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[88] Basma Hajir and Mezna Qato, "Academia in a Time of Genocide: Scholasticidal Tendencies and Continuities," *Globalisation, Societies, and Education* 23, no. 5 (2025): 1163–71, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14767724.2024.2445855.

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