

## The Assyrian Nation, why?

October 16, 2002

How did the British Isles succeed in identifying the three historically separate peoples of Scotland, England, and Wales under one political British identity, asked **Michael Gunter** in his book “The Kurdish Predicament in Iraq: A Political Analysis”? When the notion of “Britishness” was constructed by the elite and articulated during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it succeeded to trickle down to the common people of society. The rise in ethnically based nationalism spread quickly among the subjects of the Hapsburg emperors, Romanoff tsars, and Ottoman sultans. Hapsburg Emperor Joseph II was desperately trying, at the time when Poland was being partitioned, to keep a solidarity similar to that portrayed by the people of the Revolutionary France, while Abdul Hamid tried to articulate his own formula to hold his empire together through the principles of Islamic religion and the institution of the sultanate, but with no success in either case. Abdul Hamid will always be looked at as the sultan who initiated the programs that pitted Moslem Turks and Kurds against Christian Assyrian, Armenian and Greeks, programs that led to the Christians Genocide of WWI in what became known as Turkey.

The Assyrians had in reality constituted what was defined in medieval Europe as a “nation”. At the time, the term “nation” connoted certain factors as a common country, a common language, a common tradition, or some combination of these three elements. The three Assyrian sects, members of the Church of the East, Chaldean Catholic Church, and Syrian Orthodox Church, although stateless, had shared: (1) a common Syriac language for at least 2000 years, and (2) a common tradition for yet much longer period, and (3) a common geographical region for at least 4000 years, if not longer, although the region was not controlled by Assyrian power for the last 2500 years.

If we look back at the European experience, we will realize that the foundation upon which the then new phenomenon of nationalism was built upon was somehow different from Western to Eastern Europe. The absence of one or more of those factors did not hold certain people from constituting what became ultimately a nation.

In Western Europe, for example, the people had begun to feel conscious about their nationality within a certain set frame of already existing states. **Arnold Toynbee** wrote in his book “The World After the Peace Conference”, 1926: “*Belgian and Swiss nations had been formed out of populations speaking two and three languages respectively, no single one of which preponderated in the new community...*” In reality, history has proven that states create nations. **Ernest Gellner** in “Thought and Change” for example wrote: “Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist”—or as Benedict Anderson in “Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism” puts it, it “imagines” them.

To illustrate how the state can be used to create the nation, **Massimo d’Azeglio**, an Italian nationalist leader during the Risorgimento, reputedly explained: “We have made Italy, now we have to make Italians.” **Eugene Weber** in “Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914” documented how most rural village inhabitants of France did not think of themselves as members of the French nation up to the eve of WWI. As much as 25% of the population could not even speak French, while half the people considered it a foreign language. Weber added, “...the French nationhood has not penetrated into the psyches of the French rural masses more than a hundred years after scholars had pronounced it to be in full bloom...” That is not so unusual if we understand the French society. Quoting a 19<sup>th</sup> century French observer, Weber wrote: “Every valley is still a little world that differs from the neighboring world as Mercury does from Uranus. Every village is a clan, a sort of state with its own patriotism.”

Meanwhile, in Eastern Europe, we are told by **Toynbee**, the growing sense of nationality had remarkably attached itself to ethnic languages, a phenomenon called “Linguistic Nationalism.” It began with the partition of the United Republic of Poland and Lithuania resulting in the developing national feelings among the Polish, Lithuanian, White Russian and Ukrainian-speaking population, followed later by the

Serbs, Greeks and other Balkan nationalities. Of course these feelings were rooted since the early Middle Ages.

Compared to the French one can see that there is nothing different about the Assyrians who identify themselves through their religious, tribal, or locale titles, with one difference; the French has a country while the Assyrians don't. It is not unusual to hear Assyrians referring to themselves as Moslawi, Bazi, Talkefi, Barwari, Kaldani, Kharpotli, Alqoshi, Sennaii, Urmian, Nestori, Mardinli and so on. It makes no difference to me whether France is on the map and Assyria is not, because Assyria is still in a thought, a thought that awaits nothing but implementation. **Walker Connor** in "Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding" stated that the U.S. Immigration data gives many examples on the behavior of referring to oneself according to his/her religious, tribal, or locality. The data indicates for example that: "Croats described themselves as Dalmatian, Istrian, Slavonian, and the like, but not as Croat, while Poles identified themselves as Goral, Kashubi, Silesian, and so on, but not as Polish". Why then the Census Bureau penalized and marginalized the Assyrian title by its silly and unfounded Assyrian/Chaldean/Syriac category, when it did not do the same and called the Polish for example as Goral/Kashubi/Silesian or the Croats as Dalmatian/Istrian/Slavonian?

What is delaying the Assyrian national thought from reaching its final destination of maturity where the term "nation" is not contested anymore by those marginalizing the Assyrian national dream is the attempts by few individuals unfortunately holding certain positions in society. It is unjustifiable to claim Chaldean as an ethnic uniqueness, as few within the Chaldean Catholic Church are advocating, simply because of silly arguments like the diversity in dialect ... not language but dialect! This is deploring. Gunter explained for example that, quote: "The Kurds use Kurmanji, Sorani, Dimili, Gurani, among other dialects but they never identify themselves by other terms but Kurds. Modern Greek has two versions, a demotic or popular literary style and a reformed classical style. Also the Norwegian, bokmal or riksmal (book or national language) and nynorsk or landsmal (new Norwegian or country language)." Unquote. So why are the Chaldeans who used the Syriac language officially in their liturgy until some decades ago, claiming unique ethnicity? Did the Arabization policy of Iraqi government make them a different ethnic group?

Assyrians need to start a revolution within ... and with the world paved in front of them they need to educate themselves how to transform from tribal, religious, and locale communities into living this concept of a nation, especially when they have the factors that could constitute so already. Assyrians must not give in to trivial arguments from some ultra-fanatic pan-Arab, pan-Kurdish or pan-Turkish claimed historians who continue to undermine the Assyrian national movement and name as a 19<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon. We know that this national consciousness in almost entire Europe began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and for a matter of fact in many parts of Europe it fully developed after WWI. So why is it some sort of a natural phenomenon for the Europeans and many others throughout the world to understand this national consciousness, but when Assyrians begin to develop it they get questioned that Assyrianism was a 19<sup>th</sup> century invention? Of course it was a 19<sup>th</sup> century national awakening; it was so for the world as it was for the Assyrians. **Michael Howard** in "The Lessons of History" tells us that with the possible exception of Norway, it is difficult to think of any nation-state "that came into existence before the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which was not created, and had its boundaries defined, by wars, by internal violence, or by a combination of the two ... The concept of the 'nation' became inseparably associated with the wars it had fought." The present-day Turkey was only established in 1923 and in addition there were no Turks in present day Turkey until the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Why was it OK for Mustafa Kemal to claim Turkish nationalism in 1923 but not OK for Yousuf Malek (a member of the Chaldean Catholic Church) to fight for the Assyrian Nation in the almost exact same period? **Bruce Masters** in "Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism" wrote: "Anatolia had been a solidly Christian territory before the battle of Manzikert / Malazgirt in 1071." Meanwhile, modern-day Iraq only came to existence in 1921 and there was nothing about present-day region of Iraq that defined it as Arab Moslem until the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The northern region of Iraq, i.e. Mosul, was always considered Assyrian Christian in character until perhaps the invasion of Tamerlane in 1401. So, if the Turks and Iraqi Arabs were proud of their Ottoman and Arab Empires, we need to remind them that it was the Assyrians who established the Cradle of Civilizations when others were nomads roaming Central Asia and the Arabian Desert.

The highly educated Diaspora Assyrians must begin to act like pan-Assyrians. We must begin to think "Assyrians first". Nothing in a Turk, a Kurd, or an Arab gives him superiority over an Assyrian, and none is more human than the other in the eyes of God and the United Nations' declarations, supposedly the highest authority on earth. And if few European countries have decided at the conclusion of World War I to hand over the Turks and Arabs the gifts of Byzantine and Assyria, it was only unfortunate. Let me assure the readers here that nothing within the scope of the above should mean any belittling of the Arab, Kurds, or Turkish people, but their governments or officials have to sooner or later take responsibility for the atrocities and persecutions they have committed against the Assyrian Christian people. The Arabs, Turks, and Kurds have to respect the Assyrians' legitimate rights as a unique ethnic people, who are protected by the charters of the United Nations with rights for self-determination. They must stop interfering in Assyrians' internal affairs and must cease exploiting Assyrians' religious sects and allow the Assyrians to reside free in their ancestral lands.

Read:

\***Michael Gunter**, "The Kurdish Predicament in Iraq: A Political Analysis"

\***Arnold Toynbee**, "The World After the Peace Conference"

\***Bruce Masters**, "Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism"