

Fred Aprim Interview with Jeff Gardner, CEO and Co-Founder of Catholic Radio International. Conducted via e-mail. Sent on August 2, 2009.

1. Can you tell me about how you became an activist for the Assyrian community?

In mid-1991, I made plans to visit Amman, Jordan. I wanted to see the situation of what I had heard about "a few Assyrians" that fled from Iraq because of the 1990 Gulf War and later the Iraqis uprising of March 1991 and the crack down of the Iraq Army against the rebels. I also wanted so much to see ancient Petra, the Nabataean caravan-city. I have dreamed to take that amazing long eastern entrance to the city that leads into a steep path through a dark and narrow gorge, reduced in some places to only three or four yards.

But, as I witnessed later, those "a few Assyrians" turned out to be thousands! Of course, thousands more Assyrian refugees continued to arrive in Jordan after the military operations had long ceased. Due to uncertainty, the later embargo and the harsh and unbearable economic situation, the mass exodus from Iraq never stopped. I met many Assyrians in Amman and I felt the undeniable sorrow, fear of uncertainty and despair that surrounded them. They told me that their lives were devastatingly tough to endure. They were not permitted to work and depended on the kind support of relatives in the West. Many of the Assyrians told me that they were not planning on returning to Iraq. They preferred to take their chances with the Jordanian Government. A number of them had their visas already extended, but feared that the government would no longer give them an extension unless they paid large fees that they did not have. Others, as I was told, lived in fear of deportation as their visas had expired and were wanted by the local police. I visited families that lived in a small space originally a shop measuring ten by fifteen feet with a typical roll up aluminum door normally used for small shop fronts. The space had no bathroom so the family was forced to rely on friends whose rooms had bathrooms. These latter were Assyrians who rented rooms from Jordanian families. It was not unusual to witness many families, sometimes up to four, getting together and sharing one relatively larger space of thirty feet by twenty feet. Each family would then occupy one corner of the space. The economic hardships of some families in Amman forced the young women of the families to engage in prostitution to support their parents and families.

After visiting with these Assyrian families, I returned to the quiet of my hotel room, sat down and could not help myself and I broke out and began to cry. Overwhelmed with what I saw and heard, I felt great grief. I was not prepared for this. Certainly, this was not what I expected to see when I planned my journey to Jordan. But I did know that what I was witnessing would forever change my life as a human being and as an Assyrian. I realized as well that what I witnessed was simply incomparable to the horrible situation of thousands more Assyrians living in refugee camps in Syria, Turkey and Iran.

2. How long have you been writing and speaking on behalf of the Assyrian community?

Allow me to clarify first that I don't speak on behalf of the Assyrians (also known historically as Chaldeans, Suryanis, ChaldoAssyrians, Nestorians, Jacobites), because I am neither an elected individual nor belong to a political party. I only present my own opinion as an Assyrian writer and activist.

My visit to Jordan in 1992 was a turning point in my life. But, at the time of my visit, the Internet was not available to ordinary people. I wrote to few officials about what I had witnessed and embarked on doing research about Assyrian history. I did not do enough at the time, I believe. After purchasing my first computer in 1995, I started to publish my writings on various Internet based forums and exchange e-mails with other activists and nationalists.

### 3. What are your thoughts on the Nineveh Plain Administration Unit?

Many ethnic or religious groups struggle to protect themselves in order to preserve their unique culture, heritage and existence. This basic right is not suited exclusively for a selected elite. In a country where true democracy thrives and people of all ethnic and religious backgrounds are free to exercise this right, on the foundation that all human beings are equal and free, the option of self-rule (with its various governing forms) is at times disregarded. However, in an environment where persecution and oppression of one group by others is a policy and/or a way of life, that self-rule option becomes a necessity for the oppressed to seek justice, protection and survival.

The majority of Assyrian Christians live in the volatile and explosive region of the Middle East. What makes their case unique and critical is that they are persecuted and oppressed on two ends: Being distinctly different than everyone around them ethnically and religiously. Recent history, including the Genocide of WWI (1914-1918), massacre of Simele (1933), the ethnic and cultural persecution by Saddam Hussein and the ongoing "soft ethnic cleansing" and cultural genocide by Kurdish political parties prove that the Assyrians have very dim chance to survive in the Middle East in general and in Iraq (their ancestral homeland) in particular without the option of self-rule.

If, and for example, the Jews as people, the Kosovar Muslims, or ethnic Kurds (predominantly Muslims) had the support of the United States and the rest of the civilized world for self-rule (in its various shapes) and have the protection and continuous support from the West to ensure and/or sustain that right, why should the Assyrians be denied that same right? There were a million and a half Christians in Iraq before the 2003 U.S. intervention and today there remain less than 750,000. What a curse it has been for the Assyrians for being Christians!

The Nineveh Plains is historically an Assyrian region. It continues to be dominated by Assyrians for some four thousand years. This region includes many Assyrian historic towns, exclusively Assyrian ancient remains and monuments, in addition to old monasteries and churches. This makes it an ideal region for Assyrians to live in freely and survive as proud people. What makes the Nineveh Plains unique and attractive is that it includes as well other smaller ethnic and/or religious groups, such as the Shabaks and

Yezidis who have coexisted with the Assyrians peacefully for centuries and neither group imposes any threat on the others.

However, there are many important questions here, including, how would the Nineveh Plains exist as an entity, i.e., would it be linked to the Iraqi central government or Kurdish regional government (KRG) in a federal system? Who would be really governing the region, i.e., would the Assyrians be freely running their own affairs? Who would allocate the budget and how would the money be spent? These, and other details, are vital, because there are many puppet Assyrian groups or individuals that their loyalty is questioned and/or are linked to the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).

The unfair practices by certain Kurdish political groups such as the KDP in the recent elections (January and December 2005 Iraqi national elections and July 2009 northern Iraq Kurdish regional elections) continued to plant doubts in the minds of Assyrians that the KRG and the KDP are neither suited nor qualified to rule over the Assyrians, whether directly or indirectly. History and archaeology testify clearly and without any doubts that northern Iraq is the historic Assyria, which is today ruled by the Kurds. There are many issues regarding land ownership that need resolution, for example. The KRG presents itself in the image of protector of the Christians, which could be truthful to certain degree. However, there are political reasons for such policy. Furthermore, Kurdish political parties practice a clear policy of “soft genocide” against the Assyrians when it comes to ethnic and cultural matters. Therefore, the issue is more complex than the Kurdish media or Kurdish sympathizers in the West would like to perceive the relationship between the Kurds and other non-Kurdish groups in the region, including the Assyrians, Turkomans, Yezidis and Shabaks.

4. I spoke with Fr. Michael J. Bazzi of St. Peter Chaldean Catholic Cathedral – he was blunt in his feelings that Christians should be helped to leave Iraq – what is the mood in the Assyrian community?

Every person is entitled to his/her personal opinion. On the other hand, public servants must weight their answers very carefully before making public statements. When the issue involves the future of people or a stateless nation, one must be cautious, practical and savvy with his/her choices of words, recommendations or thoughts. What is more frustrating for Assyrian nationalists is the continuous and direct involvement of clergymen in political matters.

Northern Iraq is the historic homeland of the Assyrian people. The Assyrian people have the right to enjoy liberty, justice, freedom and self-rule on their ancestral lands under every law and declaration that the United Nations has issued since its inception post WWII. Furthermore, I do not believe that it is in the best interest of humanity and the world that the Middle East be emptied of its indigenous Christians. The Middle East is the land that witnessed the birth of Judaism, Christianity and Islam and Iraq is the Cradle of Civilizations. Within Iraq live Arabs, Assyrians, Kurds, Turkomans, Yezidis, Mandeans, Shabaks, and Armenians. This diversity should be protected. If we have succeeded to ensure the survival of certain groups, which I referred to earlier, then the

International community must reach out to ensure the survival of other unique groups as well.

We must help the Assyrian Christians to stay in Iraq and not leave. The Assyrian people should not be left to disappear, be a mere statistic group in the West or be simply pointed to as ancient civilization represented through monuments, busts and artifacts in the British Museum, Chicago Oriental Institute, Berlin Museum or in the Louver. The Assyrian people, culture and civilization could thrive on historic Assyria where once stood their ancient capitals of Ashur (Qal'at Shirqat), Dur Sharrukin (Khursabad), Kalhu (Nimrod) and Nineveh (Mosul) in northern Iraq. Lets foster the Assyrian self-rule in the Nineveh Plains; this unique geographical and diverse region. Lets make the Nineveh Plains a true model of coexistence of various ethnic and religious groups for others around the world to follow.