

Patriarch Mar Awa Royel III Interview on Ishtar TV

By Fred Aprim

Jan 11, 2022

On the occasion of Christmas 2021, Atra Hikmat conducted an interview in Arbil for Ishtar TV with Mar Awa Royel III, patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East.¹ The patriarch opened his remarks by explaining that since his consecration, he had met with many Assyrian groups in addition to Iraqi officials in Baghdad. He then said that he met with the Kurdish officials in the Kurdish *Igleem* (KRG region), including President Nechirvan Barzani, Prime Minister Masroor Barzani, and Masoud Barzani [president of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)]. The patriarch said that he noticed readiness from the three Kurdish leaders to work with the church leadership for future prosperities.

The patriarch said that he sent a get together invitation to various Assyrian institutions and political leaders, especially in the Kurdish region. In an arranged gathering between the patriarch and various political leaders, the patriarch expressed his wish to see all groups working in unison, cooperating with each other and putting aside their disagreements and conflicting thoughts. He asked them to agree that the ultimate and final aim has to be the benefit of the Assyrian nation. To accomplish this goal, the various groups have to unite, but they do not need to dissolve into one political group since each group has its own vision and specificity; however, there must be one goal. If the goal is one and we agree with that, then our work will be more productive, he said. Here the groups will not look at each others as enemies, rather as friends and comrades. He told them that they will always have the Church's blessings, prayers, and support as long as they believe in that one goal for our [Assyrian] nation.

In response to a question in regards to the creation of a single leadership, Mar Awa III said that throughout history the church and its patriarch had a significant role in the affairs of the church and nation. This is rooted from the Abbasid Caliphate and through the Ottoman Sultans, where the patriarch was not only the head of church, but also the head of people (nation). Today, our duty is not only to give advice on what our political groups do or not to do. We want to walk alongside our Assyrian political groups and national activists to give spiritual guidance, a guidance that comes from this 2000-year old standing institution of the Church of the East. The patriarch continued to say, if we look at the structure of our nation today and look at our institutions, national and political organizations, we will see that historically the oldest institution has been the Church of the East. It is not our goal to give orders to our nationalists (*Awoodeh Umtanayeh*) or politicians, we want to see a development in thought and activism of our political groups where we can present to them the spiritual and moral leadership. They need the church to be with them. We know that our people who attend church services on Sundays are active in national activities the rest of the days of the week. That is why we in the church are not in a contest with our politicians or national activists. We all love them indiscriminately as the sons and daughters of this nation; however, the church has a fatherly role where we walk the path with them side by side to achieve this nation's goal. Yes, we as the clergy will not interfere in political matters, but we are part of this nation. That is why when we observe that a person or institution is not walking in the right path, the church has the right to approach that person, institution, or political group and alert them that they have skewed from the national path.

Regarding the stand of certain Assyrians on the church involvement in political matters, the patriarch said that there are indeed some Assyrian activists and certain personalities within Assyrian political institutions (and not the political institutions as whole) who have mentioned that the church, patriarch,

¹<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=341937517444810>

and church leaders should not meddle in political activities or give their opinion about political matters. He said it is natural that our duty is spiritual, but, today Assyrians do not have an administrative structure or government where we have a president, prime minister, ministers, etc. Yes, some political parties are recognized by our people, but some others are not. Meaning, the whole of the Assyrian nation is not this one particular party or the other. Some people support this party and others support that party. That is why this leadership that is in the hands of the politicians is not inclusive. It is not that the whole nation is behind one group. However, the church historically had a role that is different. We in the church have members from all the political parties; therefore, our position [leadership] is more inclusive. It is different with the political parties where members of a certain political party have the right to speak only on behalf of that political party, unless that party is elected as the leader of the whole nation. So those who complain about the church involvement in national issues are not familiar with history, because the patriarch has always had a special role in our nation.



In his concluding remarks about this topic, the patriarch said that our groups must work together and become strong in the Diaspora because then the Diaspora could help those in the Homeland just as other nations have done [perhaps eluding to the Jewish example]. He encouraged the Assyrian youth in the Diaspora to finish their education, be successful, and perhaps participate in political life in the West so that the Assyrian national voice reaches the powerful governments. He stated that whereas the expression “minority group” is preferred in the West; however, the expression is not seen as positive in the homeland. He said that the word “component” is being used in Iraq for example. He added, we have a problem in the homeland where our numbers are small, but that is not the whole story, because whereas population is important, we have historic rights in the country. We must not give away that historic right. This we do by working together and uniting, because when we do that the other groups will respect us. He then said: there is no dispute in regards to our historic rights in Iraq, but we have the tendency to sit and wait for others to do the work for us or give us what we need, but we do not take the initiative where we have to take that first step to gather, work together and get things done. We are always expecting others to do things for us. A nation cannot progress in that manner.

Other issues such as the patriarchal visit to the US, the new patriarchate building in Arbil, unity of churches, etc. were addressed.

These latest statements by Patriarch Mar Awa III were not surprising to many informed Assyrians. If we listen carefully to the previous statements by the patriarch made in Simele, those by Archbishop Mar Meelis regarding the Kurds and the KRG region,² and the latest on-line presentation by Mar Odisho Oraham, the bishop of Europe, in regards to the name of the Christian God and the ancient Assyrians' god Ashur, certain conclusions beg consideration. First, Mar Meelis has been going over and beyond in his praise for the Kurdish leaders and Kurdish Regional Government. Secondly, Mar Awa III was newly elected and needed the support of his congregation. His remarks in Simele were very powerful in regards to the rights of the Assyrians in Iraq as the indigenous people of the land. The previous two patriarchs, Mar Gewargis III and Mar Dinkha IV, never made such bold remarks. However, his statement on Ishtar TV in regards to meeting the Barzani clan leaders, his planned role in Assyrian national matters, and his depreciative remarks of the Assyrian political groups for failing to establish a united leadership were to some degree a continuation of the views of the previous patriarch, Mar Dinkha^{3 4}. The one difference is that Mar Dinkha always claimed that the church would not interfere in politics, but he had submitted to the Barzani leadership instead of being supportive of the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) that Assyrians have voted for in all the early elections in Iraq. In a smart move to pave the road to enter the political scene, Patriarch Mar Awa III relied on an old precedence, i.e., the *temporal power* granted to the Church of the East patriarchs during the early Islamic dynasties. He also took advantage of the failure of the Assyrian political groups to establish a united leadership.

Well, how was it possible for the Assyrian political and national groups to reach an agreement on national goal or leadership considering that many of these groups were for the longest of time a one-man enterprise created with the support and blessing of the Barzani clan. Those groups were created solely to ensure that unity and real goals were not achieved. They kept placing roadblocks in the path of such attempts, because their loyalty is to the Kurdish interest and not to Assyria. How could an Assyrian who is a member of the KDP (a Kurdish political and national group) has allegiance to Kurdish and Assyrian aspirations at the same time when there is a great conflict in ideology and a serious struggle over Assyrian lands that the Kurds have overtaken illegally?⁵

To many Assyrian observers, the reintroduction of the *millet* system used by the Ottoman Sultans for some 500 years was to experience a face-lift where this time the sultan is represented by the Barzani. In addition, the Kurdish leadership has played its cards well and did all in its power to keep the Assyrians unarmed, even for the purpose of protecting themselves. The Kurdish leaders undermined and jeopardized the Nineveh Plain Protective Unit (NPU). Today, the Shi'aa supported Babylioon is attempting to absorb the NPU. That is in line with the earlier Ottoman sultans' policy to apply the *dhimmi* status and keep the Christians unarmed but thoroughly servile as befitted *dhimmi* according to the tenets of Islam.⁶ The Assyrians have to live as modified *dhimmi* minority under the Kurdish rulers, but their rights for self governing and as the indigenous people of northern Iraq (Occupied Assyria) were suppressed. Some analysts suggest that certain borders will be re-drawn in the Middle East to accommodate a Kurdistan (over Occupied Assyria), a new state that will rise with the support of the

2 <https://www.fredaprim.com/pdfs/2021/The%20Patriarch,%20the%20Archbishop,%20and%20the%20message.pdf>

3 https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BAGHDAD3958_a.html

4 <https://www.atour.com/government/wikileaks/20121004z.html>

5 <https://www.atour.com/government/docs/20101213a.html>

6 Levene, Mark. "A Moving Target, the Usual Suspects and (May be) a Smoking Gun: The Problem of Pinning Blame in Modern Genocide", 1999.

US, Israel and Europe. Therefore, the 2020 Iraqi election results were not surprising. The ADM was defeated and crippled by votes from Kurds and Shi'aa in favor of Christian individuals loyal to Barzani and powerful Shi'aa slate. This was important to prove that the ADM had failed.

Mar Awa III stated that the Assyrian Church of the East is more inclusive in its representation of the Assyrians. Nothing could be farther from the truth! There are members of the Chaldean Catholic Church, Syriac Orthodox and Catholic Churches and other Presbyterian and Protestant churches who consider themselves ethnically Assyrians. Therefore, the Assyrian people, their institutions and political parties belong to many different churches that are under five different patriarchs and other church leaders who for centuries have been involved in theological and personal disputes that continue to spread into the Assyrian community. Therefore, none of the patriarchs is in position to speak on behalf of all the Christians or all the Assyrians in Iraq. The question that arise here is, if the Kurdish region leadership were to deal with Mar Awa III regarding the future of his Assyrian congregation in northern Iraq, we wonder what will be discussed and constructed between Barzani and the other patriarchs individually. I think THE CHURCH would have been "inclusive" if our five patriarchs genuinely embraced one another, restored their divided churches to one church under God and had their aspirations in unison. But we know that the various Assyrian churches are run independently and each patriarch has his own goals regarding his congregation; therefore, the factor of inclusiveness of the church is lacking.

Since the details of the negotiations between the Assyrian Church of the East and the Barzanis have not been disclosed, the discussions of the future of Assyrians in northern Iraq (Occupied Assyria)⁷ will remain restlessly animated among most Assyrian activists.

7 <https://www.atour.com/government/docs/20030120a.html>