

## With Absence of Nationalists, Sectarian Leaders Reckon Society

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Jan 1, 2023

The loss of Assyrian independent representation in the 2018 Iraqi parliamentary elections did not awaken the hypocritical Assyrian society, a society that insists to remain ignorant, sectarian, apathetic and lacks the independent national thinking. A majority of Assyrians are fatuous, dimwitters and gullible – they neither analyze political or national events nor make their decisions rationally and based on facts. Bill Maher stated that science has no ego. If one proves some law or formula then unless one proves it wrong, that law or formula stands and no commotion takes place. However, when one tries to prove that religion is wrong, we could expect a war.

What is expected from the common people when the cream of the crop of the Assyrian society think that only academic title holders are worthy to be recognized, promoted and supported. Wilfred Bet Alkhas reminded me of a story back in the 1980s where there was a panel of Assyrian and International scholars who gathered in San Francisco to discuss Raabi William Daniel's book, *Qatineh Gabbara*. The Assyrian organizers were asked, why was Raabi Daniel not on the panel. The response was, "He doesn't have a PhD, so he cannot be on the panel". This mentality has changed very little among many of the Assyrian scholars, both individuals and institutions. Is this how Kurdish scholars treat their fellow authors and writers who do not hold a doctorate degree? Why does an Assyrian cultural institution or an advocacy group discriminate against those authors who do not have a related PhD? Why do they issue bulletins when books are published by certain Assyrian scholars; however those institutions or groups ignore books published by non-scholar Assyrians? Allow me to remind these Assyrian institutions that most books published about Assyrians and their history since WWI were not published by Assyrian scholars, rather by non-scholar yet educated Assyrians.

We have nationalists, scholars and civic institutions that only support or promote those who are blessed by the church. These institutions shy away from writers or activists who criticize the church and turn a blind eye to those who reckon and undermine the Assyrian national cause.

Consider the following cases:

1. On Nov 6, 1975, David Malek Yaqu Ismael rang the bell of the late Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun's home in San Jose, California. Mar Shimun opened the door and David fired three bullets assassinating the patriarch. David served some time in prison and was released in 1986. As a free man, David was repeatedly acknowledged and honored during church services at several Assyrian Church of the East (ACOE) dioceses.<sup>1</sup>

2. Yousip Malek Khoshaba wrecked the Assyrian society in Iraq in the 1960s. He was a Presbyterian and a close cooperative of the Iraqi government, but he fueled the division within the Church of the East. Despite this, he continued to be viewed as a notable Assyrian by a segments of Assyrian society or referred to as the leader (archana) of the Assyrians in Iraq by few others.

3. In Sept 2006, Mar Dinkha, patriarch of the ACOE visited northern Iraq and met with US

1 On Nov 7, 2022, Hermiz Shahen and David David devoted a special episode of their program "Voice of Hope" (Voice of the Assyrian National Council, Australia) on the life of the late Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun. They referred to the assassin David Malek Yaqu Ismael as a killer. Hermiz and David stressed that we must end our hypocrisy and must speak up the truth.

<https://www.facebook.com/hermiz.shahen/videos/5353239938136218>

officials where he undermined the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) which the people had voted for. He told those officials that the only person that the US should work with was Sarkis Aghajan from the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) because he, according to the patriarch, was the key individual who knew the Assyrian issues. When Mar Dinkha was asked about the admirable national activities of the Chicago-based Assyrian Academic Society (AAS) and whether he knew the group, he disparagingly responded, yes, they are a small group that organizes and [holds picnics](#). Really? Is that what the AAS was about at the time?

4. On several occasions Archbishop [Mar Meelis Zaia](#) of the ACOE praised the Kurdish leaders and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). On one occasion Mar Meelis told Barzani, “All Assyrians have a special love in their hearts for your Excellency.” And in another occasion he told Zagros TV, “the human being in this [Kurdish] region has freedom and lives in this democracy that does not include such things as “you are Muslim”, “you are Christian” or you are such and such. You are the son and daughter of this land and this land will serve you and everything you see here is to serve you, serve mankind.” Mar Meelis forgot about the massacres of Assyrians by Kurds in the 1840s, 1890s, WWI, Simele and the ongoing ethnic persecution and the illegal grabbing of Assyrian lands.

5. The Barzani regime was always behind efforts and plans to undermine the true independent Assyrian political and national groups in Iraq. When Barzani and his right hand, Sarkis Aghajan, opened Ishtar TV in 2005 to compete with Ashur TV, several Assyrian singers traveled to Ankawa to celebrate the event. They were paid handsomely for doing so. Did the Assyrian or Kurdish cause benefit from this propaganda?

6. On June 21, 2021, Patriarch Mar Sako sent a letter to Rewaz Faiq, Head of the Kurdish parliament demanding that Chaldeans be mentioned separately in the constitution of the Kurdish regional government. Mar Sako understands the threat against the Christians in Iraq, yet on several occasions in 2022 (Dec 30, April 22 and March 13) he appeared on al-Sharqiya Iraqi TV station and stressed that the Christians do not need a safe zone or a militia group like the rest of Iraqi groups to protect them. Mar Sako has been fueling division among the Christian congregation and then pretending to cry over his congregation abandoning the homeland.

Where are the Assyrian religious leaders leading the Assyrian people? What did Assyrians do in regards to the aforementioned situations? Did we learn anything from the disastrous 39 years under the helm of the late Patriarch [Mar Dinkha](#), especially since the 2003 US Invasion of Iraq? Is it a sound policy by our religious leaders to side with the Barzani clan completely? The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) under Bafel Talabani is criticizing the Barzani family for controlling the Kurdish region and threatening to split al-Sulaimaniya (that is under the Talabani) from the Kurdish region (Iqleem) that consists of the three governorates of Arbil, Dohuk and al-Sulaimaniya.<sup>2</sup>

Where is Patriarch Mar Awa Royel leading the ACOE congregation?

Some argue that the new Patriarch Mar Awa III Royel is continuing in the same path as Mar Dinkha. Why so, the reader might ask? Most of the advisors of the new patriarch are the same as those of Mar Dinkha or loyal to the Barzani and the KDP. Consider:

- a) Ninon Mansour Nimrod, the manager of KDP's owned Zagros TV,
- b) Amil Hariri, Related to Mar Awa and Advisor to the Minister of Endowment and Religious Affairs in the KRG,
- c) Florin Georgis, Head of the National and Religious Components Affairs Dept in the KRG,
- d) Fawzi Hariri, KRP Chief of Staff,
- e) Kristo Yalda, long-standing member of the KDP,

2 <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=856592402252770>

f) Romeo Hakkari,  
and a few others.

In 2014, Patriarch Mar Awa III Royel, then secretary of the Holy Synod of the ACOE and bishop of the diocese of California, called for a home – a safe region, for Assyrians in Northern Iraq.<sup>3 4</sup>

Throughout 2021, the messages of Mar Awa III, now patriarch, were stressing Assyrianism, that his congregation was Assyrian, the indigenous people of Iraq. He continued in that path through January 2022 as indicated in his [interview on Ishtar TV](#).

However, around mid 2022, the patriarch seems to have in general softened his “Assyrian” message. On July 30, 2022, Patriarch Mar Awa III sent a letter in Kurdish to Masoud Barzani on the occasion of the deaths of the Barzanis at the hands of the Iraqi government. Mar Awa stated: “on the occasion of the 8000 Barzanis Anfal and handing over to you the 100 remains of the tragedy of the martyrs of Anfal by dictator Saddam Hussein on the land of Kurdistan, we offer our sympathy to you and to the families of the martyrs on my behalf, on behalf of the bishops of the ACOE and the Assyrian people. We hope that this occasion will lead to more freedom and better coexistence between the people of Kurdistan and Iraq.” Mar Awa continued: “we must work together hand in hand with one heart so that this tragedy will not repeat itself again”. The patriarch concluded, “we pray to God for the arrival of the remains of the other 7304 to the land of Kurdistan so that their souls may rest and their families to receive their bodies after this lengthy wait”.

In the latter parts of 2022, several Assyrian activists and politicians traveled to Arbil to participate in the September 12th grand opening of the new splendid patriarchate complex of the ACOE. It is claimed that meetings have taken place to address the creation of an [Assyrian leadership](#). No immediate announcement for such leadership was published. During his speech at the inauguration of the patriarchate, Mar Awa pointed to an alleged meeting of peace and understanding in 1913 between Kurdish leader Abd al-Salam Barzani and martyred Patriarch Mar Benyamin Shimun. The pictures of the two leaders were displayed side by side during the ceremony as Masoud Barzani referred to it too. It is important to mention here that there has never been a signed peace treaty between the two leaders. We ask, if such treaty existed, why did Simko Shakak murder Mar Shimun in cold blood in 1918.



Then in his 2022 Christmas message to his church congregation, Patriarch Mar Awa’s message centered around the policies of the western countries regarding gay and lesbian marriages. Mar Awa criticized

3 <http://www.aina.org/news/20161227012922.htm>

4 <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/2014/09/new-urgency-for-an-old-idea-nineveh/>

the US government policies and the schools' curriculum regarding the marriage between same sexes. He asked parents to pay attention to what the schools were teaching their children. Has Mar Awa criticized the KRG for insulting the memory of Martyred Patriarch Mar Benyamin Shimun by imposing on young Assyrian students that Simko Shakak, the murderer of the patriarch, was a national hero? Has Mar Awa asked the Assyrian parents in the Kurdish region (Iqleem) to pay attention to the insulting Kurdish imposed curriculum?

Next, the Dec 16, 2022 final communique of the meetings between the leaders of the Syriac-speaking Churches in the Middle East that was held in Beirut, Lebanon was published. The participants were: Patriarchs, Mor Ignatius Aphrem II, Syriac Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, Cardinal Mar Bechara Boutros Al-Rai, Maronite Patriarch of Antioch and All the East, Mor Ignatius Youssef III Younan, Syriac Catholic Patriarch of Antioch, Cardinal Mar Louis Raphael Sako, Patriarch of the Chaldeans in Iraq and the World, And Mar Awa III Royel, Patriarch of the ACOE. In the communique the patriarchs emphasized: "*We affirm that we are one Syriac people, rooted in the beloved East and we form its essential constituents, despite our number and the variety of our apostolic traditions.*" They emphasized that they were worried about the dispersion of the faithful of their churches in the diaspora. They also emphasized on their one Syriac heritage.<sup>5</sup>

What happened to Mar Awa III message between 2014 and early 2022? Today, we hear more about the land of [Kurdistan](#). What happened to the [Assyrian historic](#) lands that the patriarch and other church leaders were preaching about earlier? There seems to be a down-tuning in the patriarch's nationalistic speeches. Many argue that Mar Awa's early speeches needed to be strongly pro-Assyria, since he was newly consecrated and he needed to gain followers and supporters. Also, few argue that the leaders of the Syriac-speaking churches have been forced to come up with a collectively agreed upon name of unification in order to survive in the Middle East.

I support all efforts of commonality, genuine dialogue, and the efforts of building peace between the various Assyrian denominations. I hope that the various patriarchs define their duties within their church and leave national matters to the elected politicians and stand behind them. Mistakes have been made since 2003 when the efforts to politically unite the various Assyrian groups from the different denominations, were undermined. Twenty years after those efforts, the Assyrian people in Iraq continue to lose their place in the Iraqi society, many continue to leave the homeland while Assyrian diaspora continues to allow religious leaders and few scholars backed by the church to dictate policy and activities.

Edward I. Koch said, "I can only explain it to you. I can't comprehend it for you". Woe on a nation that assembles in the hundreds and thousands for the ordinations of a deacon or a bishop, but gathers in the few in honoring its poets, thinkers, writers or on its various national days or on genocide remembrance days. Those who claim to be Christian must follow the words of Christ: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's". As I, and few others before me, have stated: "Be a Christian if you choose to, but be a true Assyrian as well – fulfill both obligations."

We all have our boulders, but Assyria desperately needs independent thinkers. We must get over our religious and sectarian affiliations, the influence of the religious leaders, or conflicts between groups and rise above our personal discontent, because the future of Assyria is on our shoulders. Bet Alkhas once argued that "Assyria will not be built by scholars or bishops who talk about a nation, rather by the fools who know how to build one".

5 <https://www.mecc.org/news-en/2022/12/20/joint-statement-following-the-meeting-of-the-patriarchs-of-the-syriac-churches-held-at-the-syriac-orthodox-patriarchal-residence-in-atchaneh-lebanon>