

The Assyrian National Dream in Iraq: A Mirage of few Desperate or a Real and Practical Vision of the Majority.

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A fellow Assyrian asked: Is there any way that we can overcome this disease of selfishness, non-cooperation, and undermining each others' efforts and move on together towards accomplishing our common goals?

Attempting to answer this question is very complicated and long; in fact, it might be fruitless. Nevertheless, there are facts that we all know. There will always be that minority of people who have different opinion from the mainstream and there will always be those who will exploit this latter small group for their personal benefit; it is just man's nature and part of dirty politics. The question to ask is how mature this minority is to make sure that it practices its rights and expresses its opinion, yet, and at the same time, does not allow an opportunist to take advantage of them while exercising this given right. Expressing a different opinion and providing alternatives to a problem is one thing and using this different opinion in malice way to inflict injury to people and put them in danger is completely another.

First, we must look at ourselves carefully and evaluate who we are today; where we stand; what we worth; how much influence we possess; and how much power we have before we attempt to demand the sky from world powers. The Assyrian cause in Iraq today could not be won through poetry, emotions, or sheer force. This situation is different from that of 1921 or 1932 (or even in 1941) when we made some 20% of the total population of Iraq (Iraq population was estimated at 2,850,000 at its inception in 1921 and around 3,000,000 in early 1930s). The Assyrians in 1921, 1932, and until 1941 were, as organized force, better soldiers and fighters than any other Iraqi group. In fact, the entire Iraqi army could not face the Assyrian Levy. In 1941, the Assyrian Levy was on a course to take Baghdad if the British did not interfere. I am not going to address here the role of the British in undermining that superiority and I know that it was the British, who created that force. Still, even when in Hakkari, Turkey, and Urmia, Iran, Assyrians proved to match the best of armies if given a reasonable chance. What I need to say is that Iraq today is different and we are different. Assyrians must pursue and resolve the Assyrian national question through diplomatic and political means; it is the only real path in today's world. A dreamer, backed by few followers, cannot accomplish Assyrian national rights while living the western dream and running a small business. Lets face it. I have, as a writer, the right to dream in my poetry; however, I dare not dictating solutions for complex matters dealing with the Assyrian national question concerning Assyrians that I have not built with an immediate and direct association. We must mature and rise to the occasion and evaluate the situation we are in, live the reality, and work to achieve the possible instead of wasting time on the impossible. While we keep singing Atour... Atour in California, the Assyrians of Iraq have been abandoning that same Atour.

When the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) was established in 1979, it had two options: Either operate in regions under the Ba'ath direct rule and work with and for the Ba'ath against the Kurds or establish itself in north of Iraq and work with the Kurds against the common tyranny of the Ba'ath central government. Not a single free, honest, and legitimate Assyrian political organization in Iraq established itself within the Ba'ath regime territory. The Bet-Nahrain Democratic Party (BNDP) is another example. All Assyrian groups were operating from north of Iraq and cooperating with the Kurds against the fascist Ba'ath regime in Baghdad. These organizations realized that they must use diplomacy and be cooperative in dealing with the Kurds. In matters of such nature, one must find an ally; one, especially with our limitations, cannot afford making everybody an enemy. In politics, they say, there are neither permanent friends nor permanent enemies ... there are only temporary interests. This does not mean that we stop from educating the world about the past and what the Kurds, in this case, have committed against the Assyrians. Both policies go hand in hand; we must learn how to walk that tight rope. Some individuals within these groups do work for the Kurds, and that is the fact that we cannot escape. Such individuals must be put where they belong in society; they must be exposed and left alone. Therefore, for some to raise questions about the ADM, in specific, for being under the Kurdish control simply because they were operating from northern Iraq (Assyria) is ludicrous, since all other Assyrian groups were until the liberation of Iraq. We have to understand that the political situation dictated that at the time; we had no other option.

I wonder what makes a claimed Assyrian nationalist in the Diaspora attack the ADM and its leadership in Iraq when he/she has done nothing beyond accomplishing personal gains, while the ADM has shown continuous cultural and national gains in Iraq. The last six months or so we have witnessed a vicious campaign orchestrated by Ceres, California based Bet-Nahrain Inc., and BNDP by leashing its continuous unfair attacks on the ADM and its leadership in Iraq. Sargon Dadesho, who is involved, in one capacity or another, with the Bet-Nahrain Inc.; AssyriaVision, AssyriaSat, and Bet-Nahrain Cultural Center or heading the stagnant and ineffective Assyrian National Congress (ANC) is taking the leading role in this attack campaign. If we investigate the people involved in all these institutions, we would realize that it is a small group that runs all this enterprise, which includes the ever money maker bingo business. Bet-Nahrain Inc. and Sargon Dadesho were involved in one serious project in 1980 and that was the "Assyrian Christian College." That one decent project failed before it really saw the light and we are yet to find what happened to the funds that were raised for that project [1]. If Sargon Dadesho failed in establishing one school, how are we expected to believe that he can lead a nation or establish Assyria?

Today, BNDP has made an alliance with, and is promoting, a group of eleven men who established in Iraq what they called the Assyrian United Front (AUF). Why would Sargon Dadesho cooperate with and promote an 11-man body and not cooperate and work closely with the ADM, the choice of the majority of Assyrians in Iraq? If Dadesho has any issues of concern, they could be resolved through discussions and dialogue and not through cheap personal attacks on the person of Honorable Younadam Kanna, who perhaps holds the highest position any Assyrian leader has ever held in modern history. The ADM participated in the local elections in north of Iraq in 1992 and won four out of five seats in those elections, while a group supported by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) stole the fifth seat. We know that the KDP is working to marginalize and undermine the Assyrian question in north of Iraq.

Here, we need to ask: What is this Assyrian United Front (AUF) about and who is Yousip Al-Deroo, its mastermind?

The so-called Assyrian United Front was established in Baghdad on January 26, 2004. This group has been publicized and promoted by BNDP, the Bet-Nahrain Inc. website [2] and AssyriaSat. In February 2004, the group issued a declaration in which it asked for support of the Assyrian people worldwide to represent them in their negotiations with Iraqi authorities. Their demands are impressive indeed. What was embarrassing though, in my opinion, is the mean through which the document was published initially and the person who posted it on the web originally. A person who published the declaration and the Assyrian demands supplied a yahoo e-mail account as a contact mean! Of course, BNDP and Bet-Nahrain Inc. published it on their web site few days later [3]. This brings to memories another earlier attempt by certain individuals who in 2000 declared the establishment of the so-called Assyrian Preparatory Committee in Baghdad. At the time, that committee asked the support of the Assyrian people worldwide to empower another group of questionable people in order to represent Assyrians in its negotiations with the Iraqi Ba'ath regime [4].

The mastermind behind the AUF is a lawyer by the name of Yousip Al-Deroo (written also "Al-Diro" or simply "Deroo"). Yousip Al-Deroo is the group's consultant and he is, as it seems from his several appearances on AssyriaSat, the group's real mentor. He has been a guest on AssyriaSat and Sargon Dadesho's special TV programs many times, live from Baghdad. In 1970, when the Late Mar Eshai Shimun visited Iraq, Al-Deroo was approved by the Iraqi Government to be its contact point with the Late patriarch. He participated in many of the Assyrian Universal Alliance (AUA) congresses at the time as the delegation from Iraq. On November 6, 1975, Mar Eshai Shimun was assassinated inside his home in San Jose, California, and almost everybody believes that the Iraqi Ba'ath Government was behind the plot. In 1978, Yousip Al-Deroo was a member of the Iraqi delegation to the AUA Congress in Sydney, Australia. The five-member-Iraqi-Assyrian-delegation included: William Shawel, Yousip Deroo, Petros Gibriel, Sami Hanna and Shmoel Teto. Bet-Nahrain Magazine published an article showing excerpts of articles from two Australian newspapers shedding much light on the poisoning episode. The magazine mentioned the five names of the Iraqi Assyrian delegation mentioned above and deplored the use of a form of mustard gas to poison and murder Assyrians at the AUA conference in Sydney [5]. The AUA points its fingers towards and accuses those five Iraqi Assyrian delegation for poisoning Assyrians at its 11th World Congress in Sydney and claims that the poisoned sweets were brought by the five Iraqi delegation and specially packed

in Iraq under the orders of the Ba'ath regime [6]. Of course, following this, the AUA expelled Al-Deroo from its organization.

I am not aware of any official investigation that cleared Al-Deroo and the other four from the allegations regarding the poisoning issue. If Sargon Dadesho knows this fact since the information was published in a magazine issued by his own group, why is he then in association with this person today?

There is something very wrong with any Assyrian who sidetracks his/her people with meaningless issues in such decisive times. Why are we wasting our valuable time and using our supposedly Assyrian media in spreading propaganda against our own people in these crucial moments of our history? Attacking Assyrian leadership in Iraq will not gain us those rights. In fact, it raises many questions about the real intentions, motivations, and legitimacy of anyone who indulges in such activities. If we look deeper in this episode, we can easily argue and conclude that the only groups that could benefit from such activities are our enemies in Iraq; and the Kurds in north of Iraq in particular. I am for collaboration between the Assyrians of Iraq and those in the Diaspora. I am a believer in the fact that Assyrian leadership and people in Iraq cannot gain all that Assyrians demand by acting alone because of certain pressures perhaps from powerful Arabs and Kurds. However, this could not be achieved by attacking them; this is not sound policy, it is asking for disaster.

Meanwhile, the activities of the ADM (ZOWAA) go beyond building schools and teaching Syriac language to over 6000 students who will be our future. It goes beyond rebuilding destroyed villages, paving roads, and tearing grounds up and building irrigation canals; it goes beyond planting trees and enforcing our attachment to land. These, despite limited resources, are solid achievements that will make our people have a reason to remain in north of Iraq. The ADM calculated steps were the only reason why Iraqi opposition groups recognized, and for the first time in Iraqi history, the Assyrians as an ethnic group during the 1990 Beirut Conference. It is because of the ADM (and one cannot ignore the efforts of the Diaspora Assyrians) that Assyrians are on the map again today. I continue to read articles by Iraqi writers who have finally awoken and are looking at the Assyrians from a completely different perspective. They are finally respecting who we are and in some cases amazingly fighting for our rights. This was not accomplished by dreams, emotional outburst, and poetry alone, rather through hard work by the ADM in Iraq. What the ADM has done for Assyrians in Iraq is beyond erecting buildings and establishing TV stations; it is in reality the renaissance of the Assyrian in Iraq.

To revive Assyria, one must start from the bottom and construct the new Assyria with one stone at a time. Every organization must have a short, medium, and long term plans. The organization that calls for the establishment of Assyria without specifically indicating how that Assyria will be established is only wasting the people's time and energy. We know that we could not revive Assyria with dreams and emotional speeches alone. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that what Dadesho is doing in fact is simply keeping those around him emotionally attached to something that he knows well that he cannot accomplish. Moreover, since that dream could not be accomplished, he uses the name issue to redirect the blame towards the ADM, thus keeping himself around the national scene. The ADM was barely in the national picture when Sargon Dadesho made his plans to build the school in the USA. Why did he fail? Was that because of the ADM? There is nothing easier than writing and issuing fancy looking mission statements and impressive manifestos that could be framed and hanged in our personal offices or published in our books; this is the work of writers. Meanwhile, serious politicians and true leaders, who mobilize massive people and nations, not only put things that look impressive on paper but draw precise plans to bring those plans to reality. I know that we must dream since dreams are like desert springs; but dreams alone in national matters are never enough.

Various individuals have risen to Assyrian leadership positions. These individuals could be divided into two categories: The first group comprises of those true leaders and winners, who have proven that they get things done. These leaders set up reasonable projects, yet important, and draw a clear strategy to accomplish those projects. The second group is those who run mediocre institutions and organizations, they are known losers, who do a lot of talking, look for personal gains and status. We have for so long mixed bingo runners with nationalists and educators with disc jockeys. Raabi William Daniel states that the term nationalism is overly used, even abused and it is abundantly affixed to insignificant accomplishments. He

adds: "To be zealous is admirable, but caution is the indispensable lubricant to oil the gears of national Zeal, so that there is more service and less noise. In our organizations, unfortunately, we do have some noisy members in whose dictionaries such terms as caution or mature thinking are not listed. They have contempt for him who admonishes prudence; they hail with praise him who fans the flame of their rash deliberations; him they will call their hero" [7]. As mature people, and after witnessing the political and national activities of many Assyrian groups in the last eighty years in general and thirty years in particular, we must be able to look at these groups, evaluate, assess, and then intelligently distinguish between them; distinguish between winners and losers.

Seriously, let us examine the situation in Iraq, who the real shakers and movers are, and integrate that with world policies. If all things considered, does anybody think that a declaration by an 11-man-front can move a small rock in Iraqi affairs? It would be interesting to hear from this group a detailed description to how they plan to obtain their impressive demands.

Almost every issue in life has two sides. I will dare and be an optimist today and look at that 50 percent full cup as half full. Few others chose to be pessimists and see it half empty. While few insist to live in a dream and enjoy nothing but a temporary mirage, many among the Assyrians are living the reality.

What is this reality:

Fact is that Assyrian heartland has been demographically changing in the last 80 years, from being Assyrian to being Kurdish, and no Assyrian group has addressed this issue seriously. We have neglected this issue grossly, especially by the Diaspora Assyrians, since they have a freedom to address it when those in Iraq did not. Fact is that Assyrian Diaspora has little concern for what goes on in Assyria. Fact is that most of the Assyrian organizations in the Diaspora have done basically nothing besides talk. Fact is that for 80 years the Assyrians in the Diaspora (cannot blame those in Iraq) have failed to bring recognition to Assyrians in Iraq, with the exception of the recognition of their language. This too was short lived; it remained ink on paper after few years. Assyrians were never mentioned in any Iraqi constitution and under any capacity, shape, form, or structure.

The above is important to admit and understand. To have a clearer vision of what we need to do and what our best chances in Iraq are, we have to understand:

1. We do not make a reasonable percentage of the population,
2. We do not have 50,000 armed militias ready to fight,
3. We are spread thin in Iraq and for all practical purposes no Assyrian candidate can win any serious votes in any district in event of elections, whether local or national,
4. We are financially (collectively as a group) weak, compared to all our neighbors.
5. We are divided.

If so, we must learn to be realistic and pragmatic. While a mirage is an encouraging moment for a man dying of thirst in a vast desert, this so-called AUF is not capable to accomplish any thing but be a roadblock for Assyrians. What are these eleven individuals uniting to be called a united front? Furthermore, eleven individuals cannot constitute a front of any shape, even if the BNDP was behind them. The complete disaster of the latest conference attended in Baghdad by the BNDP in collaboration with the separatist Chaldean organizations represented in the groups of Abd al-Ahad Afram and Ghassan Hanna Shathaya is a good indicator to where the Chaldo-Assyrians in Iraq stand from these groups. The total of 70 or so in attendance, including half non-Syriac speaking and non-Christian, is a loud proof [8].

We have had enough with these losers. It is time to look at ourselves and seriously evaluate our position in Iraq. We need to learn how to be good politicians because we do not have the power to get what we really demand by force. I do not know about you, but to demand the impossible and simply dream about it is not what Assyrians should pursue at this time. We are not ready to fly; therefore, let us take it as one step at a time. This temporary constitution (Iraq Fundamental Law) is a positive step. First, it guarantees the administrative, cultural, and political rights of the Assyrians (Chaldo-Assyrians in Iraq). Furthermore, it recognizes the Syriac language and guarantees the rights of its speakers to teach the language freely. This will lead to funding and assistance from the Iraqi Government to truly revive this language on a bigger

scale. In addition to all this, all Iraqis, in general, are to be treated equal and all personal rights will be guaranteed including those of Assyrians. Still, this was only a battle in which we accomplished moderate goals, no matter how small. We must look ahead to the war that will be fought in less than two years from now (2005) when the permanent constitution will be written. We need to play our cards right; we need to unite and work together to have the power necessary to lay all our demands on the table while coming from a strong position and not shaky one. The question is: Are we going to continue attacking those in Iraq and establish mediocre groups where one attacks the other or are we going to work with them to empower them and get them ready for 2005.

Finally, many hosts at AssyriaSat has continuously claimed and accused Honorable Younam Kanna for being "the Christian representative" in the Iraqi Governing Council despite many reliable sources proving otherwise. If Honorable Younam Kanna was the Christian representative, shouldn't we have seen something about the rights of Christians in Iraq in the just published Iraqi Fundamental Law (Temporary Constitution)? Let me ask: Do we even read the word Christian mentioned in the Iraqi Temporary Constitution? The answer is a clear NO. Honorable Younam Kanna was not there to fight for our Christian rights per se, although the freedom of religion is guaranteed, he was rather fighting for our administrative, ethnic, cultural, and political rights, as the Fundamental Law clearly shows.

I need to say here that, today, it is vital that all Assyrian media outlets, whether web sites, TV or radio stations, Assyrian discussion forums, or Assyrian chat rooms must be used in much productive ways to empower Assyrians of Iraq. There are civilized ways to express constructive criticism. What AssyriaSat (and Bet-Nahrain Inc. behind it) is doing, meanwhile, is simply an attempt to undermine and marginalize the Assyrians of Iraq, and that is unforgiving. This is just how it seems to me and I regret that. I regret seeing Assyrians in the Diaspora involved in such reckless behavior towards their own flesh and blood in a dangerous and unstable Iraq.

References:

- [1] Read February 2, 2004, No. 44, issue of Zinda Magazine.
- [2] http://www.bndp.net/bulletin_012504_eng.htm
- [3] <http://www.nahrain.com/d/news/04/02/29/nhr0229y.html>
- [4] Read the December 15, 2003, No. 40, issue of Zinda magazine
- [5] The Sydney Morning Herald, November 17, 1978, and the Daily Mirror, November 22 and 23, 1978 issues. Reported in Bet-Nahrain magazine Vol. V, No. 9-11, December 1978 - February 1979.
- [6] http://aanf.org/midwest/nov2002/assyrian_universal_alliance.htm
- [7] William Daniel. Assyrians of Today: Their Problem and a Solution. Chicago, 1969.
- [8] Rev. Ken Joseph Jr. "Anti-Zowaa Meeting Fizzles!" Zinda Magazine. Vol. 1, March 1, 2004.