

Kurds Undermining Assyrian National Interests in Iraq

By Fred Aprim

Since 2003, the Kurdish leadership has carefully been executing an orchestrated plan to undermine the national rights of the Assyrian people (as an ethnic group and as indigenous people) in Iraq in general and in northern Iraq in particular. The leadership of Barazani and Talabani has undermined and marginalized the true voice of the Assyrian people (also known as Chaldeans and Syriacs) represented in the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) and its legally and constitutionally elected representatives. The Kurdish-ADM relationship has been strained since the ADM's 2003 Baghdad Conference, which came after the fall of Saddam Hussein regime and with the United States promises of freedom to all Iraqi people.

Since 1992, the ADM has worked as a partner with the Kurdish leadership of Barazani and Talabani as both sides (Assyrians and Kurds) were struggling against the common oppressive Pan-Arabist regime of Saddam Hussein. However, after the fall of Saddam's regime in 2003, the policy of the Kurdish leadership changed as real changes began to take place in Iraq. The Kurdish leadership did not want to see the Assyrians as an independent entity and force in northern Iraq so as not to compete with the Kurds over the West's attention. The Kurdish leadership did not favor the recommendations and plans of the ADM that were proclaimed in the 2003 Baghdad Conference. First, Barazani and his Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) made sure to divide the one Assyrian people into two or three ethnic factions: Assyrians, Chaldeans and Syriac. Then Barazani brought certain Assyrians and Chaldeans that are members of Kurdish political parties or heads of faux Assyrian and Chaldean political parties and began to push them forward as the representatives of the Christian people in northern Iraq.

Today, these certain individuals, including ministers Sargis Aghajan (member of the KDP), Nimrod Baito Youkhanna, and George Mansour -- all members of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) -- Fawzi Hariri (representing Kurdish slate in Baghdad's central government), Romeo Hakkari (representing Kurdish slate in the Kurdish regional parliament) and Abd al-Ahad Afram Sawa (representing Kurdish slate in Iraqi national parliament) are all advocating and promoting a self-rule for the "Chaldean Syriac Assyrian" people in the Nineveh Plains. So why are they advocating a "self-rule" and is that possible?

On March 23, 2006, I wrote an article titled "The Future of the Assyrians of Iraq: A Safe Haven vs. Self-Administrative Region." In that article, I explained why a safe heaven for the Christians (after bombing churches and targeting Christians) in Iraq was completely undesirable and out of the question. I addressed the issue of self-administrative region and pointed to what Mr. William Warda of the ADM meant by that term at the time. I explained that Warda was referring to the

establishment of a new governorate (*Muhafadha*) in par with the existing 18 Iraqi governorates. This path is feasible and acceptable by, or is legal according to, the Iraqi Constitution.

The self-rule plan in the Nineveh Plains that is being promoted by KRG Minister Sargis Aghajan does not have legal basis. Aghajan, who is executing Kurdish plans, wants to create what he and the Kurds defines as a self-rule region in the Nineveh Plains, but then the prerequisite is that the region must be linked to the Kurdish region and the KRG. But since the current KRG constitution states clearly and specifically that it is forbidden to create a new region within the Kurdish region, Assyrians would not have self-rule. Furthermore, in exchange to Aghajan's plan, the Assyrians have to give up their region of Barwari Bala on the Turkish borders. Furthermore, Aghajan's plans will result in giving up the historic Assyrian region of 'Aqra, Sapna valley and the Slewana (Slaifani) region on the Syrian-Iraqi borders. These regions are strategically located and the Assyrians must keep control of them and of other Assyrian regions in Nohadra (Dohuk) and Arbil in northern Iraq.

Now, there are towns and villages in the Nineveh Plains that are exclusively Assyrian, such as Baghdede (QaraQosh), Bartella, Karamles, Telesqof, etc. However, there are other towns and villages within the Nineveh Plains region in which Assyrians make half of the population or even less and they share lands with Yezidis, Shabaks and others. Do Assyrians want to act like Kurds and impose on others their will? Shouldn't then the opinion of these people be considered in a democratic manner? A referendum in the Nineveh Plains in which the people would decide the type of government and administration they desire is an appropriate step to consider.

It is important to understand that there are no articles in the Iraqi or KRG Constitutions about the concept of "self-rule". However, the Iraqi Constitution allows the creation of additional governorates. Article 116 of the Iraqi Constitution states: *The federal system in the Republic of Iraq is made up of a decentralized capital, regions, and governorates, as well as local administrations.* Local administrations could be interpreted as simply having an Assyrian mayor, and these can be appointed by the KRG, as in the case of Sami Oshana Giwargis, appointed mayor of the sub-district of Bamirny (Amadiya District), Dohuk Governorate, by the Barazani regime.

Article 117 of the Iraqi Constitution, Item II, states: *This Constitution shall affirm new regions established in accordance with its provisions.* And Article 119 states: *One or more governorates shall have the right to organize into a region based on a request to be voted on in a referendum...* This means that the creation of a new governorate (Nineveh Plains Governorate or Assyria Governorate, for example) that covers the Nineveh Plains and other Assyrian regions is permitted and this governorate could become a region of its own, if and when the people of the governorate vote for that. Additionally, this governorate would not be created

based on any particular ethnic or religious background, but geographical, which is a desirable concept and would be welcomed by all Iraqis. Furthermore, what guarantees that when the Nineveh Plains is usurped to the KRG the Assyrians would really exercise self-rule? The reality is that there are no such guarantees. With Aghajan's plan, the Assyrians would have no political and national rights besides individual rights (highly dubious), the rights of teaching Syriac language and religious freedom at best. In fact, anything that would involve instituting new laws, for example, would be solely in the hands of the KRG, Barazani and Talabani.

Why is pursuing the creation of a new Nineveh Plains Governorate attractive? The answer is in the Iraqi Constitution again. Article 121, Item II states: *In case of a contradiction between regional and national legislation in respect to a matter outside the exclusive authorities of the federal government, the regional power shall have the right to amend the application of the national legislation within that region.* This means that if and when the Nineveh Plains Governorate becomes a region (the local people vote for that), then the Assyrians, Yezidis, etc. could change laws that do not fit them, such as imposing the Islamic Law on the citizens of the region. Furthermore, the creation of this new governorate would give the Assyrians, Yezidis and Shabaks a considerable level of political, legislative and administrative freedom. This new governorate (approved by articles 117 and 119 of the Iraqi Constitution) would be destined to prosper. Article 121 of the Iraqi Constitution, Item III states: Regions and governorates shall be allocated an equitable share of the national revenues sufficient to discharge their responsibilities and duties, but having regard to their resources, needs, and the percentage of their population. Meaning, the newly established governorate would have share of the Iraqi treasury and oil wealth, therefore, the Assyrians, Yezidis, Shabaks and the other ethnic and religious groups in the governorate, would enjoy an economic boom and better life. This is one thing that the Kurdish leadership is trying to prevent.

While I desire to see an Assyrian autonomous region, the reality is that it is not possible at this junction and Iraqis and Iraq's neighbors would not support it. Assyrians must learn from the regional experiences at hand, including that of the Kurds. Assyrians must learn how to walk before they attempt to fly; it is a good policy to pursue; therefore, we should emphasize on what is achievable and acceptable at this moment and not let the enemy lead us to plans that are not in our best interests.

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