

The Patriarch, the Archbishop, and the Message

By Fred Aprim
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On October 2, 2021, the new Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, Mar Awa III Royel, visited the Assyrian town of Simele in the Nineveh Governorate, northern Iraq. The patriarch delivered a very moving and powerful statement to the gathering at the Church of the Martyrs. Mar Awa III stated: “I am here today not only as a patriarch, but also as a son of the Assyrian nation. My soul is joyful as we stand here today on this historic and sacred land that is blessed by the blood of our forefathers.”¹

The Patriarch noted that with the 1933 Simele Massacre the world witnessed, for the first time in the 20th Century, a country ordering its army to kill its own people. He added that this was a turning point in the modern history of the Assyrian nation. One of the consequences of the massacre, he said, was the exile of the late Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun from Iraq. The dispersion of Assyrians around the world could be partly a result of the Massacre of 1933. The patriarch continued: “I am not saying these things out of anger, suffering, or hate, rather we as the Assyrian nation, must learn an important lesson which is that if we did not unite religiously and nationally other events such as those of 1933 will befall against us in many different places around the world. Imagine how hard that is to our nation due to our small population and being without a country of our own.” The Patriarch added: “But we have never lost hope and the proof is that you are still here. You remained here – you the children, grandchildren, and great great-grandchildren of those who accepted the crown of martyrdom in Simele. God willing, your children and grandchildren will remain here as well, preserve the heritage that you are preserving today so that someday history will not say that there were Assyrians in Simele, rather let them say that there were Assyrians here in the past, there are Assyrians today and there will always be Assyrians on this historic ground, which is the land of our forefathers.”

Mar Awa III concluded: “We are not guests here. We are the sons and daughters of this country and its inheritance. We are the indigenous sons of this blessed country of Iraq. We will remain honest to the promise of our Church has given in the past. We promise today again that we will preserve our identity here in Iraq. We will pray that our nation be saved and protected here in Iraq, because this is our native and truthful land. We will support you to stay on your lands and in your villages here and in this blessed country.”

Patriarch Mar Awa III avoided any mention of the Kurds, the Kurdish leadership, or the Kurdish region during his speech in Simele. This was intentional and carefully calculated.

Weeks earlier, on August 30, Mar Meelis - the Archbishop of Australia, New Zealand and Lebanon - was a guest on the weekly TV program “Voice of Hope”, hosted by the two deposed members of the Assyrian Universal Alliance (AUA), David David and Hurmiz Shahin. Mar Meelis stressed that the Assyrian nation needs a leadership that can lead the Church and Nation so that our people, wherever they are residing, can live in peace, tranquility, and gain their human rights. He said: “I personally think that the Church must play a large role on the national scene. The *national movement* has declined in the last 20 years because the Church of the East pulled back and was not involved in the national matters and hence the decline in Assyrian national activities. The truth is that it was the Church of the East that instilled the national feelings into the Assyrians. It was Mar Dinkha who came to Iraq and referred to us

¹ In 1933, in Simele, over 3,000 unarmed Assyrian women, children and elderly were butchered by the Iraqi Army under Kurdish general Bekir Sidqi. Along with the killings, Kurdish and Arab tribes ransacked Assyrian villages and plundered tens of surrounding Assyrians villages.

as we the Assyrians and Saddam got angry and asked what is with this [Mar Dinkha] saying Assyrians, Assyrians every day. It was Mar Dinkha who stood in Iraq and said we are Assyrian and there are two things we will not give up, our belief in Christ and our Church of the East and our nationality as Assyrians.”

The archbishop spoke about two of his friends, who were tortured by the regime of Saddam Hussein. Mar Meelis stressed that after 2003 US invasion, Assyrians found refuge and safe haven in one place only and that was the Kurdish region of Iraq, as the Kurdish authorities opened their doors and welcomed our people. He asked: “What was the goal or purpose of the Kurds for doing that? Well, it is not my business, I leave it to you, you politicians.” He added: “I am speaking from the humanitarian perspective. When a large population of people live in a region, they can guard and protect their identity, culture and being; however, when a group is very small that is not the case. In the Iraqi parliament we are known as Christians and the Parliament quota is a Christian quota.” He said: “The fact and the truth is that the majority of our people whether Assyrians, Chaldean or Suryanis live in Nineveh Plain and in the north that is now being called Iqleem [Kurdish region in northern Iraq]. These two regions acquired a special importance for our people. In fact, many Assyrians from the Khabor region escaped to the Kurdish region. They were taken care of and they were housed in the homes built by Sarkis Aghajan.”

Mar Meelis continued:

“... But we must understand that we are not guests on these lands – we are the original people of Iraq and northern Iraq. Our origin is in northern Iraq; our empire was there. We did not come from nowhere and settle in northern Iraq... When I am saying that we will prosper in northern Iraq, I am addressing the Assyrians who are living on the lands of their parents. Listen, we escaped from Hakkari. Have we returned to Hakkari? No. We escaped from Tur ‘Abdin. Have we returned to Tur ‘Abdin? No. In Urmia, how many Assyrian villages are left? We had 48 churches. Today we have 8 left, with few Assyrians living around them. So for those who are attacking [us] will they return to Urmia. No. I know they will not return, because they have good lives [in the West]. But you know, we returned to one place only and that is northern Iraq. Do you know how many churches we built in northern Iraq thanks to Sarkis Aghajan? We built churches, halls, castles, homes that cost millions. What do those who are attacking or criticizing us want? Do they want us to leave? Do you know how many schools Zowaa has built that teaches the Assyrian language? Show us where else we have schools besides northern Iraq and Australia? Let those who are attacking and criticizing show us one school present where they live that is on par to the Assyrian schools that Zowaa has in northern Iraq. Are there any cultural and civic clubs and associations left in Baghdad? No. But we have many cultural clubs in the Kurdish region... What should we do? Should we deny that we do not have all this in the Kurdish region? Should we deny that no one tells our women to wear the hijab? Should we not tell the truth about the safe and good life in northern Iraq, because of those who are attacking us from the US, Europe, and Australia? We are never happy anywhere. We complain wherever we are. We complain from the Kurdish region just to answer what happened in our past history. We have to live for the future and forget the past... The millet [nation] that cannot learn how to live in peace and tranquility with the nations or peoples around it will face hard times. We have to be truthful, what has occurred against the Christians in Baghdad has not been experienced in the Kurdish region. Where have you heard that an Assyrian or Chaldean was kidnapped, and a ransom was demanded or been killed and thrown somewhere?... There have been encroachments on [Assyrian] lands, but the cases have been

resolved. But then what is that? Do you know that there are encroachments of Assyrian on Assyrian, Christian on Christian, Kurdish on Kurdish? So the encroachment is common.”² The Archbishop tried very hard to deliver the message that there was freedom for all in the Kurdish region.

I listened to the responses of the archbishop in awe. The statements of Mar Meelis were untruthful, misleading, and twisted. The Assyrian national movement did not start in Iraq with the visit of Mar Dinkha. In fact, it was the visit of the Mar Shimun in 1970 and the half a million Assyrians that lined up the road from Baghdad International airport to the Green Palace that inflamed the Assyrian national thought. Was Mar Dinkha praising Assyrianism when he visited the grave of Mulla Mustafa Barzani and said a prayer on his grave? Did Mar Dinkha publicly and proudly talk about “we Assyrians” while accompanying Barzani? Mar Dinkha was steps away from the graves of the Assyrian martyrs of Simele. Did Mar Dinkha visit the site of the Simele massacre and pray over the Assyrian martyrs? Mar Meelis tells the story of his two murdered friends, but he did not say a word about the murder of thousands of Assyrians by Kurds.³ Did Mar Meelis forget about the Assyrian women who were kidnapped, raped, and killed by Kurds? Did Mar Meelis forget about the many cases of Assyrian men killed by Kurds?⁴ He stated that the Assyrian land issues have been resolved. Does the archbishop listen or read the Assyrian reports about the continuous Kurdish encroachment and illegal confiscations of lands in Ankawa and in the Assyrian villages in Nahla? Does Mar Meelis consider a dispute between two Assyrians similar to the wide sponsored encroachment of Kurds over Assyrian lands? Can Mar Meelis point to one single case of an Assyrian encroachment on Kurdish lands? Lastly, anyone who says that there is freedom in northern Iraq is either unaware of what is happening in the Kurdish northern region or is a liar. Was Masoud Barzani democratic when he in 1993 ordered the assassination of Francis Shabo, the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) member of Kurdish parliament, an act confirmed by Kurdish leader and later president of Iraq, Jalal Talabani? Talabani said in an interview that the gangs of Barzani assassinated an Assyrian member of the parliament and that he [Barzani] terrorized the Christians, confiscated their lands, and forced them out from their villages?⁵ Was the closing of the Assyrian National Broadcasting (ANB) office in Arbil by the Kurdish authorities a democratic step?

Could the archbishop tell the Assyrian people where Sarkis Aghajan got the money from that the Kurdish puppet spent on building those churches and homes? It was neither his private money nor the Kurdish money. The monies were part of the aid collected from the US and other western countries; therefore, neither Aghajan nor his Barzani master did the Assyrian Christians any favors. Furthermore, we have some Kurds converting to Christianity. What will happen when these Kurdish converts attend these churches?

Mar Meelis stated that the Assyrian being, culture, and identity is linked to the geography that they live in. Thus, according to the archbishop, the Kurdish region and the KRG must be supported and promoted because it is the only safe place for Christians. Let me remind the archbishop by the fact that has been repeated on social media. Saddam Hussein was good for the Christians in Iraq. Bashar al-Assad was good for Christians in Syria. What happened to the Assyrians in Iraq when Saddam fell? What happened to the Assyrians in Syria when the regime of al-Assad was weakened? Therefore, the archbishop's case that the safety and prosperity of Assyrians is based on Barzani's tolerance (false presumption) of Christians is a matter of time. It is a political maneuver in order to gain the world

2 “Voice of Hope” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D_mDe5E6ORg

3 <https://www.facebook.com/faiz.jarjeis/videos/589561212076300>

4 https://www.fredaprim.com/pdfs/2009/Kurdish_oppression_against_Assyrians.pdf

5 Jalal Talabani interview with Zuhair Qsaybati, published on the daily ALHAYAT, January 11, 1995, Issue No. 11649.

support to establish the Kurdish dream, the illusive Kurdistan, over historic Assyria. The US courted Saddam and then turned against him. It courted the Shah of Iran, but its national interest later was to get rid of the Shah. What will happen in northern Iraq when the so-called tolerant Kurdish leader is deposed? We cannot take any more chances and hope that we will be protected as Christians, especially by the Kurds who have caused the Assyrians the greatest tragedy in the 19th and 20th Centuries. Haven't we learned our lessons yet? Patriarch Mar Awa III said that we must learn a lesson from our past. We have to remember that there have been fatwas (Islamic edict) already issued by the Kurdish mullahs against the Assyrian Christians in northern Iraq in recent times. For Assyrians, the pictures and experiences of life in Baghdad, Iraq, and Khabor, Syria are vivid. The Assyrians must work harder to be recognized ethnically and as the indigenous people of northern Iraq. The Assyrians must be allowed to govern themselves and handle their own security with the presence of a special international monitoring system. That is the only way that Assyrians could survive in the Middle East.

Weeks after that "Voice of Hope" interview, the Archbishop returned again and praised the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Kurdish leaders during his interview with Zagros Kurdish TV.⁶ The trend of manipulating and exploiting information continued. At the evening ceremonies of the consecration of the new patriarch at Franso Hariri Hall, Mar Meelis forced the Assyrian professor Dr. Robin Bet-Shmuel to step down and end a speech that he was delivering. Bet-Shmuel was talking about the history of the Church, how Mar Benyamin Shimun was murdered cowardly by Kurdish leader Simko and how Mar Eshai Shimun was assassinated by David Malik Ismael, when Bet-Shmuel was told to end his speech. According to the Archbishop, we have to forget the past. We are expected not to mention that the leadership of the Assyrian Church of the East has asked its clergy to honor the assassin of the Assyrian patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun by name as he attended various diocese in the US, Canada, and Australia. What kind of a message were Mar Dinkha and some of his bishops delivering to the congregation by honoring the assassin of the patriarch of their own church?

The essence of Archbishop Mar Meelis's answers and remarks in his recent interviews have focused on praising the Kurdish region, the KRG, the Kurdish leaders, and their puppet Sarkis Aghajan. He made sure not to sound completely as though he is the voice of Kurdish propaganda, so he mentioned that the Assyrians are the original people of the region. While the new Patriarch Mar Awa III has tried to avoid addressing the Assyrian – Kurdish relations and the alarming situation of Assyrians within the Kurdish region in northern Iraq, the Archbishop has been the trumpet for Barzani and the KRG. It is hard to imagine that the Patriarch and the Archbishop are at conflict. To many observers that I have spoken with, the two church leaders are playing good cop, bad cop; however, in the final analysis they both, as many are telling me, will work to promote the Kurdish region as the haven for the Christians. But at what price?

Edward I. Koch said, "I can only explain it to you. I can't comprehend it for you". I say to our sectarian people: look closer at the miserable situation of the Assyrian people. Haven't you wondered why Assyrians have not moved ahead after over 100 years of genocide? Look at the Kurds, a people of no reported civilization and of vague history, look how they have created a regional parliament for themselves and how they are seeking statehood. If the Assyrians continue to insist on living in a world centered around their clergy, they will be dragging their nation into the abyss.

The leadership of the Assyrian Church of the East are planning behind the scenes, the skeptics are relying on history and current affairs to make their case and the general population is apathetic. Will the Assyrians vanish from the land of their ancestors by the time the storm is finally over or will the new Assyrian patriarch prove the church critics they were wrong?

6 <https://www.fredaprim.com/pdfs/2021/Mar%20Awa%20edited.pdf>