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**A Province for the Chaldo-
Assyrians in Iraq:
A Realist Perception**

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A Province for the Chaldo-Assyrians in Iraq: A Realist Perception

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Abstract

This article discusses the issue of ethnic minorities in Iraq, specifically the Chaldo-Assyrian Christians. It provides a historical background, presents demography, and points to their locations, mainly in Nineveh province in Northern Iraq. It discusses the current proposals to solve the issue, particularly autonomy for the group or creating a province for them in the Nineveh Plain, as crucial to the security and survival of the group. Then, it assesses and argues for autonomy proposal as a better option. The article also compares the Iraqi Constitution to the proposed Kurdistan Constitution in regard to ethnic groups' rights.

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Introduction

Iraq is a home for the Christians, the Yazidis, and the Mandaeans, some of the oldest minority communities in the Middle East. Their numbers in Iraq have been decreasing since the American invasion of Iraq in April 2003. They have been target of extreme Islamist groups. Most of Iraq's Christian and Mandaean minorities have left their homes for safer areas in the north of Iraq or for exile. Their situation is deteriorating greatly despite the constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion.

The Chaldo-Assyrian people in Iraq are the indigenous people of Iraq and they are Christians.¹ They belong to an ethnic group called by various names, such as the Chaldeans, the Assyrians, the Syriacs, the Chaldo-Assyrians, the Arameans, etc. The most recently adopted name is the "Chaldeans Syriacs Assyrians." This ethnic group is scattered across many areas in Iraq, in both the Arabic controlled area in central and southern Iraq and in the Kurdistan region northern of Iraq. The largest concentration of the group² is in Nineveh province³ in the north of Iraq. It extends to Duhok province in the Kurdistan region.⁴

Following the fall of the former Iraqi regime in April 2003, extreme fundamental Islamic groups terrorized the Chaldo-Assyrians with murder, kidnapping, and attacks on churches because of their Christian faith.⁵ The character of the new 2005 Iraqi Constitution, which promises nationalities' rights, and the inability of the Iraqi government to secure the safety of the Chaldo-Assyrians in northern Iraq are encouraging them to seek special administrative systems for their areas. Many Chaldo-Assyrian parties, associations, and intellectuals were seeking autonomy (self-rule) for their districts,⁶ based on ethnic principles. Now, they are demanding a creation of a province to include them with other minorities who live in their areas. This idea of creating a "safe haven" specifically in the Nineveh Plain⁷ is gaining momentum despite some opposition to it.

The Chaldo-Assyrian People in Iraq

The Chaldo-Assyrians ruled ancient Mesopotamia for centuries, either from Babylon or from Nineveh capital cities. Today, the Chaldo-Assyrians are distributed in various provinces, but the bulk of them are concentrated in the province of Baghdad and Nineveh.⁸ Great numbers of them are living in districts, sub-districts, and areas of the Nineveh Plain, including Karamles, Qaraqosh, Bartila, Bashiqa, Bhzani, Telkaif, Tilisaqof, Baqofa, Batnaya, Sharafiya, Alqosh, Sheikhan, and others.⁹ Nineveh Plain is a flat area inhabited by multiple coexisting groups, such as the Chaldo-Assyrians, the Yazidis¹⁰, the Shabaks¹¹, the Kurds, and the Arabs. Some statistics indicate that today Christians in Iraq are between 750,000 and 800,000 people, but some observers feel that this figure is exaggerated and that the real number does not exceed 500,000, due to Christian families' migration trend out of Iraq (Siyawish, 2006, Hah, 2011, Global Security, 2008).

The Chaldo-Assyrians enjoyed certain cultural rights in the 1970s during the Ba'ath rule.¹² Despite that positive turn, things began to change for the Chaldo-Assyrians. They were deprived of their cultural rights, while at the same time the Ba'athist regime attempted to alter their history. Eventually, the 1972 proclamation¹³ was overturned, and the Ba'ath regime began a strict campaign of 'Arabization,'¹⁴ hostile to non-Arabs in Iraq, including the Chaldo-Assyrians, as well as other groups, such as the Kurds, and the Turkmomans.

An Overview of the Chaldo-Assyrian Demography in the Nineveh Plain

There are three main districts containing a concentration of the Chaldo-Assyrians in the Nineveh Plain¹⁵. The first district is Telkaif district, with a total population of 167,600 people in 2003, according to statistics from the United Nations World Food Program¹⁶ (Youkhana, 2006b). In the center of the district, half of the populations are Chaldeans,¹⁷ and the other half are people brought there because of former President Saddam Hussein's Arabization policy. Batnaya town, Alqosh sub-district, Tilisqof, and Baqofa are Chaldean, in addition to the villages of Sharafiya and Bindwayie. The second and the largest district is al-Hamdaniya, with a total population of 125,700. The center of the district, called Qaraqosh in Arabic or Baghdaida in Syriac, is dominated by Syriacs¹⁸; Karamles sub-district is entirely Syriac, and Bartila sub-district center has a vast majority of Syriacs, tangibly impacted by the Arabization policy. Baashiqa sub-district center has a majority of Yazidis, with a substantial presence of Syriacs, and the existence of modern networks of Arabs. In its north, Bahizani town has a mix of Syriacs and Yazidis, but there are no Syriac people in the nearby Nimrod sub-district. Al-Hamdaniya is the largest Chaldo-Assyrian district in Iraq and is proposed to be the capital of the proposed Nineveh Plain province. The third district is Sheikhan, with a total population of 58,100. A great majority of people of Sheikhan are Yazidi Kurds, with few Assyrians in the Aen Sifni city.¹⁹ In addition, there are five villages in Baadra sub-district, and five other villages in Atrosh sub-district,²⁰ all belonging to the Syriacs (Youkhana, 2006c).

The Iraqi government failed to clearly provide for the security of its citizens. This has led to continuing migration of Christian families from Iraq. To offset such trend, many Chaldo-Assyrian organizations advocate autonomy for the group or most recently a province for them and other minorities in the Nineveh Plain.

A Case for Autonomy

The demand for autonomy is not new for the Chaldo-Assyrians; their representatives demanded autonomy from Lausanne conference in 1923, which dealt with the issue of the territories of the collapsed Ottoman Empire (Gorges, 2011). Many people see autonomy as an assurance to guarantee national, administrative, and cultural rights of the Chaldo-Assyrians.

The claim of autonomy for the Chaldo-Assyrians is a political claim. It does not contradict with the spirit of the Iraqi Constitution, whose articles stipulate

ethnic and political rights, as well as the adoption of decentralization. The claim of autonomy on an ethnic basis can be applied to other ethnic groups in Iraq. Such claims of autonomy in Iraq are not new. It was granted to Kurdish people in March of 1970, although autonomy is not explicitly stated in the current Iraqi Constitution.

Some opponents of autonomy proposal argue that autonomy will make the Chaldo-Assyrians a target of terrorism. In fact, the Chaldo-Assyrians have already been a target of terrorism because of their religious identity. The Mandaean²¹ were also a target of terrorism because of their religion, although they have no autonomy claim and they cannot be associated with the West (Baito, 2009).

According to Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution,²² people in the disputed areas (between the central government and the Kurdistan region government), including Nineveh, will decide their administration type in a referendum. Eventually, some areas with a majority of Kurds and Yazidis would mostly prefer to join the Kurdistan region, such as Sheikhan district. Other districts with a majority of Arabs and Shabaks would prefer to stay part of Nineveh Province. Majority of Shabaks are Shiite Muslims whereas almost all Kurds are Sunnis. If the Chaldo-Assyrians choose to join the Kurdistan region, then it will be easier for them to enjoy autonomy there. The Kurdish proposed Constitution provides for the autonomy of national minorities.

The Iraqi Constitution,²³ which had two Chaldo-Assyrian members on its writing committee, failed to approve the principle of autonomy for small nationalities.²⁴ It only identified local administrative rights for minorities.

Many Chaldo-Assyrians believe that the autonomous region for them should be in their historical area of Nineveh, as well as areas in Duhok Province in the Kurdistan region. The potential area for self-governance could be created in an area of about (2000-5000) square kilometers (Kako, 2007).

The demographic presence of the Chaldo-Assyrians in the Kurdistan region is verified by the existence of about 140 villages, towns, and cities, whether partial or complete. The Chaldo-Assyrian's presence in Iraq's major cities, like Baghdad, Mosul, Kirkuk, or Basra, cannot in any way be considered a real demographic presence.

Self-administration differs from autonomy, and self-administration is similar to what is currently practiced in the Chaldean city of Ankawa, north of Erbil, the Kurdistan region capital. Its mayor, for example, is from Ankawa, but the city does not have legislative and executive power usually granted in autonomy. Similar self-administration is practiced in Telkaif and al-Hamdaniya in of Nineveh province, without having legislative and executive branches. They have just municipality councils.

The design for autonomy could be as follow. In an autonomous region, there would be an autonomous parliament elected by its people. The parliament would elect the chief executive and approve the executive branch. This self-government would appoint its own courts to decide on matters of concern and those related to personal status law. Self-governance would motivate people to connect to the land and to stay there, rather than migrating. People of the region would have representatives in the Iraqi parliament, the Kurdistan region

parliament, and the provincial councils, as well as ministers in the central and Kurdistan region governments (Kako, 2007).

The Advantage of Autonomy over Self-administration

There are advantages of autonomy over current self-administration provided in the current Constitution. In autonomy, the control is over people and the land, whereas in self-administration, the control is over people but not the territory. In autonomy, the people are in charge of land distribution; but in self-administration, the central government usually is in charge of the land, and it can distribute it any way it sees it fit (Kako, 2007).

Article 116 of the Iraqi Constitution affirms that “The governments of the regions have the right to practice legislative, executive and judicial powers, according to the Constitution, except in what is listed as exclusive powers of the federal authorities” (Text of the Draft, 2005). Under an autonomous entity, there would be a certain share of the general budget of the state in accordance with its population, but not in self-administration. Article (116) of the Iraqi Constitution states that “A fair share of the revenues collected federally is designated to regions ... taking into consideration the (region's) resources and needs” (Text of the Draft, 2005).

In autonomy, there would be a distinctive emblem, with a flag flying next to that of the Iraqi and Kurdistan's flags, while self-administration has no such privileges. Additionally, an autonomous society (and even under own province) would have its own police force and internal security that receives orders from the self-rule authority; this is not necessarily satisfied under self-administration status, where the police and their commanders would not necessarily be from the area (Kako, 2007).

In fact, autonomy is not the only administrative option for the group. There are three administrative possibilities. The first is to establish an autonomous region²⁵ in the current Nineveh Plain and beyond in Kurdistan to be part of the Kurdistan Region. The second is to establish a federal province in the Nineveh Plain connected with the central government in areas of the current Nineveh Province. And the third is to leave it the way it was before the fall of the former regime in 2003, but with a guarantee of national rights wherever they live, in accordance with the new Iraqi Constitution that guarantees nationalist cultural and administrative rights (Bidawid, 2006).

A Case for the Nineveh Plain Province

Many of the arguments to save the Chaldo- Assyrian Christians in Iraq presented in the drive for autonomy can be argued for the creation of a province in the Nineveh Plain current drive. Christian leaders represented by 16 political organizations have formally demanded the creation of a province in the Nineveh Plain. The demand came three weeks after the bloody attack on "Our Lady of Deliverance" Church in Baghdad on 31 October 2010 by Al-Qaeda gunmen killing over 50 worshippers and announcing that they would continue to target Christians in the Iraq (Iraqi Christians, 2011).

Christian parties and organizations have held two meetings, one in the city of Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan in November 2010, and the second in the capital, Baghdad in January 2011, issuing a memorandum demanding the creation of the province in the Nineveh Plain for them and other ethnic and religious group in the area. The 16 parties also called for the establishment of an autonomous rule for the Chaldo-Assyrians in areas where they constitute a majority in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, as a solution to the suffering of their people.

Yonadam Kana, a member of Iraq's parliament and head of the Chaldo-Assyrian al-Rafidain bloc, said that the demand to form a new province is constitutionally guaranteed under Article 125, which stipulates that "this constitution guarantees the administrative, political, cultural, and educational rights of the various ethnicities, including the Turkmen, Chaldeans, Assyrians and other groups, and is regulated by law". The Chaldo-Assyrian organizations declare that their demand is based solely on administrative, geographical and service related reasons (Iraq's Christians, 2011).

More than half of the population of the Nineveh Plain lives below the poverty line, according to Mr. Kana. The province will have its own allocated budget from federal government in accordance to its populations, and its creation will encourages investment (Sras, 2011).

The region includes more than 300 towns and villages with a majority Christian population. Many believe that the villages of the Nineveh Plain possess the necessary agricultural, industrial, and tourist components for a favorable and sustaining governorate (ADM rep, 2005). The demand is for a province that is linked to federal government in Baghdad, not to be a part of the Kurdistan region as some critics claim.

Among the reasons for the demand for province are the lack of employment and services in the Chaldo-Assyrian districts and the non-existence of the so-called strategic projects in those districts. About 60% of Nineveh province's budget is for the so-called strategic projects. This means that no real budget is ever going to these districts from this strategic projects budget. None of these three districts has such strategic projects. From the remaining 40% of the budget, only 5% (\$2-3 millions) goes to al-Hamdaniya district, which is the largest Christian district in Nineveh and Iraq. The province is to preserve what is left from the Chaldo-Assyrian ethnic group in Iraq, which survived over two millenniums in Mesopotamia (Georges, 2011).

The need is to create this province either by a presidential decree or by parliamentary approval. This move needs political consensus which is hard to obtain in the current political climate in Iraq. In addition, the Sunni Arabs who dominate Nineveh province object forcefully to such demand. Article 116 of the Iraqi Constitution provides the spirit for such rights. It states that "the federal system in the Republic of Iraq is made up of a decentralized capital, regions and governorates, as well as local administrations" (Iraq's Constitution, 2005). Articles 117 to 124 have provisions addressing regions, governorates, and the capital

Atheel al-Nujaifi, the governor of Nineveh province, is totally against taking any part of Nineveh's Plain from his province claiming that "Such an act would harm the Christian community and isolate Christians from the rest of the

Iraqis," adding that "There are many obstacles preventing the creation of a new province...It is located in the vicinity of Arab areas, there are no economic activities taking place in this area and people live off the work they do in other regions" (Mustafa, 2011). Also, the speaker of the Parliament Osama al-Nujaifi who is also a brother of Nineveh province governor spoke against creating a Nineveh Plain province although he himself once called for a creation of a federal region for the Sunnis in Iraq.

Iraqi member of the parliament from Ahmed al-Jubouri from al-Iraqiya (mainly Sunni Arab bloc) spoke against the formation of the province in the Nineveh Plain stating that "the general trend now is the unity of the province and the unity of the country," adding that "Nineveh province living situation now are safer to a large extent (Aswat al-Iraq, 2011).

Why Is Autonomy Better within Iraqi Kurdistan?

People who support merging the Nineveh Plain with the Kurdistan region through referendum argue that the experience of 15 years of the Kurdistan region has transformed it into a developed area, compared to the rest of Iraq. It is more modern, liberal, and economically more developed. It will allow the Chaldo-Assyrians freedom of return to their original land and to initiate a process of reverse migration.

Additionally, the Chaldo-Assyrians would become the largest second national minority in the Kurdistan region. The exchange of population between the villages and towns of the Chaldeans and the Yazidis and others could be initiated for a further concentration of national and religious minorities of the region. Cooperating with the Kurdistan bloc in the Iraqi parliament and with the institutions of the Kurdistan region will allow this initiative to proceed and to implement a referendum of the Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution.

In fact, Article 140 calls for a referendum on the disputed areas to decide whether to join the Kurdistan region or to stay under the central government authority. The Kurdish leadership is the only reliable leadership that is supporting the Chaldo-Assyrians' rights, even if they are doing so to serve their interests, which is customary political practice. The group's interests can be jointed with that of the Kurds' interests, serving the interest of the group, even if it would be beneficiary to the Kurds (Youkhana, 2006a).

The Kurdish Constitution and the Iraqi Constitution Regarding Autonomy

Article 2 of the Kurdistan Constitution specifies that the Kurdistan region is made up of many areas, including the districts of Telkaif, al-Hamdaniya, and sub-districts of Bashiqa in the Nineveh Plain, where the majority of the residents are Chaldo-Assyrians. It calls for the implementation of Article 140 of the Federal Constitution, to define the political borders of the Kurdistan region. It also states that "a new region may not be established within the borders of the Kurdistan Region." Also, Article 35 of the proposed Kurdistan Constitution guarantees ethnic, cultural and administrative rights to the

Turkomans, the Arabs, “the Chaldeans, the Syriacs, the Assyrians,” and the Armenians, including autonomy, wherever any of those components represent a majority of the population.

Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution is enforceable. The disputed areas included in the text of the article are areas affecting the border of the administrative units in Iraq, whether counties, districts, or provinces. It also includes processes of demographic change carried out by the system of the removal and displacement of people from villages and towns. The ultimate goal of the application of Article 140 is to reconstruct the administrative border between the counties, districts or provinces, and to determine the connections between these units and the Kurdistan region.

Conclusion

The Chaldo-Assyrian people should have the right to decide, in a referendum, the issue of autonomy, or any other form of administrative type, including creating a new province for them in a federalist Iraq, in accordance with the Iraqi Constitution spirit and other demonstrative laws. If such a referendum is not explicit in the Iraqi Constitution, then there is still a chance to include it in the proposed amendments to the current Constitution.

The self-governed autonomous region is crucial to the welfare and survival of the group in Iraq, and will also encourage its refugees in Iraq and elsewhere to return to their areas. With so many people fleeing Iraq, the very survival of these indigenous people is at stake. Since the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, more than half of the Iraqi Christians has left Iraq.

The call for the establishment of an autonomous region for the group in Iraq raised their expectations and became an aim for many of their political groups. In fact, autonomy is a safeguard for the existence of the group in their country, where their existence is threatened. It is a disgrace for Iraq to lose its indigenous people who have survived since early stages of Mesopotamian history. Either autonomy or a province would serve the cultural or national interests of the Chaldo-Assyrians in Iraq but autonomy is more practical and achievable if Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution is implemented.

Because of fierce opposition to the idea of creating a province in the Nineveh Plain for the Chaldo-Assyrians and other minorities from the Sunni Arab and specifically in Nineveh province, then the best option is to wait for the implementation of Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution. This article is already there waiting implementation, but nothing specific that can be used to call for the creation of a province in the Nineveh Plain. The Kurdish leadership is very serious about the implementations of Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution. Autonomy option has more advantages than creating a province for the Chaldo-Assyrians.

Notes

1. The Syriac speaking people of Iraq constitute about three percent of Iraq’s population. The Chaldeans make up more than two percent, followed by the Syriacs and then the Assyrians.

2. I will occasionally refer to the Chaldo-Assyrian people or “Chaldean Syriac Assyrian” people as “group” because of the length of their newly used name.
3. The majority people of Nineveh province are Arabs, with a large Kurdish population. About ten percent of Nineveh province consists of other religious or ethnic minorities, such as Chaldo-Assyrians, Yazidis, Turkomans, and Shabaks (International Crisis Group, 2009).
4. At the birth of the Iraqi state, the Mosul Province consisted of Duhok, Erbil, Suliemaniya, and Kirkuk. It had a majority of Kurds.
5. Beginning with the U.S. invasion of Iraq in April 2003 till November 2007, over 27 churches were attacked or bombed by al-Qaeda and other insurgency groups, killing dozens and injuring hundreds of Christians. Until May 2008, 17 priests or bishops were kidnapped and four were killed. The archbishop of Mosul city, which is the center of Nineveh province, Poulis Faraj Rahhoo, was kidnapped on February 29, 2008 and killed. The climax of the killing came in November 2010 when at least 52 people were killed when terrorists attacked a Catholic church in Bagdad.
6. Autonomy is also called self-government or self-rule, and self-administration is also called self-management.
7. The Nineveh Plain is a region located in the northern Iraqi Nineveh governorate to the north and west of Mosul city, which is the center of the governorate. The area consists of the three districts of Telkaif, al-Hamdaniya, and Shikhan. Many of the inhabitants are Aramaic-speaking Christians, along with the Yazidis, Shabaks and Kurds.
8. There is not one definite geographic area for the Chaldo-Assyrians in Iraq. In addition to the concentration in of Nineveh province, there are some in Erbil Province, Duhok Province, and many others in big cities of Baghdad, Kirkuk, Basra, Suleimaniya, etc. (Behnan, 2008).
9. A district is called “Qadhaa” and a sub-district or county is called “Nahiya” in Iraq.
10. Yazidism is an ancient religion dating back to the Sumerian period of Mesopotamia. The great majority of Yazidis, about 600,000, live in Iraq. Their ethnicity is Kurdish and they speak the Karmanji Kurdish dialect (Hanish, 2009).
11. The Shabaks are an ethnic minority group living in the province of Nineveh in northern Iraq. They have their own Shabaki language, which is an Indo-European language, with many Arabic, Kurdish, Persian, Turkish and Hindu vocabularies. Their population was about 80,000 in 1977. They follow Islam, mainly the Shiite sect (Alyasiri, 2009).
12. Historically, the Iraq Communist Party was the first political party in Iraq to demand administrative and cultural rights for the “Chaldeans and Assyrians” in Iraq.
13. On April 16, 1972, the Revolutionary Command Council, the highest authority in Iraq, issued Resolution No. 251, granting cultural rights to the Syriac-speaking people.
14. The Arabization Policy is a policy adopted by the Ba‘ath regime to Arabize non-Arab areas in Iraq.
15. *Nineveh* is also written as it is pronounced in Arabic, *Ninewa*.

16. The World Food Program (WFP) is part of the UN system and is voluntarily funded.
17. The Chaldeans are about one million, mostly in Iraq and over 200,000 in the U.S. They belong to the Catholic faith and they speak Aramaic.
18. The Syriac name was used after the spread of Christianity in Iraq.
19. The Assyrians accept as factual the Assyrian identity or ethnicity. They believe that Chaldeans, Syriacs, and all Christians in Iraq and its neighboring countries are Assyrians. The term *Assyrians*, which has been employed since 1886, is used today mainly to indicate the followers of Nestorius (Hanish, 2009).
20. Since 1991, the area of Atrush for example, which is part of Sheikhan district of Nineveh province, came under the administration of the province of Duhok.
21. The Mandaean (Mandaian) are also called the Sabeans or the Mandaean Sabeans. They belong to an ancient religion in Iraq. They identify Adam as the first prophet. Their most important rite is baptism. Their scriptures are also written in Aramaic (Hanish, 2009).
22. The implementation of Article 140 comes with the process of normalization first, census second, and referendum to determine if these areas will become part of the Kurdistan region or under the provinces of the central government.
23. Article 116 of the Iraqi Constitution states that the federal system consists of capital, regions, decentralized governorates, and local administration. It does not mention autonomy by name.
24. The Iraqi Turcomans are a distinct Turk ethnic group, who live mainly in Kirkuk and Mosul Provinces (Park, 2005).
25. When I use the word “region” (*mantaqa*, in Arabic), I mean it to be a geographic area, not “region” (*iqleem*, in Arabic), a word used in Article 119 of the Iraqi Constitution, which means an area consisting of one or more administrative provinces.

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