Assyrians between the State and the Iraqi Opposition: Minoritization and Pluralism in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century

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In 2011, while conducting archival research in Baghdad, I began searching for ethnographic sources in Iraqi towns and villages outside of Mosul, Erbil, and Duhok—places with significant and long-standing concentrations of ethno-religiously and linguistically diverse communities that had come to be considered "minorities," as demonstrated by Heather Sharkey and Aline Schlaepfer in this roundtable. While in Alqosh, a town north of Mosul city, I visited the 7th-century Rabban Hormizd Monastery, which sits majestically on top of a mountain bearing the town's name. The ancient town of Alqosh was the See of the Church of the East for several centuries (1504–1837), and the monastary is one of Iraq's most revered Christian sites. There I came across the graves of six men buried in its grounds. The graves of saints, monks, and bishops inside the monastery are adorned with intricate Syriac epithets, and the well-kept cemetery of lay Alqoshis in the town below features various ornate graves as well. By contrast, the graves of these six men are simple. They were likely marked in haste with graffiti-like scripts stating the names, villages of origin, and death dates of the men. On top of the concrete encasing, a mark of the cross is drawn. Two of the graves had professional scripts affixed to them at a later time. Each of the six graves identifies its occupant as a brave martyr (*al-shahīd al-baṭṭal*) killed in 1963. Who were these martyrs at one of Iraq's holiest sites?

In this piece I want to underscore the importance of spatial readings of the histories of one community in particular—the Assyrians. Spatial readings are useful in examining plurlistic engagments, even if short lived, of minority communities, and their integration conceptually, linguistically, idelogically, and, as my case demonstrates, within particular geographical areas. Where Assyrians lived affected their relationship to the state and to other minorities living in the same regions, as well as the ease or difficulty with which they could be policed. I will trace the spatial history of these martyrs, which sheds light on the pluralism of northern Iraq and the ways in which it was broken. I wish to complicate existing narratives about the place of Assyrians in Iraq's past, focusing on the agency of this minority community and its pluralistic engagements—especially during periods of upheaval, or when the state was weak. These moments provided a space in which the Assyrians and other communities could maneuver in order to form alliances within the opposition and negotiate with the state.[1]

Space and place had important political dimensions that affected the community's relationship to the state. During periods of violence, or when the state was strong domestically and abroad, the state's conciliatory efforts towards Assyrians and oppositional groups were abandoned, and various levels of state repression employed. During these periods, the hierarchy of citizenship that ranked Iraqi society according to ethnic, religious, socio-economic, gender, political, geographical, and other criteria, which was adjusted in each socio-political context, was enforced more overtly. State policies towards

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the Assyrians were not always applied consistently: rural Assyrians witnessed the destruction of their villages, while urban Assyrians were granted cultural and social rights; Assyrian political leaders were at times promised administrative and political rights, while policies that enforced divisions between different Assyrian denominations were encouraged and later enforced; Assyrians opposing the state or veering away from accepted state narratives were punished, while those supportive of the state were co-opted and supported.

In the second half of the 20th century, the Assyrians migrated to the larger Iraqi cities in the north, and to Baghdad, in search of employment within modern professions—primarily in the expanding oil industry—and better educational opportunities.[2] Within these newly politicized urban spaces, they were attracted to intellectual and political movements that allowed them to emerge from the peripheries of their society, temporarily discarding their minority status to engage with other Iraqis of their own socio-economic background. These secular and often leftist political centers provided spaces that came to replace more traditional places of assembly, such as the church and the market, as Assyrians were increasingly drawn into the cities' own political organizations. With room to maneuver, Assyrians formed strategic alliances, both as individuals and as a community, in order to advance issues that were often beneficial to the community as a whole. Rural Assyrians traded and worked with Kurds, Jews, and Arab Muslims. New bonds developed, though the shift to urbanity did not destroy communal solidarity. In fact, Assyrians in urban centers were rarely disconnected from their community members in the rural areas from which they had migrated. Urbanite Assyrians, and the movements with which they were affiliated, were often interested in attracting rural Assyrians, enabling the urban and rural cohorts to maintain dynamic relationships.

In the second half of the 20th century, Assyrians were generally active within oppositional parties. In the early 1970s they found room to negotiate with the Iraqi state using historical narratives that were accepted by the Baʿthist regime, allowing Assyrians some agency in pursuing issues that were important to them.[3] The first republican era, under ʿAbd al-Karim Qasim (1958–63), witnessed an increase in the social and political agency of minorities and others, in ways that conservatives and Arab nationalists perceived to be at their expense. This led to the disruption of the established order and its hierarchy of citizenship.[4] When the regime was toppled in 1963 by the combined forces of Baʿthists, nationalists, and conservatives, a "corrective revolution" inaugurated a bloodbath that sought to kill Qasim's supporters and bring minorities into the fold, setting them in their proper place.[5] My attempt to write the history of these processes has involved stepping away from generations of state and colonial archives, including missionary reports, to draw upon a broader range of sources. The creative employment of popular culture and modern technology in the production and distribution of music enabled Assyrians to celebrate their culture, engage in transnational interactions with Assyrians outside Iraq, and counter the official narrative more assertively than they did in the press.

These shifts between urban and rural centers in northern Iraq and in Baghdad fostered interesting relationshps with the Kurds. Beginning in 1961 and continuing throughout the rest of the 20th century, the Kurdish opposition should not be viewed simply through a nationalist lens. Though the Kurdish resistance has constituted a significant portion of the political opposition against the Iraqi state in the north, Iraqi communists and Assyrians of various affiliations were also important actors, and are central to understanding the

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history of the uprising. Some Assyrian tribal leaders, dissatisfied with the way they had been treated by the government, aligned themselves with forces directed by Kurdish leader Mullah Mustafa Barzani; others joined out of fear of being associated with the government and attacked by antigovernment Kurdish forces; and some Assyrians joined because they were being persecuted by the government for their presumed sympathy to the Communist Party.[6]

In northern Iraq, such collaborations were possible. Hurmizd, son of Malik Chikku of Tiyare, was a formidable Assyrian tribal leader from the village of Koray Gavana who fought alongside Barzani.[7] He joined the Kurdish uprising against the Iraqi state in 1961, together with fifty men, but was recruited and supported financially by Kheith Kheith Allap II in 1962, to ensure the independence of the Assyrian resistance from the Kurdistan Democratic Party, led by Barzani.[8] Chikku continued fighting the Iraqi forces over the next two years, ceasing only after the fall of Qasim in 1963. Cooperation began between Hurmizd Chikku's forces and the newly formed communist forces, and more specifically with Tuma Tumas.

Tumas, a native of Alqosh, emerged as a military leader within the Communist Party. During this period his forces were stationed on top of Alqosh's mountain to fight off government attacks on his town. The National Guard and *juhūsh* progovernment tribes had attacked Alqosh three times that year—on 30 June, 7 July, and 9 July—demonstrating how, in the eyes of the government, whole villages could become implicated in the resistance.[9] Tumas was part of a diverse force composed of Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, Turkmen, and Yazidis.[10] In his memoirs, he provides a detailed description of his collaboration with Chikku and his men. Given that Tumas and Chikku belonged to different ideological factions, their collaboration points to the diversity of associations established between the various camps during this period, and also to the ongoing intercommunal interactions between Assyrians of differing denominational affiliations.[11] On 30 November 1963, the Syrian Baʿthist Liwaʾ al-Yarmuk assisted the Iraqi Baʿthists in eliminating Chikku, along with men from Tumas's forces. These men's bodies were transferred to Alqosh and buried in the martyrs' cemetery in the Rabban Hurmizd Monastery.[12] In 1972, when the Higher Committee for Christian Affairs was established in collaboration with the Kurdish opposition, the committee's battalion would be named Khayla d'Sahda Hurmizd, or Battalion of Martyr Hurmizd.[13]

Uncovering this story helps to shift the scholarly focus from urban centers to the mainly rural north during the early Iraqi republican period (1961–75). It complicates the traditional understanding of the Kurdish uprising as a Kurdish nationalist movement alone, demonstrating that Assyrians, as well as communists who survived Qasim's toppling, were significant actors in the politically charged conflict between the Iraqi state and the opposition. A sectarian reading of the events that denies its geographically northern and politically leftist dimensions is misleading. Starting in 1961, Assyrians joined the opposition movements of their Kurdish neighbors—first as individuals, and later through organized tribal and political associations. Although a minority, the Assyrians became useful to the opposition not only in military conflict with the Iraqi army, but also in garnering regional and international support from actors engaged in Cold War politics. Through these actions, the Assyrians hoped to win full citizenship and equality in the north. The involvement of Assyrians in the Kurdish opposition contributed to competition between the Iraqi state, the KDP, and the communists for alliances with the

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Assyrian community; all three strived to entice the Assyrians by presenting them with favorable policies. But the consequences of the ensuing war with the nationalists were devastating to the Assyrian community, resulting in major demographic shifts and rural–urban migrations, as well as the destruction of Assyrian villages and religious and cultural sites in northern Iraq. Furthermore, the state punished Assyrian affiliates of the Communist Party along with some of the villages where they lived. However, the ways in which the Assyrian community chose to commemorate these events and the people associated with them, were evoked by the place chosen to bury these six martyrs, a holy site.[14]

This essay has attempted to contextualize the experience of the Assyrian community within Iraqi and Middle Eastern studies. It moves away from the popular representation of Middle Eastern minorities as either persecuted communities or agents of Western colonial powers, instead acknowledging their agency as actors who, in many cases, were well integrated into their societies. This work also highlights the intercommunal relations, both within Iraq and across its borders, that came to divide Assyrians from one another in the newly formed nation-states. It reflects upon the ways in which space and place are destroyed—often tragically—by the lethal effect of contemporary sectarianism and religious strife.

NOTES

[1]Alda Benjamen, "Negotiating the Place of Assyrians in Modern Iraq" (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 2015).

[2]Alda Benjamen, "Assyrians and the Iraqi Communist Party: Revolution, Urbanization, and the Quest for Equality," in *Minorities and the Modern Arab World*, ed. Laura Robson (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2016), 106–21. Arbella Bet Shlimon, *City of Black Gold: Oil, Ethnicity, and the Making of Modern Kirkuk* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2019).

[3]Baghdadi Assyrian intellectuals, in their magazines and clubs, used accepted narratives about socialism and Abbasidism propagated by the state, to argue for greater cultural, political, and administrative rights. This campaign was pursued subtly in the press, but more vocally in popular culture; Benjamen, "Negotiating the Place of Assyrians in Modern Iraq," 171–214.

[4]On the ways in which women exacerbated the social order, see Sara Pursley, *Familiar Futures: Time, Selfhood, and Sovereignty in Iraq* (Stanford , Calif.: University Press, 2018).

[5]Benjamen, "Assyrians and the Iraqi Communist Party," 106–21.

[6]Avshalom H. Rubin, "Abd Al-Karim Qasim and the Kurds of Iraq: Centralization, Resistance and Revolt, 1958–63," *Middle Eastern Studies* 43 (2007): 368–76; interviews by author with informants in Barwar, Duhok city, Alqosh, and Baghdad, December 2011.

[7]I.I., interviewed by author, Chicago, Illinois, 14 November 2011.

[8]Y.C., interviewed by author, Chicago, Illinois, 13 November 2011. Khuyada w Kheirutha Athorayta (Assyrian Unity and Freedom) is known by its acronym, Kheith Kheith Allap II.

[9]Tuma Tumas, "Awraq Tuma Tumas (3)," accessed 14 May 2014, http://www.al-nnas.com/THEKRIAT/24jsf3.htm; Tumas, "Awraq Tuma Tumas (4)," accessed 14 May 2014, http://www.al-nnas.com/THEKRIAT/30jsf4.htm. See also, Hizb al-Shuyuʿi al-ʿIraqi, Lajnat Mattbuʿ Shuhadaʾ al-Hizb, *Shuhadaʾ al-Hizb, Shuhadaʾ al-Watan: Shuhadaʾ al-Hizb al-Shuyuʿi al-ʿIraqi, 1934–1963,* 2nd ed. (n.p.: Hizb al-Shuyuʿi al-ʿIraqi, 2008), 344–46.

[10]Tumas, "Awraq Tuma Tumas (4)." The Turkmen apparently left this force due to a split instigated by Muslih al-Jalali.

[11]In these urban and politicized spaces, Assyrians were able to look beyond the sectarian divisions that had emerged within their communities in the mid-19th century. By living in shared neighborhoods, agitating in labor unions and political parties, and cooperating as intellectuals in common clubs and newspapers, they socialized outside the constraints of religious institutions. This interdenominational closeness experienced by Assyrians in

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the second half of the 20th century is demonstrated by the cooperation between Tumas and Chikku. In urban settings, Assyrians married across denominational lines, spoke a similar *koiné* of the Eastern Aramaic language, and mingled as neighbors and community members. These kinds of interactions are evident from the writings of Assyrian intellectuals during the 1970s as well. Although sectarianism emerged at various points, and especially during the 1980s, it is problematic to impose a structured analysis based solely on church affiliations that were not entirely applicable to the period under study.

[12]Tuma Tumas, "Awraq Tuma Tumas (5)," accessed 14 May 2014, http://www.al-nnas.com/THEKRIAT/5jsf5.htm.

[13]I.I., interview by author, Chicago, Illinois, 14 November 2011.

[14]Maria Cattel and Jacob Climo, "Introduction: Meaning in Social Memory and History: Anthropological Perspectives," in *Social Memory and History: Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Maria Cattel and Jacob Climo (Walnut Creek, Calif.: Altamira, 2002), 4.

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