

## MAKING HISTORY TO/AS THE MAIN PILLAR OF IDENTITY: THE ASSYRIAN PARADIGM

BÜLENT ÖZDEMİR\*

Assyrians are known as the “Remnants of the people of ancient Mesopotamia, succeeding the Sumero-Akkadians and the Babylonians as one continuous civilization. They are among the first nations who accepted Christianity. Today they remain stateless and great numbers of them have left their homeland and settled in Western Europe, the United States and Australia.”<sup>1</sup>

In order to explain the sectarian complexities clearly to readers, it is necessary to deal with the problem of the term ‘Assyrians’ in English.

‘Assyrian’ in English scholarship usually refers to the ancient Assyrians of Assur. 19th century Protestant missionaries applied the term ‘Assyrian’ loosely to various Eastern Christian groups, including (very misleadingly) some Nestorian groups. During and after World War I, the British army used the term ‘Assyrian’ loosely to apply to some Eastern Christian groups, and named (misleadingly) the mountain Nestorian auxiliaries ‘the Assyrian levies’.

‘Syrian/Syriac Christian’ in English scholarship is used to refer to a number of Eastern Christian groups (but never to Nestorians), and is defined differently by different writers - these differences in definition relate to the complexity of distinguishing between the various sects.

Modern Eastern Christian nationalists (in Sweden, Switzerland, etc) use the term ‘Assyrian’ to describe a notional ethnic group that they have constructed for political purposes. In Turkish and Arabic the term ‘Süryani’ was and is used to mean the Syrian Christians, but this sometimes applied to Nestorians as well.

Confusion can arise because: various Syrian Christian groups have become formally linked with other, more powerful Christian denomi-

\* Professor of Modern History at Balıkesir University, Balıkesir/TURKEY, e-mail: ottoman1300@hotmail.com

<sup>1</sup> *The Political Dictionary of the Modern Middle East*, Lanham, Md.: University Press of America.

nations (eg Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic); ancient names (eg 'Melchite', 'Chaldaean') have been revived; and also because many individual Syrian Christians have at various times converted to other Christian sects. Further confusion is caused by some writers referring to, for example, Maronites as 'Catholics' because the Maronite Church is in communion with the Catholic Church.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century Syriac speaking Christians living in diaspora have increased their search of identity because of the social and political conditions of their present countries. In doing so, they utilize the history by picking up certain events which are still kept fresh in the collective memory of their society. World War I, which caused a large segment of the Syriac speaking Christians to emigrate from the Middle East, has been considered as the milestone event of their history. They preferred to use and evaluate the circumstances during World War I in terms of a genocidal attack of the Ottomans against their nation. This political definition dwarfs the promises which were not kept given by their Western allies during the war for an independent state. The aspects of Assyrian civilization existed thousands of years ago as one of the real pillars of their identity suffer from the artificially developed political unification around the aspects of their doom in World War I presented as a genocidal case. Additionally, this plays an efficient role in removal of existing religious and sectarian differences for centuries among Syriac speaking Christians.

This paper aims at showing in the framework of primary sources how Syriac speaking Christians' genocidal claims are being used pragmatically in the formation of national consciousness in a very effective way. Not the Assyrian civilization but their constructed history in World War I is used for the formation of their nation definition.

Until the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Nestorians<sup>2</sup>, Chaldeans<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The term "Nestorian" derives from Nestorius, who was the patriarch of Constantinople from A.D. 428 to 431. Nestorius was condemned for heresy; he and his followers fled from Syria to Persia, where they practiced their distinctive religion for fifteen centuries.

<sup>3</sup> This group, with a population of about 40,000, had mostly converted either to Protestantism or, as in the case of those living around Mosul, to Catholicism. In general they lived in villages in the area running from the left bank of the Tigris to the mountains. They mainly lived in the *sanjaks* of the towns of Sert, Mardin and Mosul, which follow the river. The Chaldean Church's centre was in Mosul. As with many eastern churches, they were in communion with the Roman Catholic Church. The Chaldean Patriarch was appointed by the Pope, or at the very least it was necessary for the Pope to give his assent to the appointment.

and Syrian Christians<sup>4</sup>, belonging to various different branches of Eastern Christianity, lived as small, little-known communities in the Ottoman Empire. It was known that these Eastern Christian groups were descended from some of the first Christians and that many of them spoke varieties of Syriac, a form of Aramaic, the language of Jesus. These communities were “discovered” first by Western travellers, and later by Christian missionaries, and came to be characterised as a “Lost Tribe”, in reference to the ten Lost Tribes of Israel mentioned in the Old Testament.<sup>5</sup> The notion was based on the similarities between ancient Hebrew customs and certain traditions that were kept alive in the Nestorian, Chaldeans and Syrian Christian communities. This fantastical view of the Nestorians Chaldeans and Syrian Christians led to a greater awareness of the communities in the West, and brought with it a number of problems. Over time, abrupt and profound changes began to occur both within the structure of Nestorian, Chaldeans and Syrian Christian society itself and also in its external relations. Western Christians, especially Protestant missionaries, became influential in these communities and alienated them from Ottoman rule by means of social work, such as the establishment of schools and hospitals. More importantly, the activities of the missionaries led to the emergence of a perception of these Eastern Christian groups as “others” in their relations with Turks and Kurds, with whom they had shared the same lands and culture for centuries as neighbours. At the outbreak of the First World War, the Nestorians, Chaldeans, and Syrian Christians found themselves trapped in the middle of a struggle between the Ottomans and the Entente powers. The Syrian Christians and Chaldeans, remaining faithful to Ottoman rule, generally stayed quiescent during the war, while the Nestorians, encouraged by Russia, took part in the war as the Entente powers’ “smallest ally”.

<sup>4</sup> They were also known as Jacobites and named for Jacobus Baradeus, who was also considered heretical at the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451; his followers have kept their faith for as long as the Nestorians. See, Ishaya, Arian, and Eden Naby, “Assyrians”, in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, edited by Stephan Thernstrom, 160-163. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1980).

<sup>5</sup> E. Ferguson, (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, (New York & London, 1998) pp. 1100-1102., F. L. Cross, (Ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (London, 1958) pp. 98, 1315, 1316., G.W. Bowersock, P. Brown & O. Grabar, *Late Antiquity, A Guide to the Postclassical World*, (Cambridge & London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999) pp. 710-713.

### What Happen to the Nestorians, Chaldeans and Syrian Christians during World War I?

The Ottoman Government began the mobilization of its army a short time after the Great War broke out in Europe in 1914. When this mobilization began first a secret Armenian committee organized armed bands to interfere with the carrying out of the mobilization and in Eastern Anatolia attacked companies of recruits proceeding in accordance with the mobilization.<sup>6</sup> When Ottoman Empire entered the war, the Armenians in Eastern Anatolia and Armenian committees outside of Ottoman Empire espoused the cause of the Allies and joined the armies of the Allies. Throughout the Great War the Armenians joined or assisted the Allies wherever and as much as possible.<sup>7</sup>

Likewise when Ottoman Empire entered the Great War, Nestorians of south eastern Anatolia held a conference under the leadership of Patriarch Mar Shimon. In response to a request of the Ottomans to join Ottoman Empire against the Allies or to remain neutral during the war, the decision was made in that conference to join the Allies against the Ottomans. Thus, it was an open rebellion to the state of which they were citizens. By joining the Allies they became the enemies of Ottoman Empire. To the end of the war Nestorians had continued to fight against Ottomans.<sup>8</sup>

During the first and second advance of the Russian army in eastern Anatolia against the Ottoman Empire, Armenians and Nestorians of the region joined the Russian army in fighting the Ottomans. During these two advances of the Russian Army, Armenians and Nestorians took advantage of the opportunity to take reprisals upon the Muslim population of the occupied territory. The Russians reported the excesses of the Armenians. According to Admiral Mark L. Bristol, United States High Commissioner in Istanbul, the extent of the excesses will never be known.<sup>9</sup> In 1917, Nestorians had organized a small fighting force under the Russian command and operated with the Russian army in the

<sup>6</sup> Genelkurmay Başkanlığı, *Birinci Dünya Harbi'nde Türk Harbi: Kafkas Cephesi, 3. Ordu Harekatı*, cilt II, (Ankara: Genelkurmay Basımevi, 1993) p. 566.

<sup>7</sup> NARA (National Archives and Research Administration of the United States of America), RG 59, M 363, Reel 28.

<sup>8</sup> R. S. Stafford, *The Tragedy of the Assyrians*, (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1935) p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> NARA, RG 59, M 363, Reel 28.

Caucasus against the Ottomans. The Nestorians rendered invaluable services as advance guards and scouts to the Russians.<sup>10</sup>

The collapse of Russia in 1917 resulted in the dispatch of a Franco-British Mission to the Caucasus. A scheme was devised by which the Assyrians, in conjunction with Armenians, should form part of a line of defence against the Ottoman advance. After the Bolshevik Revolution, Armenians in the north and Assyrians in the south fought against the advancing Ottoman Army. Assyrians and Armenians formed an army of 35,000 men in response to encouragement by British officers who promised this army assistance with supplies and ammunition.<sup>11</sup> This army held on as long as it could and finally Assyrians retreated with their families through Persia to Mesopotamia. This was a tragic escape and every known disease seemed to attack these unfortunate people, and hundreds died from typhus, dysentery, and smallpox and others from exhaustion.<sup>12</sup> Eventually what was left of the nation arrived at Hamadan where there was a small British detachment. Under British protection Assyrians continued their march of some five hundred miles to Baquba in Iraq. They were put in a refugee camp in Baquba near Baghdad. This camp maintained principally by American charity though the British authorities did render some assistance. It was from these refugees that the British formed an Assyrian Legion to fight together with English forces and the Iraqi Levies.

Earlier, when World War I was approaching an end, President Woodrow Wilson laid down a set of principles for world peace called the Fourteen Points. These principles contained his vision for how the Allies should build peace after the war was won. Taking heart from this key principle, Syriac speaking Christian leaders prepared to argue for the creation of an independent state. From the start, the delegations met with obstacles, the most serious from Britain, and the mandate power most directly involved with the fate of Nestorians. Great Britain and the US delegates denied the Nestorian right to present the petition in the Paris Peace Conference.<sup>13</sup> Nestorians demanded basic freedoms and the release of all prisoners and the punishment of the crimi-

<sup>10</sup> Mary Lewis Shedd, *The Measure of a Man*, (Gorgias Press, 2006), p.218.

<sup>11</sup> Sir Percy Sykes, "A Summary of the History of the Assyrians in Iraq, 1918-1933", *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, v.21, 1934, pp.255-268.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259.

<sup>13</sup> TNA (The National Archives of the UK): FO (Foreign Office) 371 / 4177 / 1842.

nals responsible for the atrocities committed against the Nestorians during the Great War. These demands included allowing the Nestorians of Hakkari to return to their homes. Although there was nothing about the establishment of an Nestorian autonomous area, even these modest demands were ignored by the Allies.<sup>14</sup>

The question of restoring the Nestorians to their homeland was not raised at the Lausanne Conference in 1923. A most unfortunate omission was made by the British delegates. Settling the question of the frontier line between Iraq and Turkey was left to League of Nations. In 1924, the League of Nations decided to dispatch a commission for this purpose. The commission concluded that Hakkari region, which was claimed as the homeland of the Nestorians, would remain in Turkey. This decision created a great disappointment and anger on the part of the Nestorians. British government asserted that the only possible solution was to settle the Nestorians on unoccupied lands in the mountain districts of Iraq and to assist them as far as possible in the early stages. This meant that Nestorians must henceforth be scattered and lived among the Kurds. The final blow came when the British government decided to negotiate for the termination of the mandate in 1929. The Nestorians were bitterly disappointed with the action of the British government in terminating the mandate without settling the Nestorian question. There was no mention of their particular position in the Anglo-Iraq treaty. No provision was made for the protection of minorities.<sup>15</sup>

The question of the Nestorians formed the subject of a debate in the House of Lords on November 18, 1933. I quote The Times on the debate: "The fact remains that the Assyrians in Iraq were enlisted, paid and trained by the British governments in order to avoid the expense of employing the British troops to uphold the British mandate against local opposition; that they thus accumulated a large stock of unpopularity among the numerous anti-British elements in that country; and that British statesmen might have foreseen the probable consequences of the militarization of an alien minority, which had faithfully served British policy in Iraq and had thus become an object of Arab suspicions and fears. Britain has no legal responsibility for the present plight

<sup>14</sup> TNA: FO 608 / 83 / 217637.

<sup>15</sup> UNOG (The United Nations Office At Geneva): LNA, (League of Nations Archives) S-14, Political Section, 1919-1927.

of the Assyrians, but it has a moral duty to do its best for the remnant of a brave, if misguided, people.”<sup>16</sup>

### How the Story was Constructed and Told

In some biased books written about World War I, it can be observed a serious partiality and misinterpretation of the events. Although the terms and expressions differ due to the differences of the dates they were written, certain themes such as famine, epidemics, migration and genocide are always presented as there were oppressed people on the one side, and evil and cruel people on the other. Especially in the situations where the war expands into the places where civil people live, or when the civil society was pushed into the war, Ottoman Empire was always depicted as cruel and evil. When one reads those writings it is easy to come to a conclusion that the Ottoman Empire was only composed of soldiers and statesmen and that there were no civilian population other than Armenians and Nestorians. Events are presented within this framework by creating a perspective of considerable oppressed people and societies, and yet an antithesis supported by research is not displayed. When alternative studies and opinions are presented, though based on genuine researches, they are denied due to the claim that it is an attempt to conceal and distort realities based on selected documents. This denial exhibits most of time a preconceived approach to alternative opinions and studies. There is a dominating apprehension and attitude which asserts that all the realities are already known and they must be accepted rather than searching for the truth.

The word *Seyfo* means ‘sword’ which etymologically comes from the Arabic word ‘*sef*’ in Syriac. In recent years, there exists a common effort particularly among Syriac speaking Christians Diaspora in the point of narration of the events happened in Mardin-Midyat region (South-eastern Anatolia) in 1915 which are being identified with this specific term. It is not possible to find the term, ‘Seyfo’ in the literature and especially in archival sources formed during and after the war, since it is generally based on oral narrations and genocide claims among the people.<sup>17</sup> This term began to be used after 1990s in the works of Syriac speaking Christian researchers who live in some European countries

<sup>16</sup> *The Times*, 18th of November 1933.

<sup>17</sup> Ramazan Aras, *Migration and Memory: Assyrian Identity in Mardin Kerboran/Dargeçit*, Unpublished Post Graduate Thesis, (Boğaziçi Üniversitesi, 2005) p. 75.



especially in Sweden. Briefly, this expression includes the claim that Syriac speaking Christians in Mardin-Midyat region were subjected to massacre by both regular Ottoman forces and irregular Kurdish troops during the World War I, and particularly during the forced migration of Armenians in 1915. When we put aside the events which were briefly displayed above, it is hard to find any document to support such a claim neither in the archives of Ottoman Empire nor in the archives of any other belligerent countries.

In the Ottoman military archival records, it is written that some of the Syriac speaking Christians rebelled around Midyat and Cizre; and a detachment with 650 soldiers under the command of Ömer Naci Bey set out towards the area to end this revolt. Finally, the parties reached a compromise and the rebellion ended in peace. The events, which are thought to be occurred among the tribes in the region during the war, are generally based on narration of people who were survivors or witnesses. These narrations that are transmitted through generations reached an important position in time. In addition, the Diaspora of Syriac speaking Christians had also contributed to the construction of such a myth. In those narrations, sometimes there are stories about the attacks and massacres of Turkish and Kurdish soldiers; and sometimes there are narrations exalting the their defense and resistance, producing heroism. Particularly, the resistance in Hezek and Ayn-Warda villages was transmitted with great exaggeration. On the one hand, genocide thesis is claimed; and on the other hand, it is emphasized that the deeds of the people during their rebellion were heroic. It is obvious that these statements contain an irony.<sup>18</sup> The only study which includes the statements of witnesses during and just after of these events is the book *Al-Qousara Fi Nakabat Annasara (The Disaster of Christians)* and it was compiled and published by a Catholic priest Ishaq Armalto in Beirut in 1919.<sup>19</sup>

Contrary to the claims, in the reports which were written by Major E. Noel from British Army, who came to the region with a secret duty just after the war in 1919; it is emphasized that it was the Jacobites (Syriac Orthodox Christians) who got the minimum damage among the

<sup>18</sup> See David Gaunt, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim-Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia During World War I*, (New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2006) This book was clearly written with the aim of promoting the thesis that a genocide occurred. Although reports have been made to use the existing archival sources, more often oral accounts are resorted to in order to support the allegations of a genocide for the Syriac speaking Christians.

<sup>19</sup> See, Ishaq Armalto, *Al-Qousara Fi Nakabat Annasara*, (Beirut, 1919).



Christian societies living within the borders of Ottoman Empire. Major E. Noel expressed that Jacobites had good relations with Ottoman administration and they were officially exempted from the forced emigration decision taken for Armenians during the war. Nevertheless, Jacobites were suffered from the common effects of war like all other people of the empire in the period when the security was weakened in the region. Major Noel also added in his notes that Jacobites in Diyarbakir had quite good relations with Ottoman administration and they supported existence of the empire in the region; and they even prayed for Ottoman Empire and Sultan in their churches in Mardin and Diyarbakir.<sup>20</sup>

“Seyfo-1915” is a phenomenon, which is made up and constructed practically by some secular European associations which reject the traditional role of the Church. The purpose of constructing “Seyfo-1915” is primarily to demand that the experiences of Syriac speaking Christians during World War I have to be considered apart from the claims of Armenian and Pontic Greek, and be evaluated individually. In fact, this was especially emphasized in the petitions submitted to Paris Peace Conference.<sup>21</sup> By doing this, it is aimed to create a common history for Syriac speaking Christians living in different countries and belonging to different sects of Christianity.

Another important argument is derived from the misinterpretation of *jihad* declaration during World War I by Ottoman Empire. The reason of this misinterpretation is lack of information. Declaration of Jihad was a political manoeuvre towards societies in other Muslim countries in order to obtain their support, unfortunately by some researchers who do not aware the legal base of the subject interpreted the jihad as a declaration of war and massacre against Armenians, Assyrians or Greeks who had been living as Christian subjects of Ottoman Empire for centuries. However, jihad declaration is in essence a decision that can be taken by a Muslim country against another country in warfare; and it is not possible to acted upon it against Christians living in Dhimmi status as citizens of the country declaring jihad. A contrary situation is totally against the Islamic law; and the fatwa declared in World War I was towards the foreign enemies, which Ottoman Empire fought against.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup> TNA: FO 141 / 806, 218295.

<sup>21</sup> TNA: FO 608 / 83 / 217637, pp. 467-468.

<sup>22</sup> M. F. Gülen, *Prophet Muhammad as Commander*, (London: Truostar Ltd., 1996) p. 31-38.

It is obvious that those claims are not based on serious research and they are supported rather by slogans. For example, the term “Turkey” is used intentionally instead of “Ottoman Empire” in speech texts or in books. On the other hand, people who were claimed to be subjected to genocide are named altogether as “Christians” in order to provide the political support. It is claimed that Ottoman Empire carried out genocide towards Christians (Armenians, Nestorians, Jacobites, Chaldeans and Greeks) using Kurdish forces, Muslim immigrants from Caucasus and *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa* (Special Intelligence Organization). There are not any serious archival studies or empirical data supporting those arguments. The source shown in this subject are the works, whose credibility is being questioned for a long time, such as *Deutschland und Armenien* by J. Lepsius 1914-1918; *The History of the Armenian Genocide* by V. N. Dadrian, and the famous *Blue Book* prepared by A. Toynbee as a material of war propaganda. Claims of Syriac speaking Christians about the casualties due to the events, which are claimed to take place in 1915 during World War I, complicate the issue further. The number of casualties ranging between 400.000 and 700.000 is never supported by any empirical and archival data.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the more interesting point is that the Syriac speaking Christians’ total population living within the borders of Ottoman Empire prior to World War I was indicated in many sources as less than 400.000.<sup>24</sup>

We see that a “genocide literature” was created by both Armenians and Syriac speaking Christians, who support the thesis that they were subjected to genocide, and this literature composed of a special rhetoric using some specific symbols. That the claims are densely based on the missionary reports and oral narrations came out in later periods constitutes one of the reasons for this. On the other hand, the result is obvious in this case when authors had an agenda in their minds even before they began to write. Therefore, it becomes almost a necessity to use some striking and extreme examples.

Certain themes are noticeable in the stories of eye witnesses or the tellers who listened from the eye witnesses. In the first place there are

<sup>23</sup> In a conference organized in European Parliament on 26 March 2007, Sabri Atman’s speech from Seyfo Centre, Sweden.

<sup>24</sup> For further information on this subject see, Bülent Özdemir, *Süryanilerin Dinî Bugünü: I. Dünya Savaşı’nda Süryaniler*, (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 2008), pp. 50-67. K. Karpat, *Ottoman Population 1830-1914: Demographic and Social Characteristics*, (Wisconsin, 1985). Justin McCarthy, *Muslims and Minorities- the Population of Ottoman Anatolia and the End of the Empire*, (New York, 1983).

scenes of death involving violence, killing and torture. The rhetoric of these stories contains violence and savagery coercing our imagination. In particular, tragic deaths of elderly, children and pregnant women are explained in detail. Pillaging, robbing and raping are common and almost the order of the day. Robbery and looting is another important theme. A narrator told that the Kurds attacked the village, stole even the bloody clothes of murdered people.<sup>25</sup> Mothers who committed suicide even without nursing her baby for last time and who cried “I am the lamb of Christ” while committing suicide, or women and young girls who chose to die when they were forced to believe in Islam appear as general themes.<sup>26</sup> Here, there is also the theme of heroes who became martyrs for their beliefs, which contains also a political message and an emotional exploitation towards Christians. There are quite exaggerated narrations talking about corpses whose ears, noses or other limbs of their body were removed. For example, in the book of Is-haq Armalto which was claimed to be formed by collecting of narrations of the witnesses in 1919, an Syrian Catholic priest Matta Kharimo saw full of human ears, noses, teeth, eyes, fingers and nails (!) in three baskets in the room where he was imprisoned.<sup>27</sup>

In some books, presentation of these scenes is very interesting. It is presented ironically that the Christians, mostly defenceless women and children, were waiting to be killed by the cruel Turks who were not at war in seven fronts for four years and thought only how to massacre Syriac speaking Christians and tried to find ways to exterminate them. In this setting, there were no civil population of Turks, no Turkish families, elders, women and children. Turks were nothing other than the soldiers, only male population who had been programmed to kill and massacre Armenians.<sup>28</sup>

### Why They Need a “Genocide literature”?

The twentieth century has witnessed emigration on a very large scale of Christians from the Middle East. These all come from different Churches, but the pattern of emigration differs from one community to another. In general terms one can say that, as far as Syriac speaking

<sup>25</sup> Ramazan Aras, *Migration and Memory*, p. 78.

<sup>26</sup> Ramazan Aras, *Migration and Memory*, p. 80.

<sup>27</sup> David Gaunt, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors*, pp. 174-175.

<sup>28</sup> For the most striking examples see David Gaunt, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim-Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia During World War I*, (New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2006).

Christians are concerned, emigration during the first half of the twentieth century was mainly to the Americas, while in the last four decades of the century it has been predominantly to Western Europe, though a certain number have gone further afield, to Australia.

In the twentieth century, various Syriac speaking Christian groups have accepted the nationalist ideology. Despite its success, the nationalist ideology is in competition with the denominational ideology, and it is not by all means clear as to which will emerge victorious. So powerful is the denominational ideology, it has resisted attempts to unify basically the three communities under one-Assyrian-nationalism. While it is true that these communities have moved to redefine their identities in nationalistic terms, each has chosen a different identity.

Today living in different countries in large numbers, Syriac speaking Christians faces certain threats that can be outlined as follows:

- Denominationalism and fragmentation
- Islamic fundamentalism and Islamization
- Cultural immersion and absorption into Arab societies
- Mass emigration to the West, and absorption into Western societies

After World War I, majority of Syriac speaking Christians in Turkey consisted of Jacobites. Economic conditions were the main reason for migrations from Turkey to Western countries that began in 1960s and accelerated in 1970s. In the same period, many Turkish citizens from various ethnic and religious origins from different parts of Turkey migrated to European countries, mainly Germany, in order to attain higher life standards or to earn more money. In general, men went to these countries as workers and then they took their families with them, too. People who had been in those countries and came back with wealth caused the migration process to accelerate. Without any doubt, difficult economic and social conditions in Turkey were significant factors affecting this migration movement.

Nestorians, Chaldeans and Syrian Christians who preferred to live within small colonies together in abroad had felt it necessary to organize in all aspects of social life at a short time. Since the Church has constructed their identity traditionally, primary social organizations and communities had taken place around the Church and religious officials. The society faced with new social values and different situations in their present countries in course of time had a much profound interest

in its identity. In order to find and protect their identity they have developed a keen interest in their history. Therefore it can be observed an emphasis on ethnic identity besides religious identity in their discourse. This ethnic awareness, which requires re-reading and rebuilding of history, began to appear in new organizations. Many associations or institutions embraced a new definition of identity based on “Assyrianism” and ethnic roots, rather than Christianity and Church. At this point, they described themselves as “Assyrians” who had lived in Northern Mesopotamia long before the expansion of Christianity. This claim, which is very difficult to prove scientifically, appears to be practically right choice because acceptance of an ancient civilization as the ancestor is a quite pragmatic and harmless attitude.

- The first question here is why identity construction is based on ethnic origin rather than on the Church or Christianity?
- Why are thousands of co-religionists speaking the same language, sharing the same history for 2000 years as first Christians living in different countries not considered as sufficient or proper for identity construction?
- Why is it insisted that they are a different ethnic society who lived in Northern Mesopotamia in Ancient times?

Today, the identity construction of Syriac speaking Christians turns into a political issue and it is being directed by other elements. Preference of being an ethnic Assyrian society will spontaneously bring along a perception of geographic homeland with it.

Their efforts to emphasize, in their claims, that they are an ethnic society having been subjected to genocide in World War I, and to construct an identity upon this claim result from the fact that this is quite important for the unification process of the Assyrian society.

Without any doubt, there are also two other contemporary factors that affect this ethnic consciousness. The first and the most important of these factors is the process which Armenians, who formed a Diaspora like Syriac speaking Christians but with a higher population figure, began to evaluate the events in World War I as genocide since 1960s. The other is that Syriac speaking Christians tend to base their identity construction upon injustice and negative experiences they confronted with during the World War I. Genocide and injustice claims which constitute an answer to the question why they now have to live in diffe-

rent country appear as most unifying element in the processes of identity construction in Diaspora societies.

Some groups within the Syriac speaking Christians' Diaspora have based their ethnic identity search on historical, social, and political factors rather than empirical data.

Historically, the events before and after World War I have characteristics of significant milestones. Nestorians think that they did not get their share that they had deserved in the new order established in the Middle East after the war. Despite their efforts to establish an independent state or at least an autonomous government during the war, their attempts proved insufficient to convince the Allies in post-war period. They remained as minority groups in newly founded countries of the Middle East after the war and great migrations took place towards the Western countries in the 20th century.

As Diaspora communities, their search for identity was intensified due to both social and political conditions of their host countries. In view of that, they preferred to consider the harsh conditions they had been exposed to during the World War I as 'genocide'. In the meantime they rarely mention the unfulfilled promises of their Western allies and the fact that they were indeed led down. 'Genocide claims' became a buzzword to be used for constructing their identity. Unifying Syriac speaking Christians around 'genocide claims' and constructing a national consciousness upon it is undoubtedly much easier to reach unity around "Assyrian civilization" that had existed for thousands of years ago. It may also be claimed that in attempts to bridge age old religious and denominational differences among the "genocide claims" have played a significant role. These claims are also useful tools for constructing an efficient national consciousness. The Nestorian experiences during World War I are accepted as common historical elements by also Jacobites who actually did not share similar experiences-even did not participate in the war; and a historical consciousness and a common fate is being constructed in that manner.

### **Conclusion**

To find out whether a conscious planned and programmed ethnic cleansing was executed against the Syriac speaking Christians or they were exposed to a forced migration by Ottoman administration during 1915 events is the primary objective of Diaspora communities today.

Nevertheless, the archival documents display that the claims concerning Syriac speaking Christians are far away from historical facts; and they appear to create a myth to be constructed like in the issue of the Armenian claims. It is stated clearly in Nestorian petitions submitted to Paris Peace Conference that Nestorians declared war and later fought against the Ottoman Empire alongside first with the Russians and then British, and they suffered thousands of casualties. It means that, according to their own expressions, Nestorians took an active part in the war and the struggle that ensued was within the framework of rules of war. The title used by Wigram for his book regarding Nestorians aptly reflects this point; "Our Smallest Ally".

If a nation or a group of people uses the adjectives as massacred, insulted, humiliated, repressed while defining their identity, it is not possible for them to have sound thinking and to produce positive policies. Therefore, even trying to talk to these people in order to reach a compromise and a setting of dialog would be really hard to realize. The reason here is that this psychology does not want to check the authenticity of the claims. In their thinking these claims are true and there is no doubt about it. If there will be a compromise, one has to accept these claims as prerequisite. It is thought that any effort to open these claims up a discussion in terms of history or academic thinking would be the same thing as discussing the identity of this nation.

We should admit that both sides have to display certain magnanimity and willingness to face its past. We have to stand ready today to start building a sound future for our next generations through the establishment of viable and peaceful relations without delay. For this, a bit of wise thinking and goodwill as well as refrainment from rhetoric and baseless accusations would more than suffice. This should not be too hard a task for any responsible government or parties to undertake.

#### Reference

NARA (National Archives and Research Administration of the United States of America)

RG 59, M 363, Reel 28

The National Archives of UK (TNA): Public Record Office (PRO), FO 371 / 4177 / 1842

TNA: PRO, FO 608 / 83 / 217637

TNA: PRO, FO 141 / 806, 218295



- The United Nations Office At Geneva (UNOG): League of Nations Archives (LNA), S-14, Political Section, 1919-1927
- The Times, 18 November 1933
- Thernstrom, Stephan, (Ed.) *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1980)
- Ferguson, E., (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, (New York & London, 1998)
- Cross, F. L., (Ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (London, 1958)
- Bowesock, G.W., P. Brown & O. Grabar, *Late Antiquity, A Guide to the Post-classical World*, (Cambridge & London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999)
- Kocabaşoğlu, Uygur, *Anadolu'daki Amerika*, (Ankara:İmge Yayınları, 2000)
- Genelkurmay Başkanlığı, *Birinci Dünya Harbi'nde Türk Harbi: Kafkas Cephesi, 3. Ordu Harekati*, cilt II, ( Ankara: Genelkurmay Basımevi, 1993)
- Stafford, R. S., *The Tragedy of the Assyrians*, (London: George Allen &Unwin Ltd., 1935)
- Lewis Shedd, Mary, *The Measure of a Man*, (Gorgias Press, 2006)
- Sykes, Sir Percy, "A Summary of the History of the Assyrians in Irak, 1918-1933", *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, v.21, 1934, pp.255-268
- Aras, Ramazan, *Migration and Memory: Assyrian Identity in Mardin Kerboran/Dargeçit*, Unpublished Post Graduate Thesis, (Boğaziçi Üniversitesi, 2005)
- Gaunt, David, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim-Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia During World War I*, (New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2006)
- Gülen, M. F., *Prophet Muhammad as Commander*, (London: Truestar Ltd., 1996)
- Özdemir, Bülent, *Süryanilerin Dünü Bugünü: I. Dünya Savaşı'nda Süryaniler*, (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 2008)
- The speech of Sabri Atman from Seyfo Centre, Sweden in the Assyrian Conference organized in European Parliament on 26 March 2007.