Introduction
Identity, Urbanization, and Citizenship

The Assyrians are an ancient Christian community that has historically resided in northern Mesopotamia. They belong primarily to churches that follow the Syriac liturgy and traditions, particularly the Apostolic Church of the East, but also the Syriac Orthodox Church of Antioch. Both churches were influenced by Catholicism from around the sixteenth century. The Church of the East's branch in communion with the Vatican is the Chaldean Church, while the Syriac Church's Catholic branch is the Syriac Catholic Church.

Due to their respective understandings of the nature of Christ, the Church of the East and the Syriac Orthodox Church came to be judged as schismatic and even heretical by those Churches that accepted the Christology advanced at the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD), such as those of Rome and Constantinople. The Church of the East's diphysite position argued that the complete nature of Christ was both human and divine. The Church was associated – incorrectly, as recent scholarship shows – with Nestorius, the excommunicated patriarch of Constantinople, and referred to as "Nestorian," though this identification was rejected by the Church of the East. The Syriac Orthodox Church advanced a monophysite position that stressed Christ's divinity.[1] From the fifth century onward, the Church of the East, prominent in the region encompassing modern Iraq, experienced the most expansive geographical reach in the Middle Ages, spreading its faith beyond Mesopotamia into Central Asia, Arabia, India, and China.[2] Likewise, the fifth century was significant for the Syriac Orthodox Church, as it experienced a period of growth, particularly under Jacob Baradaeus,

[1] Sarah Shields, *Mosul before Iraq: Like Bees Making Five-Sided Cells* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 45–46; Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History* (London: Rutledge Curzon, 2003), pp. 1–5.
[2] Baum and Winkler, *The Church of the East*, p. 1.

the Bishop of Edessa, who engaged in missionary excursions in Syria, Mesopotamia, and Egypt, ordaining thirty bishops and thousands of priests and deacons.[3] The Syriac Orthodox Church and its adherents appear at times under the designation of "Jacobite," after Jacob Baradaeus.

The Syriac linguistic designation appearing in relation to the churches refers to the language of the liturgy, which is the Classical Syriac dialect of Aramaic that developed in ancient Edessa (modern-day Urfa, in Turkey). The Assyrians in Iraq, including communities in south-eastern Turkey, north-western Iran, and the diasporas speak Eastern modern Aramaic, which is also the language of printed source materials consulted in this book. The Assyrians' use of "Sureth" to refer to their language in Eastern modern Aramaic – "Suryani" in Arabic – has led to the use of Syriac in a modern context to refer to the spoken and written languages of the community, and not only the Classical variant. Similarly, a modern Western Aramaic dialect exists that is not spoken in Iraq, but has currency in Syria, Turkey, and the diasporic communities.

Assyrians therefore appear in Western scholarship under the designations Assyrian/Nestorian, Chaldean, and Syriac/Syrian/Jacobite. But Assyrians refer to themselves in their language as "Sūroyo/Sūrāyā" (first person, singular, masculine in Western modern Aramaic and Eastern modern Aramaic, respectively), a designation that was believed in the twentieth century to be derived from the word "Assyrian" – a claim to which recent scholarship has lent support. The term Assyrian is used throughout the book, in combination with religious affiliation when appropriate.

Tūmās's identification with his ancient Mesopotamian roots and his pride in a Syriac religious heritage have been typical of Assyrians since the late nineteenth century. What was atypical was his identification as a member of the Chaldean Church. How could he be at once Assyrian, Chaldean, and Iraqi? Most studies of Iraqi Christians have depicted them as adhering to one of a handful of Syriac churches that shared no single conception of ethnic identity. Nor do such studies place the

[3] John Joseph, *Muslim–Christian Relations and Inter-Christian Rivalries in the Middle East: The Case of the Jacobites in an Age of Transition* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), p. 6.

identity of the community within a historical framework that is able to account for its development, especially during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Divisions between Assyrians and Chaldeans, for instance, are taken to be primordial, religious denominations to be demographically static and governed primarily by rigid institutions. But in the politicized urban spaces I explore in this book, Assyrians were able to reach beyond sectarian divisions by living in shared neighborhoods, agitating in labor unions and political parties, and cooperating as intellectuals in clubs and newspapers. 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, who were vigorously engaged in discussing their ethnic identity, reviving their language, and preserving their vernacular culture in the face of forced urbanization and emigration to the West. These intellectuals and the communities they represented were collectively designated as "Speakers of the Syriac Language" officially by the Iraqi government that took note of their shared heritage.

Interdenominational divisions were not fully eradicated, though they were greatly reduced – particularly in the spaces I explore, which exist in many forms to this day. The reversal of the Baʿthist policies exacerbated intercommunal sectarianism again in the late 1970s and 1980s. An understanding of these communities as monolithically divided along denominational lines obscures many of their essential complexities. It also elides structural causes of division that cut across religious denominations: between villagers and urban dwellers; between speakers and non-speakers of Aramaic; between those belonging to different ideological camps, and different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. All of these dividing lines are routinely ignored in the literature in favor of that between "Assyrians" and "Chaldeans."

Western Missionaries and Intercommunal Division

During the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire suffered numerous defeats against Western powers, leading to an increase in the influence of Christian Europeans at the higher levels of its administration, as well as larger concessions to those affiliated with Europeans. French,

British, and German consulates were established in Mosul to encourage trade and "protect" religious minorities in the city – a trend that had previously been followed in other parts of the empire.[4] Some native Christians became protégés of these governments, acquiring benefits enjoyed by Western foreigners. Though numerous advantages were afforded to native Christian populations, their growing ties with Europeans also caused tension with local Muslims. Furthermore, the competition between the British and the French to convert Christians to their respective faiths, Protestantism and Catholicism, exacerbated these tensions, leading to violence against, and within, these native Christian communities.[5]

The French government became aggressive in its efforts to convert native Christians to Catholicism (mainly members of the Church of the East, but also of the Syriac Orthodox Church). The British accused the French of scheming to reduce the numbers of adherents of the Church of the East and degrade their living conditions, and of influencing the Kurds to inflict violence against their members living in the Hakkari mountains.[6] Two new churches had now emerged within these communities: the Chaldean Church, which had split from the Church of the East (Nestorian), and the Syrian/Syriac Catholic Church, created for Syriac Orthodox converts to Catholicism. These new religious communities were allowed to practice their old traditions, and to use the Syriac liturgy, although they were in communion with Rome.[7]

By the end of the nineteenth century, the native Christian churches had dwindled considerably as French missionaries succeeded in establishing schools, hospitals, and printing presses in Mosul.[8] Members of the Church of the East, who had once enjoyed an overwhelming majority, now consisted of only 550 members, two churches, and four priests in the city. The Chaldeans, meanwhile, counted 650 members, two churches, a bishop, and six priests and monks.[9] Most of the conversions in Mosul, and the nearby villages had been accomplished by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[10] Conversions of villages from the Church of the East to Catholicism involved:

[4] Shields, *Mosul before Iraq*, pp. 46–47. [5] Ibid., p. 46.
[6] Ibid., pp. 49–50. [7] Ibid., p. 47. [8] Ibid. [9] Ibid.
[10] David Wilmshurst, *The Ecclesiastical Organisation of the Church of the East, 1318–1913* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), p. 190.

the provision of Catholic priests, service books, and church implements, [which were] slow and laborious, achieved village by village by foreign missionaries working in partnership with Catholic clerics of the Church of the East, often against fierce opposition, and with occasional reverses. It is important not to confuse the allegiance of a particular bishop with the sympathies of the priests and villagers in his dioceses.[11]

On May 23, 1892, the Vali of Mosul corroborated these facts, claiming that the French had sent several special missions in the past four years, and that the patriarch of the Church of the East had complained bitterly to him.[12]

This did not necessarily imply that conversions were final, or that no one wished to revert to their original native Church. Cases of such reversion were observed in 1909, in Alqosh for example; but the individuals concerned were constrained and inhibited by the technical requirements of reversion.[13] On the eve of the World War I, many Chaldeans would have rejoined the Church of the East "gladly" if its patriarch could have provided them with protection equal to that received from the papal delegate.[14] According to John Joseph, most people of this region, including some of the Chaldean patriarchs, were still "emotionally attached to their old church and jealous of the many alterations made in their ancient customs."[15] These churches continued to share a "liturgical, linguistic, spiritual, and theological heritage."[16]

Although these divisions, mainly between adherents of the Church of the East, led to numerous conflicts, Sarah Shields reports that there was an absence of Muslim persecution of Christians and Jews in the city of Mosul, and that some Christians even held positions of authority as notables. This changed toward the middle of the nineteenth century, with major political upheavals resulting in violence and massacres against Christians – first in the mountain areas of

[11] Ibid., p. 2.
[12] Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876–1909* (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 1998), p. 119.
[13] Shields, *Mosul before Iraq*, pp. 50–51. See also, Wilmshurst, *The Ecclesiastical Organisation*, p. 92.
[14] Joseph, *Modern Assyrians of the Middle East*, p. 58.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Wilmshurst, *The Ecclesiastical Organisation*, p. 5.

Hakkari, and eventually in the city of Mosul itself. These violent episodes were comparable to the massacres of Christians in Lebanon and Damascus in the mid 1800s.[17] Hormiz Aboona focuses in particular on the massacres of Assyrians in the Hakkari region by the Kurdish tribal chief Bedr Khan Beg in 1843–46. Aboona illustrates the demographic changes in the mountains surrounding Mosul, resulting from a significant decline in the Assyrian populations in Hakkari and Mosul, and the loss of Assyrian independence and autonomy within Hakkari's established tribal system.[18] Shields argues that Bedr Khan's rise to power and subsequent downfall exemplify key "midcentury issues," particularly centralization, new taxes, the effects of the changing roles among Christians, and the consequences of a growing foreign presence. The Ottoman efforts to retake direct control and reform the empire took on different meanings as the central government extended its power into the mountains near Mosul.[19]

Although Bedr Khan Beg's massacres are beyond the scope of this study, two factors are of particular interest: first, the movement of large numbers of survivors from Hakkari to the Nineveh Plain, an area just outside Mosul comprising Assyrian towns and villages that had become primarily Chaldean; second, the influence of Mosul's Ottoman Vali on the mountainous area east of the city of Mosul. Both of these factors, combined with a knowledge of the ancient history of the Church of the East, are significant for any understanding of those Assyrians who had moved to areas that came to be included within the state of Iraq following the World War I. Most historiography on Iraq designates Assyrian refugees – survivors of the massacres of 1915 coming mainly from Hakkari, but also from Urmia – as "foreigners." This designation fails to take into account the historical interaction among members of the Church of the East, including the movement of patriarchs, bishops, priests, and especially lay people, and between different areas with concentrated Church of the East communities and significant cultural and religious institutions. These movements were based on religious pilgrimages to monasteries, or in commemoration of saints' cults – celebrations that had festive and even market-based dimensions, involving the exchange

[17] Shields, *Mosul before Iraq*, pp. 51–64.
[18] Aboona, *Assyrians, Kurds, and Ottomans*, pp. 169–95.
[19] Shields, *Mosul before Iraq*, p. 51.

of goods.[20] Finally, as demonstrated in the nineteenth century, not only were the Ottomans increasing their efforts to exert their influence, as were both native and Western Christian religious officials and the colonial powers; population movements also took place, in the event of persecution, between the various areas traditionally occupied by Assyrian (Church of the East and Syriac Orthodox) coreligionists – even when the members of those communities had adopted a new faith (mainly, Catholicism).[21] For instance, in a book on Alqosh published by the late Bishop Yousif Babana of Alqosh, the author includes information on Alqoshi families and their origins, showing movement between Assyrian towns and villages in Urmia, Hakkari, and Mosul from the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries. The freshly drawn borders of the new nation-states in the region did not necessarily challenge these historic links in the immediate aftermath of their appearance; in fact, communities residing in the vicinity of these borders have found ways of transgressing them throughout the modern history of Iraq. However, the stigma of being a "foreigner" continued to be associated with Assyrian adherents of the Church of the East.

[20] For instance, see literature on the life and legends of Mar Qardagh, which is part of the "Genre of Martyrdom" associated with the Church of the East (fourth- to seventh-century persecutions of Christians by Zoroastrians). Mar Qardagh's narrative focuses on his life and heroic deeds and alludes to the status of Christians under the rule of King Shapur II. According to his account, Mar Qardagh was born to a prestigious family of ancient Assyrian origin, where his father descended from the lineage of King Nimrud and his mother descended from that of King Sennacherib. After Mar Qardagh was killed by King Shapur II for adopting the Christian faith, he was regarded as a martyr of the church, and the community began commemorating his life as described in literature dating back to that period, "And each year on the day on which the blessed one was crowned, the people gathered at the place of his crowning. And they made a festival and a commemoration for three days. But because of the size of the crowds, they also began to buy and sell during the days of the saint's commemoration. And after some time had passed, a great market was established on the place in which the blessed one was stoned. It continues to this day. And the commemoration of the holy one lasts three days, and the market six days. And it is called the souk of Melqi from the name of the fortress of the blessed one." Joel Walker, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 68.

[21] Yousif Babana, *Alqūsh ʿabra al-Tārīkh* (Baghdad: Offices and Printers of the East, 1979), pp. 45–57. Other Assyrian villages in northern Iraq have included such demographic information on websites as well.

Map 1.1 Historic Assyrians Areas Prior to World War I.
Drawn by ML Design (London).

The Rise of Nationalism and Claims of Common Ancestry

Despite the sectarian divisions they suffered in the nineteenth century, Assyrian members of the Church of the East, Syriac Orthodox, and Chaldean churches all understood themselves to be descended from the ancient Assyrians, and by the end of the century were claiming to be the heirs of early Mesopotamian civilizations. For instance, at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, an Assyrian delegation comprising Church of the East, Chaldean, and Syriac Orthodox members attended collectively to petition for an Assyrian national homeland. The delegation defined the Assyrian community in its petition as including all the Syriac religious communities.[22] In the city of Mosul itself, British sources reveal that the "old Syrians," or Syriac Orthodox, responded in January 1919 to a British inquiry on Iraq's independence and tutelage under Abdulla by introducing their community as "belonging to the Assyrian race."[23]

These claims have found both support and opposition among specialists in history, linguistics, Assyriology, Syriac studies, and the social sciences. Those supporting the Assyrian position have relied both on the spoken language of the Assyrians (Aramaic with Akkadian influences, denoting a continuous presence in the area)[24] and on connections between *Assūr* and *Sūr*, *Sūroyo/Sūrāyā* – the self-designations used by community members, along with geographical relations of where their ancestors lived.[25] Those disputing such claims have proposed that the Assyrians' identification with ancient Mesopotamians is a result of their interactions with Western missionaries and archaeologists, who imposed the Assyrian identity on native Syriac Christians after discovering Nimrud (1845–48) and other Assyrian sites.[26] This

[22] Sargon Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History: Iraq and the Assyrians in the Twentieth Century* (Edinbrough: Edinbrough University Press, 2016), pp. 68–71.
[23] FO 608/96/11, February 20, 1919, "Self Determination in 'Iraq," pp. 26–27.
[24] See the works of philologist Geoffrey Khan, including: Geoffrey Khan, *The Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Qaraqosh* (Leiden: Brill, 2002) and *The Neo-Aramaic Dialect of Barwar Volume Two: Lexicon* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).
[25] Simo Parpola, "Assyrian Identity in Ancient Times and Today," seminar at the Assyrian Youth Foundation, Sweden, March 27, 2004, at aina.org; R. Rollinger, "The Terms 'Assyria' and 'Syria' Again," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 65: 4 (2006), pp. 283–88.
[26] This position was probably first introduced by John Joseph in the first edition of his book, published in 1961, which was in turn based on his dissertation completed in the 1950s, *Modern Assyrians of the Middle East*, pp. 1–32. See also, Adam Becker, *Revival and Awakening: American Evangelical Missionaries*