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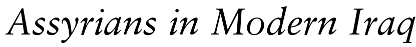

Assyrians in Modern Iraq

Examining the relationship between a strengthened Iraqi state under the Baʿth regime and the Assyrians, a Christian ethno-religious group, Alda Benjamen studies the role of minorities in twentieth-century Iraqi political and cultural history. Relying on extensive research in Iraq, including sources uncovered at the Iraqi National Archives in Baghdad, as well as in libraries and private collections in Erbil, Duhok, and Mosul, in Arabic and modern Aramaic, Benjamen foregrounds the Iraqi periphery and history of bilingualism to challenge the monolingual narrative of the state. By exploring the role of Assyrians in Iraq's leftist and oppositional movements, including gendered representations of women, she demonstrates how, within newly politicized urban spaces, minorities became attracted to intellectual and political movements that allowed them to advance their own concerns while engaging with other Iraqis of their socioeconomic background and relying on transnational community networks. Assyrian intellectuals not only negotiated but resisted government policies through their cultural production, thereby achieving a softening of Baʿthist policies toward the Assyrians that differed markedly from those of later repressive eras.

Alda Benjamen is Faculty Fellow in the Department of History at University of California, Berkeley where her work concerns questions about memory, home, and belonging in multilingual and diasporic communities in the context of rural-to-urban and global migrations. She is editor of a special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Iraq and the Arab World*, "Coexistence and Pluralism in Northern Iraq" (2020), and a roundtable for the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, "Minoritization and Pluralism in the Modern Middle East" (2018).

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Assyrians in Modern Iraq

Negotiating Political and Cultural Space

ALDA BENJAMEN
University of California, Berkeley

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To Danny, Aryo, and Arbela

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Preface

In July 2011 the statue of the late Tūma Tūmās, a communist leader and Assyrian nationalist figure, was placed in a park dedicated to him in the center of Alqosh, a town north of Mosul with a historic Assyrian Christian majority. Twelve years after his death in Syria, in 1996, Tūmās was reburied in his beloved Alqosh, where he holds a special place in local and collective memory. An active Communist, he remained deeply concerned about the welfare of his town and wider community. His political life reveals the ways in which Assyrian intellectuals and activists with various ideological and confessional perspectives interacted with each other as both Assyrians and Iraqis struggling for a common cause. Tūmās's life provides a touchstone for numerous themes that recur and converge throughout the period covered by this book, from the Baʿth ascendancy of the 1960s to the aftermath of the Iran–Iraq war in the late 1980s.

This book places Assyrians within the context of Iraqi history, analyzing their role in socio-ideological movements of the twentieth century. I examine four different aspects of this history: (1) government policies – the interactions between the state and the Assyrians, and Assyrians' inclusion or exclusion within it; (2) intellectual production – the role of Assyrians within the Iraqi Communist Party and the Kurdish uprisings, as well as Assyrian cultural and nationalist movements, from the 1960s to the 1980s; (3) gender – whose lens is employed to examine the role of women in these movements, and their portrayal by intellectuals; and (4) transnationalism – a comparative perspective is used to garner cross-national interactions between Iraqi Assyrians and Assyrians in Iran, Syria, Turkey, and the diaspora.

Tūma Tūmās was born in Alqosh in 1924. Surrounded by ancient Assyrian sites, the town lies forty kilometers from Nineveh, the last capital of the Assyrians. Tūmās claimed that Alqosh had preserved its authenticity (*aṣāla*) and traditions, and had not allowed its "national identification" (*hawiyyatuhā al-qawmiyya*) to be destroyed

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Statue of Tūma Tūmās, Alqosh, Iraq.
Image credit: Alda Benjamen

or compromised despite tribal invasions and the influence of successive ruling states. The town was an important center for the scribal production of texts, especially from the seventeenth to the twentieth century,[1] and Tūmās notes, "Until this day, its Chaldean-Assyrian language has remained *shāmikha*, or dignified."[2] Alqosh is believed to hold the shrine of the biblical prophet, Nahum, and the seventh-century monastery of Rabban Hurmizd was founded in the surrounding mountains. For many centuries (1504–1837) it was the See of the Church of the East (known as Nestorian).[3] From Alqosh's religious ranks came a bishop named Mar Sulaqa, who split from the Church of the East in the sixteenth century and joined the Roman Catholic Church. This split eventually gave rise to the current Chaldean Church, which remains in communion with the Roman Catholic Church.

[1] Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winkler, *The Church of the East: A Concise History* (London: Rutledge Curzon, 2003), pp. 14–15, 241–70.
[2] Tūma Tūmās, "Awrāq Tūma Tūmās (1)," *Thekriat*, 2006, at www.al-nnas.com.
[3] Ibid.

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History and geography have given Alqosh and its people a reputation for resilience and pride. In his memoirs, Tūmās vividly celebrates his town's ancient and modern history, and its ability to maintain its cultural traditions, language, and national identity throughout the centuries.[4] He fondly remembers its "heroic national position" in coming to the aid of Assyrians massacred in the village of Simele and the surrounding region in 1933. During this time, his family sheltered twenty other families who had taken refuge in Alqosh to escape the Iraqi army, Kurds, and Bedouin tribes that surrounded the town. A few years later he was denied entrance to Mosul's only high school, which he attributed to his inability as a small-town Christian boy to compete with the sons of urban and tribal elites.[5] These two events were the first injustices that young Tūmās described in his memoirs. Combined with his experience as an officer in the British-formed battalion of the Iraqi Levies and his employment in the Iraq Petroleum Company in Kirkuk, they drew him toward the Communist Party.

Assyrians did not always act collectively but were generally attracted to intellectual and political movements that promised to benefit their community. These tended to be secular, leftist, and concerned with socioeconomic justice and minority rights. Involvement in such groups allowed Assyrians like Tūmās to emerge from the periphery and onto the political stage. Moving to urban centers and working for large firms further politicized Assyrians, introducing them to grievances shared by other Iraqis with similar socioeconomic backgrounds. These politicized spaces temporarily opened up room for negotiations between the state and society, and between different political groups. Assyrians took the opportunity to forge associations with various groups, within which they negotiated for increased cultural and political rights for their own community. The ways in which they identified themselves throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s – understanding their internal divisions mainly in terms of religious denomination but also identifying as Iraqis and as members of a transnational Assyrian community – are a central concern of the chapters that follow.

Assyrians' transnationalism was demonstrated in the movement of Tūmās's body across the permeable border between the two Assyrian

[4] Ibid. Tūmās wrote his memoirs between 1990 and 1996. They were first published, in 2006, at www.al-nnas.com.
[5] Ibid.

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towns of Qamishli, in Syria, and Alqosh, passing through Duhok – an action enabled by decades of civil war. Transnationalism also had significant effects on the Assyrian community's understandings of itself, as ideas, material objects, and human beings made their way across borders. Its diasporic character also proved useful in articulating Assyrian Iraqi concerns to international humanitarian bodies and Western governments, and also in advocating on behalf of sympathetic movements and regimes.

Finally, the collective historical memory of the Assyrian community and the ways in which it chose to commemorate specific events were evoked by the statue erected to Tūmās fifteen years after his death, and by his inclusion of the Simele massacre in his memoirs. During the twentieth century, Assyrians used historical memory both to counter the state's narrative and to negotiate strategically with the state, weaving themselves into historical discourses accepted and propagated by it. Historical memory was conveyed in both assertive and more subtle ways, reproduced both in print and orally through songs of defiance.

Tūmās came from a town with a long and proud history. It had produced many religious and intellectual figures who might have merited a statue and a park. Moreover, communism had lost its traction, and newer political groups such as the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) had emerged to fuse Assyrian nationalism with Iraqi patriotism. The reason why Tūmās's statue was nevertheless erected was that people still remembered his heroic actions and political standing with respect and affection. In 2008, a song describing his heroism was included on singer Talal Graish's highly acclaimed CD *X-Love*.[6] Tūmās was a figure who managed to represent the complex convergence of identities that defined him: intercommunally, as an Assyrian member of the Chaldean Catholic Church; locally, as an Alqoshi and an inhabitant of the northern provinces; politically, as a Communist engaged in the northern Iraqi opposition; and nationally, as an Iraqi.

This book sheds new light on the position of Assyrians, and minorities in general, in Iraqi opposition parties, and on their subsequent treatment by the state and its judicial institutions. The following chapters explore the policies adopted by the early Baʿthist government, and

[6] Talal Graish CD, "Toma Tomas," *X-Love*, Jam Music Productions, January 2008.

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examine the Assyrian intellectual response to their being granted certain cultural rights in 1972. I argue that Baʿthist policies toward the Assyrians reflected the regime's response to both internal and external pressures. Internally, the opposition activism of Assyrians and their interactions with regional and international compatriots represented a concern for the central government. Externally, the influence of a vocal diasporic Assyrian community on Western governments and human-rights organizations resulted in negative publicity for the Baʿthists.

From a broader perspective, the intellectual and social movements explored in this book contribute to our understanding of leftist radical movements of the 1960s in the Middle East. It seeks to shift the traditional academic focus from the center, Baghdad, to highlight relations between the center and the periphery. In particular, it deepens our understanding of Iraqi provincial history, since Assyrians engaged within leftist movements were active not only in urban centers but often in rural areas as well. Moreover, given that the Assyrians were concentrated in the north, a new story of that region has also been told – one that complicates our understanding of the intricate relations between political actors, tribal affiliations, and ethno-religious communities. A rich history is revealed of bilingualism, and often multilingualism, that challenges the idea of a monoglot Arabic-speaking population advanced by the Iraqi state and its associated intellectuals. The individuals whose actions are described in this book employed Arabic, Aramaic, Kurdish, and Turkish not only in their private homes and community centers but also in their interactions with other political players, intellectuals, and state officials.

Moreover, I shed light on the history of Iraq in the 1970s – a decade that is often overlooked in favor of succeeding periods marked by the ascendency of President Saddam Hussein (late 1970s), and the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88). In studying the early republican period in Iraq, and particularly that of the Baʿth regime of the early 1970s, I have placed an emphasis on the relations that existed between the Baʿthist regime, the opposition, and the Assyrian community. A detailed analysis of the hierarchical relationships between these three entities reveals that the regime was resolved to negotiate and compromise during this earlier period, demonstrating its weakness in the Iraqi north and within the opposition. These types of conciliatory strategic relationship stand in stark contrast to its policies during subsequent periods – often

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highlighted in Iraqi scholarship – that were marked by an increase in its Baʿthification policies and violence toward its citizens.

Approach and Methods: Minoritization and Pluralism in Middle Eastern Studies

Over the past decade, the study of Middle Eastern religious, ethnic, and linguistic communities – including various indigenous groups defined during the modern period as "minority communities" – has shifted to include sophisticated scholarship that challenges previously dominant notions concerning these communities in ways that have undone national, colonial, and imperial narratives; and it has turned some attention to the ways in which these narratives were formed and popularized.[7] A shift has begun to occur in certain fields whereby many of these communities, which were once studied through theological, classical, and linguistic lenses, are being examined within Middle Eastern Studies as imperial subjects, members of nation-states, exiles, trans-regional actors – and, most importantly, as active agents shaping their own destinies. Most of the literature on the Assyrian community has traditionally stemmed from the linguistic and theological fields of Semitic and Syriac Studies, focusing on the ancient and medieval periods of Eastern Christianity and its linguistic medium of Syriac – the liturgical dialect of the Aramaic language used by the churches. Given the nature of its sources, this literature offers less insight into the lives and attitudes of ordinary members of the communities in this period than into those of Syriac-speaking religious scholars and elites.[8]

[7] A version of this appeared in Alda Benjamen, "Introduction," in "Pluralism and Minoritization in the Middle East," Roundtable, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 50: 4 (November 2018), pp. 757–59. See also all other entries in this edited roundtable (pp. 757–85).

[8] Exceptions within these fields include Sebastian P. Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 3. This book offers the modern reader a glimpse into the contemporary narratives of female Syriac martyrs from the fourth to seventh centuries, and thus into the construction of gender during this period. Whether the heroic accounts of these women were written immediately after their martyrdom or after some time, the reader is able to learn about the communities in which these saints lived, through accounts preserved in the collective memory of the survivors.

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Most studies of these Middle Eastern communities – and, in particular, of how they came to be thought of as minorities – contend with concepts that inspire new approaches, as well as with sources selected to examine histories and cultures. *Minoritization* describes the process leading to the creation of minority communities, whether the original point of departure is taken to be the society of the Ottoman period or that of the nation-states of the twentieth century.[9] Minoritization has been deeply connected to sectarianism; it appeared – and in fact was designed – to favor certain communities, but it often had devastating consequences. Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel define "sectarianization" as a process formed by actors functioning within a context that allows them to pursue "political goals that involve popular mobilization around particular identity markers" that are enabled by the structures of an authoritarian regime.[10] It thus signifies historical and contemporary practices of discrimination that marginalize communities, relegating them to an inferior status within the modern hierarchy of citizenship.

Ussama Makdisi argues, for example, that the discourse around sectarianism was an artefact of political modernism, shaped both by the new ways in which local Lebanese actors had begun to engage with each other as a result of the Ottoman reforms of the nineteenth century and by an increase in European hegemonic power throughout the empire and in Mount Lebanon.[11] Colonialism disrupted modes of coexistence in the Levant. The ecumenical framework defined by new secular Ottoman principles that had privileged Muslims – but was striving to include non-Muslims – as citizens was also put to an end

[9] Laura Robson, ed., *Minorities and the Modern Arab World* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2016); Peter Sluglett, "From Millet to Minority: Another Look at the Non-Muslim Communities in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries," in *Minorities and the Modern Arab World* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2016), p. 32; and Heather J. Sharkey, *A History of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). See also Aline Schlaepfer, "Defining Minorities: Mission Impossible? The Case of Hashemite Iraq," in "Pluralism and Minoritization in the Middle East," Roundtable, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, pp. 769–72.

[10] Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, eds., *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 4–5.

[11] Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 1–14.

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in the mid-twentieth century.[12] My book shows that, even within the framework of the authoritarian Arab state, communities composed of various ethno-religious backgrounds found ways to coexist in spaces marked by hierarchical relationships in the second half of the twentieth century. John Joseph focuses on Assyrians' interactions with missionaries and the world powers from the late 1800s up to the end of the First World War.[13] Hormiz Aboona also deals with the inter-communal conflicts between Assyrians, their neighbors, and the Ottoman state that were exacerbated by European encroachments into Ottoman lands. Aboona focuses on the massacres of Assyrians in the Hakkari region carried out by the Kurdish tribal chief Beder Khan Beg from 1843 to 1846 – a traumatic series of events that gained the interest of Janet Klein, who focuses on Kurdish–Armenian relations.[14] The theme of genocide has recently gained greater traction with regard to the Assyrian community. David Gaunt, Hannibal Travis, and Joseph Yacoub have attempted to fill a gap within studies of the Armenian genocide by focusing on the Assyrian experience.[15] The

[12] Ussama Samir Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).

[13] John Joseph, *The Modern Assyrians of the Middle East: Encounters with Western Christian Missions, Archaeologists, and Colonial Power* (Leiden/Boston, MA: Brill, 2000).

[14] Hirmis Aboona, *Assyrians, Kurds, and Ottomans: Intercommunal Relations on the Periphery of the Ottoman Empire* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2008); and Janet Klein, *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011). See also Mordechai Zaken, *Jewish Subjects and Their Tribal Chieftains in Kurdistan: A Study in Survival* (Leiden/Boston, MA: Brill, 2007). On the growing body of histroigraphy dedicated to the Armenian genocide, see Taner Akçam, *From Empire to Republic: Turkish Nationalism and the Armenian Genocide* (London/New York: Zed, 2004); and also Fatma Muge Gocek, *Denial of Violence: Ottoman Past, Turkish Present, and Collective Violence against the Armenians, 1789–2009* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[15] David Gaunt, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim–Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia during World War I* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2006); Hannibal Travis, "'Native Christians Massacred': The Ottoman Genocide of the Assyrians during World War I," *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 1: 3 (2006), pp. 327–72; Hannibal Travis, *Genocide in the Middle East: The Ottoman Empire, Iraq, and Sudan* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2010); David Gaunt, "The Complexity of the Assyrian Genocide," *Genocide Studies International* 9: 1 (2015), pp. 83–103; and Joseph Yacoub, transl. James Ferguson, *Year of the Sword* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). See also David Gaunt, Naures Atto, and Soner O. Barthoma, eds., *Let Them Not Return:*

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living memory of the genocide, and the trauma that survivors – and their descendants born in the new nation-states – have carried with them comes through clearly, evoking Tūmās's recollection of the 1933 massacre.

This book also engages with the concept of pluralism. Rather than adopting a national language that sees these groups as "problems" or "questions," pluralism celebrates how these communities enriched the cultures of the region, and how they preserved languages, notions of homeland, historical memories, and literatures in the face of state pressures, displacement, and exile. Within this context, pluralism can be defined as the linguistic, cultural, and ideological integration, albeit temporary, of communities within particular spaces. Its importance resides not only in the degree of its success. For example, Orit Bashkin applies Makdisi's analysis of sectarianism in Lebanon to Iraq, arguing that sectarianism had been "produced, hybridized, and changed over time";[16] she argues that a "hybridized sectarian discourse" existed as early as the 1920s, and was evident in the Iraqi print media, which cut across ethno-religious divisions.[17] Similarly, I understand sectarianism and the minoritization of Assyrians to be modern phenomena derived from historical processes. Moreover, as this book will reveal, Assyrians, much like Egyptian Copts and Iraqi Jews, did not constitute monolithic, static communities, but shared similarities with Iraqis of various religious and ethnic backgrounds. Although they did not generally identify as Arabs, they did identify as Iraqis. Assyrians, like Iraqi Jews, came to be immersed in the public sphere in the second half of the twentieth century, contributing to the press and joining political groups.

Top-down, structured approaches have also been assumed to be appropriate in studying various communities, including Middle Eastern Christians, who have often been considered through the prism of religion – specifically, that of their particular denomination – ignoring their minoritization and more pluralistic involvements. This sectarianized approach, in vogue since the 2000s, ignores local processes of historical change and the role of colonial and missionary actors. It is

Sayfo – The Genocide against the Assyrian, Syriac and Chaldean Christians in the Ottoman Empire (New York/Oxford: Berghahn, 2017).

[16] Orit Bashkin, *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 7.

[17] Ibid., pp. 6–7. See also pp. 157–93.

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now being challenged in rich scholarly discussions of a kind that have not previously been conducted in relation to minority communities.[18] Contributing to this dialogue is Febe Armanios, in her study of Coptic Christianity in Ottoman Egypt. Focusing on the early modern period, Armanios demonstrates how, while Copts faced legal and social restrictions, they nevertheless succeeded in creating spaces that fostered their communal identity by turning to religious rituals such as cults of martyrdom and pilgrimages to saints' shrines, which also enabled them to ward off Catholic missionary incursions.[19] Heather Sharkey explores religious interactions between Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the modern period. Focusing on mundane encounters in the Ottoman Empire before the First World War, she demonstrates how people participated socially in everyday aspects of culture such as dress, food, and bathing. The Ottoman state maintained and limited these hierarchical interactions – efforts which exacerbated religious tensions and set the stage for the twentieth century.[20] Henry Clements traces the development of conflict between Armenian and Syriac Orthodox Christians over access to holy spaces in Jerusalem – in particular, over a key to a closet in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Clements relates how, in the post-Tanzimat period, the Syriac Orthodox learned that bureaucratic record-keeping rendered their community visible to the state, leading to its eventual achievement of sovereignty, liberating it from the tutelege of the Armenian millet.[21] Akram Khater traces the journeys of predominantly Christian peasants from Mount Lebanon to the Americas and back between 1860 and 1920. His work depicts the ascent of these peasants to the

[18] Fanar Haddad studies the effects of sectarianism within the Iraqi context, arguing that Sunnis and Shiʿas "are not monolithic groups; rather they are themselves dissected by various social, economic and political categories that in themselves may unite 'Sunnis' and 'Shiʿas' on the basis of, for example, class or political ideology." See Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (London: Hurst, 2011), p. 8; Makdisi, *Culture of Sectarianism*; and Max Weiss, *In the Shadow of Sectarianism: Law, Shiʿism, and the Making of Modern Lebanon* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 1–38.

[19] Febe Armanios, *Coptic Christanity in Ottoman Egypt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[20] Heather Sharkey, *A History of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambrdige University Press, 2017).

[21] Henry Clements, "Documenting Community in the Late Ottoman Empire," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 51: 3 (2019), pp. 423–43.

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ranks of middle classes, and their role in the creation of a "modern" Lebanon, while exploring notions of gender, family, and class.[22] My own book is in dialogue with this scholarship on Christians and other non-Muslim communities, examining the Assyrians in the context of authoritarianism.

The absence of the Assyrians from scholarly discussion reflects not only their omission from national archives and libraries, but also a lack of language training among scholars. Students of displaced communities such as the Assyrians, Palestinians, Armenians, and Arab Jews can no longer rely on archives, many of which have been destroyed, relocated, or looted, while others remain closed in certain nation-states. Some communities have had to create alternative archives in order to preserve sources relating to their own past. At the time of writing, the Assyrians are in the process of digitizing their archives; but waves of displacements, starting at the turn of the twentieth century, have disrupted these efforts, creating gaps in the record. The lack of historical scholarship on mostly rural communities, such as the Yezidis, that have a primarily oral culture has also had disruptive results.[23] Both Yezidis and Assyrians have witnessed the destruction of their cultural sites, while the displacement of their populations has disrupted their agricultural way of life. Rural traditions that had been preserved orally for generations have slowly begun to disappear. But some scholarship produced by Palestinians and Arab Jews, like my own work on the Assyrians, has found ways to revisit existing sources – the press, poetry collections, works of literature and art – in order to gain new insights on these communities. An overreliance on colonial and missionary sources, and on the perspectives of the state and the cultural majority, has diluted our understanding of the Assyrian community.[24] But the incorporation

[22] Akram Fouad Khater, *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

[23] On provincial history, see Sargon George Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History: Iraq and the Assyrians in the Twentieth Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015); Arbella Bet Shlimon, *City of Black Gold: Oil, Ethnicity, and the Making of Modern Kirkuk* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019); Nelida Fuccaro, *The Other Kurds: Yazidis in Colonial Iraq* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999); Dina Khoury, *Iraq in Wartime: Soldiering, Martyrdom, and Remembrance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[24] Most studies of the community have been dedicated to Assyrians of Urmia, Iran, due to the accessibility of Western missionary archives and the large collections of Assyrian Iranian periodicals available to Western scholars. In addition to

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of provincial history is one means by which agency can be ascribed to minority communities without ignoring their minoritization.

This book makes use of new and unexamined archival sources retrieved in Iraq – both those at the Iraqi National Library and Archives, and Baʿthist archives acquired since 2003 by the Assyrian Democratic Movement, housed at their headquarters in Baghdad. Since the ADM collection has not been catalogued, I have provided sufficient information on every source used in this book to make it identifiable by future scholars. I also examine popular songs and interview singers, tracing the movement of cassette recordings and of the artists themselves across borders. I include an in-depth analysis of Iraqi and Assyrian periodicals, in both Arabic and Aramaic, that I located at smaller libraries and publishing houses, such as Najm al-Mashriq and the Dominican Library in Baghdad; the Assyrian Cultural Center; and the Oriental Cultural Centre in Duhok. I also make use of interviews conducted in Iraqi cities, towns, and villages as well as in North America (Illinois, Ontario, and California) and the Netherlands. Informants whose testimony contributed to this study included men and women involved in the relevant social and ideological movements, who I do not identify to protect their identity.

This book seeks to deepen our understanding of Iraq's intellectual and social movements during the twentieth century. It suggests that pluralism in Iraq was indeed possible, and that Iraqis were able to transcend ethnic sectarianism to take part in the various intellectual, social, and political movements of the day. At the same time, it locates an under-examined community within the context of modern Middle Eastern history. It moves away from the popular representation of minorities as either persecuted communities or agents of imperialism,

Joseph, *Modern Assyrians of the Middle East*, an article by Eden Naby is unique within this genre, given its interest in Assyrian cultural production: Eden Naby, "Theater, Language and Inter-Ethnic Exchange: Assyrian Performance before World War I," *Iranian Studies* 40: 4 (2007), pp. 501–10. See also Nicholas al-Jeloo, "A Study of the Socio-Cultural History and Heritage of Urmia's Ethnic Assyrians Based on a Corpus of Syriac and Neo-Aramaic Inscriptions," PhD diss., University of Sydney, 2013. Al-Jeloo reconstructs the community's history by making use of tombstone epitaphs and other types of cultural and religious inscription. See also Adam Becker, *Revival and Awakening: American Evangelical Missionaries in Iran and the Origins of Assyrian Nationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

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instead treating their members as "subjects within their own right."[25] Since the Assyrians are a transnational community, they operate as a model for the incorporation of transnational history, as both method of analysis and subject of study. Finally, the book offers insights into the experiences of women, especially in the context of larger minority communities. It highlights the processes leading to the minoritization of the Assyrian community, as well as efforts of their own and of others – whether genuine, insincere, or temporary – to pursue integration in specific pluralistic spaces.

The chapters that follow examine the role of Assyrians in Iraq's political and intellectual movements from the 1960s to the 1980s, the factors that attracted them to various groups, and the nature of their interactions both among themselves and with other Iraqis. The fluidity that existed between Iraqi political groups engaged in similar struggles, and between Assyrians as members of different groups, belies the idea that communities act chiefly as homogeneous entities.

The Introduction provides a historical perspective on the issue of Assyrian identity, from the community's Mesopotamian origins through the Ottoman period, the First World War, the formation of the modern Iraqi state, and the increasing urbanization of the mid-twentieth century.

Chapter 1 describes the ways in which Assyrians located themselves in urban centers such as Baghdad and Kirkuk, and how they negotiated around their ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic grievances, either personally or communally, within the larger Iraqi context. Communities like the Assyrians began to emerge from the periphery, disrupting the existing patriarchal order and igniting socioeconomic tensions with Arab nationalists, Baʿthists, and conservatives, who felt particularly threatened by those affiliated with communism and the left – notably minorities and women. In 1959 violence erupted in Mosul and Kirkuk, and in 1963 a right-wing coup toppled the Qasim government, paving the way for the rise of the Baʿth Party.

Chapter 2 shifts the focus from urban centers to the rural north during the early Iraqi republican period (1961–75). The chapter complicates the traditional understanding of the Kurdish uprising as an exclusively nationalist movement, demonstrating that Assyrians, as

[25] Paul Rowe, "The Middle Eastern Christian as Agent," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42: 3 (2010), p. 472.

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well as Communists who survived the coup, were significant actors in this conflict. Starting in 1961, Assyrians like Margaret George joined the Kurdish opposition, and local Assyrian parties moved north after being denied registration in Baghdad. As the civil war continued, cooperation between the Kurds and Assyrians expanded transnationally. But the civil war had devastating consequences: depopulation of the countryside; the destruction of villages; and the loss of religious and cultural sites in northern Iraq.

Chapter 3 analyzes the early period of Baʿthist rule during the 1970s, arguing that the activities of Assyrians in the Iraqi opposition and the influence of diasporic organizations on Western governments led the Baʿth to adopt conciliatory policies. These included Law 251, which extended cultural and linguistic rights to "Speakers of the Syriac Language" in April 1972. Yet rural Assyrians were not fully convinced. The community as a whole continued to navigate between the state and the opposition, negotiating for more rights within the volatile and temporary space opened up under circumstances of political instability.

Chapter 4 highlights the ways in which urban Assyrian intellectuals took advantage of Law 251 in their dealings with the state. In their magazines and clubs, they used accepted narratives to argue for greater cultural, political, and administrative rights. This campaign was pursued subtly in the press, but more vocally in popular culture. Assyrian intellectuals and singers also engaged with Arab and Kurdish intellectuals, contributing to a hybridized Iraqi sphere that cut across sectarian and ethnic divides, contributing to Assyrian intellectual discourses that extended far beyond Iraq's borders.

The 1975 Algiers Agreement between Iran and Iraq brought an end to Iranian support of the Kurdish opposition, marking a turning point in the Iraqi regime's conciliatory policies toward the Assyrian community. Meanwhile, Saddam Hussein had risen to power within the Baʿth, gaining the presidency in June 1979. The Iran–Iraq War heightened the Baʿthification of society by the state, as Chapter 5 discusses. As a result, Assyrians began to experience the reversal of conciliatory policies toward their community, which led in turn to the reconstitution of the Assyrian nationalist movement as a whole.

The Conclusion provides a brief synthesis of the above arguments, and offers a sketch of the post-Anfal period that highlights Assyrian political and intellectual activism in the enclaves of the safe haven established in 1991. The Conclusion briefly describes the ongoing crisis that the Iraqi Assyrian community has continued to face since 2003.

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