

Christian Minorities and the Struggle for Nineveh: The Assyrian Democratic Movement
in Iraq and the Nineveh Plains Protection Units

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ABSTRACT

Northern Iraq's Christians are a second-order minority. That is, they are a minority within a minority. They occupy a tenuous position between the Arab-dominated central government and the Kurdistan Regional Government. All Christians in northern Iraq desire to remain in their historic homelands. Yet efforts to advance a common political goal have been rare. Differences within the Iraqi Christian community center on three interrelated points: 1) the adoption and advancement of the Assyrian ethno-nationalist identity; 2) the struggle for leadership of the community between secular parties and church officials; and 3) the securing of group rights through either Baghdad or Erbil, which is typified by the debate over a province for minorities in the Nineveh Plain. The Islamic State's invasion in June 2014 made this dynamic even more complex.

This dissertation explores how a second-order minority mobilized to protect its homelands during state breakdown and state recalibration. It examines how an Iraqi Christian political party, the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM), responded to the rise and spread of the Islamic State. More specifically, it analyzes the ADM's creation of a self-defense force, the Nineveh Plains Protection Units (NPU), and how the party positioned itself for the post-conflict state. Data generated through ethnographic fieldwork, combined with existing primary and secondary sources, reveals a detailed process whereby security threats shaped mobilization. Notions of historic homelands and distrust of both the central government and KRG were the central factors shaping this outcome.

The ADM created the NPU to liberate occupied lands. More importantly, the NPU was created to ensure Christians retained a place in their historic homelands after the Islamic State was evicted. The use of the name "Nineveh Plains Protection Units" held strategic importance. The binding principle of the NPU was an indigenous-based attachment to the Nineveh Plain, including the right to defend it, and Christianity in Iraq. Both elements captured the common threads among all Iraqi Christians and the claim they make on the state. The ADM, therefore, was particularly attuned to Iraq's pre-Islamic ancient Mesopotamian heritage. This ironically echoed earlier efforts by the Ba'ath regime to instill a Mesopotamian identity among citizens by glorifying a common Assyrian and Babylonian heritage all could presumably share.

Second-order minority status meant the ADM had to eventually align with either Baghdad or Erbil. The ADM chose Baghdad, effectively balancing against ISIS and the KRG in the Nineveh Plain. Baghdad proved a willing partner for a time. The ADM, however, was left alone to navigate the Nineveh Plain's position in the September 2017 Kurdistan referendum on independence.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the Assyrian Democratic Movement's response to the Islamic State. It analyzes the ADM's creation of a self-defense force, the Nineveh Plains Protection Units, and how the party positioned itself for the post-conflict state. Data generated through ethnographic fieldwork conducted in northern Iraq combined with existing primary and secondary sources reveals a detailed process whereby security threats shaped mobilization. Homeland claims and distrust of both the central government and KRG were the central factors driving this process. Second-order minority status meant the ADM had no choice but to pick sides between Baghdad and Erbil. The party eventually aligned with Baghdad. However, it was left alone to navigate Nineveh Plain's position within the Kurdistan independence referendum.

To Mirna, my Iraqi sister

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Introduction

How Do Second-Order Minorities Mobilize to Protect Historic Homelands? The Case of Iraq's Christians and the Islamic State

Christianity arrived in northern Mesopotamia in the first century AD, gradually securing a foothold over the next hundred years. The followers of Christ spread their faith through Aramaic. By the fourth century Christianity was the official religion of the Roman Empire.¹ Though there are at least a dozen different churches in Iraq today, the “heart of Christianity in Iraq” remains in the north.² Most Christians belong to either the Chaldean Catholic Church, the Assyrian Church of the East, the Syrian³ Orthodox Church, or the Syrian Catholic Church.⁴

Christians in Iraq speak a modern dialect of Aramaic—neo-Aramaic. Old Aramaic, Syriac, is reserved for liturgies. All Christians are united around remaining in their historic homelands. Yet efforts to advance a common political goal in modern Iraq have been rare. Differences within the Iraqi Christian community center on three

¹ See Fernando Filoni, *The Church in Iraq*, trans. Edward Condon (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2017), Chapter 1; Emma Loosley, “Peter, Paul and James of Jerusalem: The Doctrinal and Political Evolution of Eastern and Oriental Churches,” in *Eastern Christianity in the Modern Middle East*, eds. Anthony O’Mahony and Emma Loosley (London: Routledge, 2010), Chapter 1; Suha Rassam, *Christianity in Iraq*, third edition (Balywyn: Freedom Publishing, 2010), Chapter 1.

² See Rassam, *Christianity in Iraq*, Chapter 7. Rassam identified no fewer than fourteen churches in Iraq at the beginning of the twenty-first century: Ancient Church of the East, Assyrian Church of the East, Syrian (Syriac) Orthodox Church, Armenian Orthodox Church, Greek Orthodox Church, Chaldean Catholic Church, Syrian (Syriac) Catholic Church, Armenian Catholic Church, Latin Church, Greek Catholic Church, National Evangelical Church, Assyrian Evangelical Church, Armenian Evangelical Church, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists, Anglican Church, Greek Orthodox Church, and Coptic Church.

³ “Syrian” does not refer to the nation-state of Syria. It is derived from the use of a dialect of Classical Aramaic/Old Aramaic, Syriac, in the liturgy.

⁴ Though reliable statistics are difficult to come by, especially since the invasion of the Islamic State, these four churches are generally considered the largest. For description of each see Rassam, *Christianity in Iraq*, Chapter 7.

interrelated points: 1) the adoption and advancement of the Assyrian ethno-nationalist identity; 2) the struggle for leadership of the community between secular parties and church officials; and 3) the securing of group rights through either Baghdad or Erbil, which is typified by the debate over a province for minorities in the Nineveh Plain.

Several important points warrant mentioning. The identities that differentiate one Christian community from another are unquestionably “sticky.” But this does not mean denominational/ecclesiastical boundaries are impenetrable. Friction manifests primarily at the elite political level rather than among lay populations. It does not amount to the threat of violence. But it does stymie collective action and provide Iraq’s larger political forces with pressure points to exploit.

Christians are one part of a complex ethno-sectarian mosaic in northern Iraq. Sunni Muslim Kurds constitute a plurality of the population. Numerous other minorities also call the area home. For example, there are the Yazidis,⁵ who adhere to a syncretistic religion, and the Shabak,⁶ who engage in a heterodox form of Shia Islam. Complicating matters further are the competing ethno-nationalist territorial claims made by Iraq’s larger political forces. Northern Iraq is deeply coveted by Kurdish nationalists.⁷ The oil-rich city of Kirkuk is the “Kurdish Jerusalem.” The Nineveh Plain also contains

⁵ See Birgül Açıkyıldız, *The Yazidis: The History of a Community, Culture, and Religion* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

⁶ See Michiel Leezenberg, “Between Assimilation and Deportation: The Shabak and the Kakais in Northern Iraq,” in *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East: Collected Papers of the Symposium Berlin 1995*, eds. K. Kehl Bodrogi, B. Kellner-Heinkele, and A. Otter-Beaujean (New York: Brill, 1997), 155-175.

⁷ See Edmund Ghareeb, *The Kurdish Question in Iraq* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1981); David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, revised edition (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997); Edgar O’Ballance, *The Kurdish Revolt: 1961-1970* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1973); Yaniv Voller, *The Kurdish Liberation Movement in Iraq: From Insurgency to Statehood* (London: Routledge, 2014).

significant natural resource deposits and an abundance of arable land.⁸ The Iraqi central government and the Kurdish nationalists controlling the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) each link statehood to controlling “Iraq’s disputed territories.”⁹

Northern Iraq’s Christians are faced with a difficult choice. They would prefer some form of self-determination. However, Christians must work with an overlord, either Arab or Kurdish, with whom there is a legacy of mistrust. They must do so knowing they are likely to be used for some larger political goal that threatens their long-term interests.

The term *minority* does not fully capture the Christian political predicament in northern Iraq. The more appropriate designation is *second-order minority*. A second-order minority is a minority within a minority. More precisely, it is “a community which forms a self-identified ethnic or religious minority dominated by an ethnic group which represents a national, or first-order minority.”¹⁰ First-order minorities are in a comparatively strong position to make claims for political autonomy or statehood. The area in which a separatist movement seeks statehood is rarely homogenous.¹¹ Separatists often end up treating local minorities that do not fit into their ethno-nationalist agenda as the state treats its first-order minorities. The displacement, genocide, or forced assimilation of second-order minorities is common.¹²

The unique geopolitical position Christians occupy in northern Iraq became even more complex in summer 2014. That June, the jihadist quasi-state known as the Islamic

⁸ See Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, “Assessing Iraq’s Oil Industry,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, July 1, 2012, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.rubincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Jawad-YA-au1-PDF.pdf>.

⁹ Sean Kane, *Iraq’s Disputed Territories* (Washington, D.C: United State Institute of Peace, 2011).

¹⁰ Shane Joshua Barter, “‘Second-Order’ Ethnic Minorities in Asian Secessionist Conflicts: Problems and Prospects,” *Asian Ethnicity* 16, no. 2 (2015): 128.

¹¹ Donald Horowitz, “The Cracked Foundations of the Right to Secede,” *Journal of Democracy* 14, no. 2 (April 2003): 8.

¹² See Shane Joshua Barter, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Second-Order Minorities in the Aceh Conflict,” *Asian Ethnicity* 16, no. 2 (2015): 152-165.

State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) stormed into Nineveh province. The Iraqi army collapsed at Mosul. By August, Islamic State forces were driving east into the Nineveh Plain. Kurdish military forces, the *Peshmerga*, retreated towards Erbil. Christians and other second-order minorities were left to confront the Islamic State's genocidal campaign unprotected.

How did Iraq's Christians respond to state breakdown? How did the multiplicity of threats, intragroup cleavages, and limited resource capabilities shape fight or flight decisions? How did Christians prepare for the post-war environment when they foresaw that territorial control, governance capabilities, intergroup and intragroup identities, loyalties, and alliances, and the power dynamic between the Iraqi central government and the KRG would be radically different?

This dissertation explores how a second-order minority group mobilized to protect its homelands during state breakdown. It examines how an Iraqi Christian political party, the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM), responded to the rise and spread of the Islamic State. More specifically, it analyzes the ADM's creation of a self-defense force, the Nineveh Plains Protection Units (NPU), and how the party positioned itself for the post-conflict state. Data generated through ethnographic fieldwork, combined with existing primary and secondary sources, reveals a detailed process whereby security threats shaped mobilization.¹³ Notions of historic homelands and distrust of both the central government and KRG were the central factors shaping this outcome.

My analysis reveals that the Assyrian Democratic Movement created the Nineveh Plains Protection Units to reclaim lost homelands from the Islamic State, but also to prepare for what came *after* ISIS. The ADM anticipated that once the Islamic State was

¹³ Research was conducted in the Nineveh Plain, Erbil, and Ankawa, Iraq in fall 2016 and July 2017. A portion of this research was funded by a travel grant from the Association for the Study of the Middle East and Africa (ASMEA).

evicted the central government and KRG would resume their struggle over Nineveh. A self-defense force was part of the ADM's plan to ensure that Christians remained in their historic homelands following the Islamic State's defeat.

The ADM faced serious obstacles in their efforts to form the NPU. There were intragroup cleavages, conflicting loyalties as to whether future security and political rights were best guaranteed by Baghdad or Erbil, and limited resources to fund mobilization. The ADM needed a strategy to 1) mobilize across intra-Christian cleavages, 2) walk a fine line between Erbil and Baghdad, and 3) not undercut Iraq's churches, which were in charge of all aid operations to assist displaced Christians in the KRG and were vehemently opposed to sectarian militias.¹⁴ Crucially, second-order minority status precluded long-term independent action without a stronger ally; neither Baghdad nor Erbil was enthusiastic supporters.

The choice of the name "Nineveh Plains Protection Units" served a strategic purpose. The Nineveh Plain housed Christians of all ethno-denominational identities and political loyalties, whether they claimed an ethnic Assyrian identity or not. The local nationalist project the NPU represents is not exactly Assyrian nationalism nor is it exactly Christian nationalism. At the core of the NPU lies a territorial-based identity that connects contemporary Christians to an ancient Mesopotamian past. Combined with a shared Christian faith, this serves to supersede intragroup cleavages and "the Assyrian Question" without rejecting them. It also acts as a bridge to the country's other ethno-sectarian groups, finding a way to assert Christian belonging within and to Iraq. The

¹⁴ Louis Raphaël I Sako, the Chaldean Catholic Patriarchate of Babylon, quoted in Edward Pentin, "Patriarch Sako: Christian Militias would escalate Iraq Crisis," National Catholic Register, August 25, 2014, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/patriarch-sako-christian-militias-would-escalate-iraq-crisis>.

Christians of the Nineveh Plain, whether they advance an Assyrian ethnic identity or not, are a distinct but inseparable part of Iraq's national fabric.

The ADM's mobilization attempt was also caught within the Kurdistan Democratic Party's (KDP) separatist agenda. Baghdad and the ADM saw the fall 2017 Kurdistan referendum on independence as a way to seize control over the Nineveh Plain and other disputed territories. However, the central government offered the ADM little support when it attempted to prevent the referendum from taking place in the Nineveh Plain. While the vote went forward with over 90 percent approval, it proved to be a disaster for KRG. Erbil actually ended up losing territory it had gained during the post-Ba'th period and in operations to liberate areas under ISIS's control. A tenuous peace now exists between Baghdad and Erbil. Christians and other second-order minorities are again caught in the middle.

Scholarly Contributions

The emergence of second-order minorities as a distinct subfield of political science literature on ethnic conflict/rebellion and civil war is relatively new. Existing studies concentrate primarily on the macro-level structures that influence how such groups interact with separatists, such as settlement patterns, origin, and (population) scale.¹⁵ Though incidents in which a second-order minority group mobilizes to defend its homelands are discussed, these analyses fail to explore the intricacies of this process.¹⁶ I

¹⁵ See Barter, " 'Second-Order' Ethnic Minorities in Asian Secessionist Conflicts;" Barter, "Rock and a Hard Place;" Isabelle Cote, "The Enemies Within: Targeting Han Chinese and Hui Minorities in Xinjiang," *Asian Ethnicity* 16, no. 2 (2015): 136-151; A.R.M. Imtiyaz and Amjad Mohamed-Saleem, "Muslims in Post-War Sri Lanka: Understanding Sinhala-Buddhist Mobilization against Them," *Asian Ethnicity* 16, no. 2 (2015): 186-202; Oona Paredes, "Indigenous vs. Native: Negotiating the Place of Lumads in the Bangsamoro Homeland," *Asian Ethnicity* 16, no. 2 (2015): 166-185.

¹⁶ See Barter, "Rock and a Hard Place."

fill in this gap by providing a detailed look at the mobilization process, including the construction of local ethno-territorial nationalisms and their subsequent repositioning within the national fabric. I also offer a nuanced perspective of how elites use notions of historic homelands to recruit members, bridge intragroup cleavages or marginalize rivals, and navigate between primary combatants. This perspective includes the interplay between domestic political and external factors, including security threats, in shaping the content, size, and scope of the “nation,” the actual territorial claim made, and its position in relation to the central government and separatists.

I also offer critical insights into the internal politics of separatist movements. For example, how separatists determine and justify which minorities are assimilated, displaced, or exterminated, and how this process plays out within civil war and state recalibration.

Focusing on mobilization adds to research on civil war that moves beyond explaining its outbreak,¹⁷ duration,¹⁸ and settlement.¹⁹ Concentrating on second-order minorities enables researchers to continue to move away from a simple binary perspective of states vs. rebels and towards a more complex dynamic where multiple and

¹⁷ See Nils-Christian-Borman, Lars-Erik Cederman, and Manuel Vogt, “Language, Religion, and Ethnic Civil War,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 6, no. 4 (2017): 744-771; Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, “Greed and Grievance in Civil War,” *Oxford Economic Papers* 56, no. 4 (October 2004): 563-595; Marta Reynal-Querol, “Ethnicity, Political Systems, and Civil War,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, no. 1 (February 2002): 29-54; James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency and Civil War,” *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (February 2003): 75-90; Monica Duffy-Toft, *The Geography of Ethnic Violence: Identity, Interests and the Indivisibility of Territory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

¹⁸ See Paul Collier, Anke Hoeffler, and Mans Soderbom, “On the Duration of Civil Wars,” *Journal of Peace Research* 41, no. 3 (May 2004): 253-273; James D. Fearon, “Why Do Some Civil Wars Last so Much Longer than Others?” *Journal of Peace Research* 41, no. 3 (May 2004): 275-301; Nicholas Sambanis and Ibrahim Elbadawi, “External Intervention and the Duration of Civil Wars,” World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 2433 (September 2000): 1-24; Barbara F. Walter, “The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement,” *International Organization* 51, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 335-364.

¹⁹ See Chaim Kaufmann, “Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars,” *International Security* 20, no. 4 (Spring 1996): 136-175; Monica Duffy-Toft, “Ending Civil Wars: A Case for Rebel Victory?” *International Security* 34, no. 4 (Spring 2010): 7-36.

sometimes overlapping identity and interest cleavages play out.²⁰ Exploring how second-order minorities maneuver through conflict also provides a more detailed examination of the relationship between ethnic identity factors and security than what results from merely analyzing interactions between primary combatants alone.²¹ This is because second-order minorities navigate a more tangled security and political environment than majorities or other primary combatants, a situation derived from inherent limits on military capabilities, a legacy of intergroup distrust, and the need for an alliance with a stronger actor. My analysis also helps further the debate on whether ethnic wars are distinct from non-ethnic wars.²²

Finally, this project advances the discussion of the roles minorities in general play as political spoilers and proxies.²³ For example, during the Lebanese Civil War Israel supported the Maronite-Christian alliance, the Lebanese Forces, against the Palestinian Liberation Organization. The Jewish state also funded a Christian militia, the South Lebanon Army, to help control southern Lebanon.²⁴ During the Syrian Civil War the Assad regime has consistently tried to co-opt minorities to increase domestic support and enhance its international image as secular and tolerant.²⁵ For years the proxy war waged

²⁰ See Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge, 2006); Stathis Kalyvas, "Ethnic Defection in Civil War," *Comparative Political Studies* 41, no. 8 (August 2008): 1043-1068.

²¹ See Kaufmann, "Possible and Impossible;" Barry Posen, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict," *Survival* 35, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 27-47.

²² See Nicholas Sambanis, "Do Ethnic and Nonethnic Civil Wars have the Same Causes: A Theoretical and Empirical Inquiry," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 45, no. 3 (June 2001): 259-282.

²³ On minorities in the Middle East see Albert Hourani, *Minorities in the Arab World* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947); Mordechai Nissan, *Minorities in the Middle East: A History of Struggle and Self-Expression* (London: MacFarland and Company, 2002); Laura Robson, ed., *Minorities and the Modern Arab World: New Perspectives* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2016).

²⁴ See Beate Hamizrachi, *The Emergence of the South Lebanon Security Belt: Major Saad Haddad and the Ties with Israel, 1975-1978* (Caravan: New York, 1988).

²⁵ See Aron Lund, "Who are the Pro-Assad Militias?" Carnegie Middle East Center, March 2, 2015, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/59215>; Patrick J. McDonnell and Nabih Bulos, "Syria's Assad Pays Visit to Recaptured Christian Town on Easter," *Los Angeles Times*, April 20, 2014,

between Saudi Arabia and Iran in Lebanon centered on installing a loyal Christian president for its side.²⁶

Policy Implications

The eviction of ISIS did not bring unity to Iraq. ISIS persists as a low-level insurgency. The Kurdistan region's September 2017 independence referendum backfired. A fragile peace holds between Baghdad and Erbil. Iran, meanwhile, continues to expand its footprint in northern Iraq through its military proxies and by providing financial inducements to local Shabak populations. Christians and other second-order minorities remain caught in the middle, still scarred by the weak and belated responses of the Iraqi central government, the KRG, and the international community when the Islamic State attacked. All crises demand the U.S. prioritize its existing strategic partnerships and create new ones.

In October 2017 the Trump administration announced it would end America's "religion blind" policy of funneling most humanitarian aid through the U.N., a practice originally designed to de-politicize relief efforts. Washington announced it would instead begin directly assisting persecuted minorities and working through faith-based organizations with established track records.²⁷ The goal of aiding Christian minorities

accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/world/worldnow/la-fg-wn-syria-assad-easter-20140420-story.html>.

²⁶ See "Lebanon Parliament Failed Again and For the 45th Time to Elect a President," YALIBNAN, September 28, 2016, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://yalibnan.com/2016/09/28/lebanon-parliament-failed-again-and-for-the-45th-time-to-elect-a-president/>; Mohamed Azakir, "Hezbollah has Effectively Won the Lebanese Presidency," *Newsweek*, November 13, 2016, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.newsweek.com/hezbollah-won-lebanese-presidency-520317>.

²⁷ Remarks by Vice President Mike Pence at In Defense of Christians Solidarity Dinner, Washington, D.C., October 25, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, see transcript at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/10/25/remarks-vice-president-defense-christians-solidarity-dinner>.

may emerge as an important policy driver for the U.S. government in a way reminiscent of how Europe related to Near Eastern Christians during the late-Ottoman period.

Indeed, the Trump administration's December 2017 National Security Strategy indicated the U.S. would seek to extend its influence across the globe by promoting American values and ideals. Central to this endeavor was the protection of religious minorities and religious freedom abroad.²⁸ The situation confronting Christians and other second-order minorities in northern Iraq stands to be a litmus test for the Trump administration's foreign policy goals.

The future of Iraq as a stable, pluralist, and democratic society with warm relations towards Washington hinges on healing intergroup cleavages and resolving the disputed territories. Both require finding a place for the area's second-order minorities. Externally supported and empowered local minorities reduce the vulnerability of such groups and lowers tensions between Baghdad and Erbil. It can also work to force Iraq's larger political forces to treat such groups not as political tools, but as equal citizens and security partners integral to stability and good governance. The more proactive the U.S. is at empowering and integrating second-order minority communities the less opportunities there are for Iran to exploit ethno-sectarian cleavages in its pursuit of a "Shia crescent" stretching from Tehran to Beirut and running through northern Iraq.

In fact, as the Arab Spring states struggle to reconstitute themselves it may be Christians and other minorities that hold the key to the region's stability and long-term democratic reform. It is Christians who were instrumental in the emergence of the region's secular identities. Guaranteeing their continued presence in Iraq and throughout

²⁸ United States of America, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (United States: White House, 2017).

the region provides the foundation for pluralism and democratic reform. Without minorities, something akin to religious-based identification may resurface. The prospects for violence would increase and reduce the chances for long-term democratic reform. Continuing to support minorities, particularly Christians, no matter how small or politically weak they are, must remain a central tenet of any American policy towards the Middle East.

Argument

In this project I argue that a second-order minority group's historical experiences and the identities that result from them, particularly when bound up in homeland claims, harden over time and thereby constrain or direct actions during contentious political episodes. But as a conflict evolves, the influence of identities and preferences on actions and goals reach a threshold where power and security concerns take over.

Second-order minority status precludes long-term independent action. At some point a second-order minority group has to pick between primary combatants. Security and power concerns drive alliance decisions and also function to shape the type of political claims leaders of stateless nations make. Security and power concerns are not formed exclusively within anarchic situations. They are derived in part from historical intergroup relations.

I derive my argument from analyzing the underlying causes and processes driving a territorially concentrated indigenous second-order minority group's mobilization attempt and its negotiation of state recalibration. When studying a single case, one must ask how much can be generalized from the findings. To this I say the project's main goal

was one of nuance.²⁹ Second-order minorities are largely ignored in existing research on civil conflict and, more generally, how they mobilize to protect historic homelands and reach for political power. As noted above, such groups operate in a unique geopolitical environment. They are forced to pick sides between separatists and the central government when no option is good. My analysis therefore focused on identifying and explaining the complicated path dependent mechanism-based accounts taking place within this complicated dynamic in order to lay the groundwork for future theory-building and theory-testing.

My argument about the role of identities is essentially an instrumentalist one: Ethno-territorial identity claims— notions of a homeland, including its size and scope— are deployed strategically and for ends that often extend beyond immediate security threats. My findings complement a significant amount of existing research on civil war and ethnic conflict that details how elites exploit identities to secure political goals.³⁰

Conceptual Clarification

Since independence, Iraq’s Christian leaders have been unable to unite around a common political appellation to serve as the foundation for collective action. Prominent

²⁹ On various perspectives on qualitative/quantitative methods including ways of integrating the two, see Henry E. Brady and David Collier, eds., *Rethinking Social Inquiry* (Plymouth: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010); Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to Methods for Students of Political Science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

³⁰ See Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); V.P. Gagnon, Jr., *The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); Nelson Kasfir, “Explaining Ethnic Political Participation,” *World Politics* 31, no. 3 (April 1979): 365-388; Kaufman, “Possible and Impossible;” David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild, “Containing Fear: The Origins and Management of Ethnic Conflict,” *International Security* 21, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 41-75; Kathleen Newland, “Ethnic Conflict and Refugees,” *Survival* 35, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 81-101; Roger D. Peterson, *Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear Hatred and Resentment in Twentieth Century Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 34-35; Barry Posen, “Security Dilemma.”

examples of these failed efforts include terms like *ChaldoAssyrian*, *Syriac-speaking Christians*, and the most recent iteration *Chaldean-Syriac-Assyrian*.³¹

It makes no sense to adopt a term some or all groups reject. Yet an inclusive term is needed. There is variance across and within sources as to how these communities are identified.³² In some cases the names in which these communities have been designated with or self-identified by has changed over time.³³ The most logical conceptual strategy in such a situation is to adopt a lowest common denominator approach.

For this reason I adopt *Christians*, using it interchangeably with *Christians in Iraq* or *Iraqi Christians*. I adapt this term to fit the appropriate historical political context (*Iraqi Christians*, *Ottoman Christians*, etc.). I feel this is the best option to convey what all or the vast majority of these communities have in common in terms of their identity, their historical and political experience in modern Iraq, and how they make their case for belonging and equality. To sum up: 1) a shared Christian faith or a variety of it; 2) indigenous status; and 3) a common language, spoken and liturgical. I preserve the preferred means of self-identification when possible, such as *Chaldeans*, *Assyrians*, *Assyrian Democratic Movement*, etc.

Going Forward

This dissertation contains five chapters. In the first chapter I present my research design. The framework for conducting my analysis is derived from scholarly works on social movements, territorial valuations/entitlements, ethnic conflict and civil war, the

³¹ For a thorough review of the appellation problem see Shak Hanish, “The Chaldean Assyrian Syriac People of Iraq: An Ethnic Identity Problem,” *Domes* 17, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 32-47.

³² For example, many Assyrian writers call all Christians in Iraq “Assyrian,” despite the fact that many do not subscribe to this identity.

³³ See Racho Donef, *Assyrians Post-Nineveh: Identity Fragmentation, Conflict and Survival (672-1920)* (Sydney: Tatavla Publishing, 2012).

(changing) ethno-territorial claims made by leaders of stateless nationalist movements, and alliance formation.

Chapter 2 is divided into three sections. Section I details the origin and development of Assyrian nationalism. Section II examines the Assyrians from just after WWI until Iraq's independence in 1932, a period in which the group went from refugee status to a second-order minority in Iraq. Section III focuses on how and why Assyrians and other segments of the Christian second-order minority in northern Iraq attached themselves to the Kurdish first-order minority and other opposition movements to achieve group rights. It is here that the story of the Assyrian Democratic Movement begins. Across these three sections I demonstrate that second-order minorities are likely to balance against threats, homeland claims are fungible, and alterations in the size and scope of territorial claims are driven less by domestic political rivalries and more by external factors, such as the creation of new borders, security anxieties, the presence of an external patron, and changes in both the ethnic composition of an area and a group's relative power vis-à-vis the state.

Chapter 3 examines the Assyrian Democratic Movement in post-Ba'th Iraq from 2003-2014. After the U.S. invasion, the ADM shifted its loyalties away from Erbil and toward Baghdad in the hopes of securing a Nineveh Plain province for minorities. The Kurdish first-order minority moved to "reclaim" Nineveh. Within a few short years the ADM was once again caught between Arab and Kurd.

This period represents another instance of second-order minorities acting as balancers as well as homeland claims being fungible. The primary driver in the territorial changes that took place within this period, a claim over the Nineveh Plain rather than

Amadiya and others parts of Dohuk province, seems to be the changing ethnic composition of both areas. Also significant was the creation of new borders, the (perceived) presence of an external patron in the U.S., and a changing power balance vis-à-vis the state. These factors seemed to both embolden the ADM's belief it could secure self-determination as well as "harden" the group's claim over the Nineveh Plain. Despite Kurdish territorial encroachments and the U.S. and Baghdad's growing indifference to plight of second-order minorities, the ADM's territorial claim remained fixed. It was not until January 2014 that Baghdad finally endorsed the creation of a Nineveh Plain province.

Chapter 4 provides the main empirical analysis. I examine the underlying factors and processes behind the ADM's formation of the Nineveh Plains Protection Units and its alliance with Baghdad. The ADM did not create the Nineveh Plains Protection Units to engage in revenge-seeking violence. It created the force to 1) liberate lost lands and 2) prevent a return to the pre-ISIS security and political dynamic in Nineveh. With a measure of U.S.-backing, Baghdad proved a willing partner for a time. The ADM, however, was left alone to navigate the September 2017 Kurdistan referendum on independence.

The ADM again balanced against the threats to its short and long-term political goals: ISIS and the KRG. Mobilization was driven with a territorial-based identity claim on the Nineveh Plain that was undergirded by issues of land tenure, indigenous status, and incumbency. These were traits to which the ADM believed that all Christians could relate to, regardless of whether or not they identified as ethnically Assyrian. Self-help/self-defense was perceived to be the only way Christians could ensure they retained

a place in their historic homelands after ISIS. The calls-to-arms were shared experiences of displacement, fear of permanent exile, and a desire not to return to the pre-ISIS security and political dynamic in Nineveh.

Despite domestic political rivalries, the reappearance of a modicum of foreign assistance, the area's changing ethnic composition, and a slight change in the territories controlled by the KRG and Baghdad—a delineation that continued to be part de jure and part de facto, the ADM's claim on the Nineveh Plain remained fixed. What these factors did appear to influence was the ADM's official stance on the Nineveh Plain province's position between Baghdad and Erbil. The ADM moved to turn the Nineveh Plain into an internationally supported safe haven. This would allow displaced persons to return and resettle the region. Only then would residents decide whether the province would be attached to Baghdad or Erbil.

Chapter 5 provides a summary of the project and my final analysis. I discuss my results, and what they may mean for how scholars in the future should analyze second-order minorities, mobilization around ethno-territorial identity claims, alliance formation in civil war, and what drives leaders of stateless nations to alter what areas constitute homelands. My concluding remarks examine U.S. policy implications more thoroughly and what the future may hold for the ADM and the rest of Iraq's Christians.

Chapter 1

Relevant Literature

Existing scholarly works on social movements, ethnic conflict and civil war, territorial valuations/entitlements, the (changing) ethno-territorial claims made by leaders of stateless nationalist movements, and alliance formation all offer critical insights for potentially explaining how second-order minorities mobilize to protect historic homelands. I discuss these works to lay the groundwork for explaining my research design and how I conduct my analysis.

Mobilization, Second-Order Minorities, Changes in the Territorial Claims Leaders of Stateless Nations Make, and Alliance Formation

Mobilization is the “process by which a group goes from being a passive collection of individuals to an active participant in public life.”¹ Here, “public life” means armed combat/collective violence. Understanding how a movement takes shape requires locating and analyzing its constituent parts—mechanisms. Mechanisms refer to a “delineated class of events that change relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations.”²

Generally speaking, there are three types of mechanisms: environmental, cognitive, and relational. Environmental mechanisms are external influences on circumstances shaping social life, for example, when torrential rain wipes out crops,

¹ Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1978), 69.

² Charles Tilly and Robert E. Goodwin, “It Depends,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Contextual Political Analysis*, eds. Robert E. Goodwin and Charles Tilly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 15.

which may have been a key revenue stream for insurgents. Cognitive mechanisms function through changes in individual or collective perceptions. For example, when “friend” becomes “foe.” Relational mechanisms are shifts in connections among social units. For example, when small criminal organizations band together into a cartel or umbrella insurgent group complete with its own nationalist program.³

Mobilization is not spontaneous; it is organized. Elites—political entrepreneurs—broker new connections or strengthen existing ones between two weakly or previously unconnected actors or sites of contention. They also activate/deactivate boundaries, stories, and relations between and within groups, connect/disconnect distinct groups and networks into larger/smaller units, coordinate joint actions, and make representation claims.⁴

Central to understanding how elites facilitate mobilization then are *frames* and the *framing process*. Frames are “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events...”⁵ Framing is the adoption and dissemination of a common definition of an issue or performance.⁶ *Collective Action Frames* perform the same task but are “intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists.”⁷ They contain a *diagnostic* component

³ Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, 20-21.

⁴ Charles Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 34.

⁵ W.A. Gamson and A. Modigliani, “The Changing Culture of Affirmative Action,” in *Research in Political Sociology*, Vol. 3, ed. R. Braungart (Greenwich, CT: JAI, 1987), 143. See also Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman, “Framing Theory,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 10 (June 2007): 103-126.

⁶ Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2007), 216.

⁷ Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 26, no. 1 (August 2000): 614.

(the problem/threat), a *prognostic* component (goals/required actions), and a *motivational* component (call-to-arms).⁸

Collective action framing begins with the effective construction, (re)negotiation, and deployment of a political identity that resonates with recruits.⁹ This becomes easier when episodes of violence,¹⁰ or economic, political, and socio-cultural grievances,¹¹ fall along ethno-cultural lines. Political entrepreneurs, or, “threat-framing actors” recruit and establish cohesion by invoking “common histories and the relationships impacted,”¹² such as grand nationalist myths or real or exaggerated episodes of victimization.¹³ It is within emotionally charged narratives,¹⁴ reinforced through persistent violence,

⁸ See Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, “Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization,” *International Social Movement Research* 1 (1988): 199-204.

⁹ See Roger V. Gould, *Insurgent Identities: Class, Communities, and Protest in Paris from 1848 to the Commune* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 18; John A. Noakes and Hank Johnson, “Frames of Protest: A Road Map to a Perspective,” in *Frames of Protest: Social Movements and the Framing Perspective*, eds. Hank Johnston and John A. Noakes (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 1-29; Snow and Benford, “Framing Processes and Social Movements,” 630-631; David A. Snow, E. Burke Rochford, Jr., Steven K. Wordon, and Robert D. Benford, “Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation,” *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 4 (August 1986): 464; Tilly and Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, 79.

¹⁰ See James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, “Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity,” *International Organization* 54, no. 4 (Autumn 2000): 845-877; Stuart J. Kaufman, “Symbols, Frames, and Violence: Studying Ethnic War in the Philippines,” *International Studies Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (December 2011): 937-958; Chaim Kaufmann, “Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars,” *International Security* 20, no. 4 (Spring 1996): 136-175; Barry Posen, “The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict,” *Survival* 35, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 27-47.

¹¹ See R.D. Duvall and Ted R. Gurr, “Civil Conflict in the 1960s: A Reciprocal Theoretical System with Parameter Estimates,” *Comparative Political Studies* 6, no. 2 (July 1973): 135-169; Ted R. Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970); Ted R. Gurr, “Why Minorities Rebel: A Global Analysis of Communal Mobilization and Conflict since 1945,” *International Political Science Review* 14, no. 2 (1993): 161-201; Frances Stewart, ed., *Horizontal Inequalities and Conflict: Understanding Group Violence in Multiethnic Societies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

¹² Anastasia Shesterinina, “Collective Threat Framing and Mobilization in Civil War,” *American Political Science Review* 110, no. 3 (August 2016): 417.

¹³ Roger D. Peterson, *Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear Hatred and Resentment in Twentieth Century Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 34-35; Kaufmann, “Possible and Impossible,” 141-145; David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild, “Containing Fear: The Origins and Management of Ethnic Conflict,” *International Security* 21, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 41-75; Posen, “Security Dilemma,” 30-31.

¹⁴ See Stuart J. Kaufman, “Narratives and Symbols in Violent Mobilization: The Palestinian-Israeli Case,” *Security Studies* 18, no. 3 (2009): 400-434.

marginalization, and the enemy's own us/them imaging,¹⁵ that a group locates its interests, claims (goals), and how to secure them.¹⁶

For many groups territory is at the core of identity, and, by extension, security, intergroup grievances, and political claims.¹⁷ Political entrepreneurs can bridge intragroup cleavages, establish cohesion, and harness resources by appealing to notions of historic homelands. But no two individuals or groups relate to territory the same way. Attachments and entitlements to homelands can be framed as a matter of strategic military or economic importance,¹⁸ through stories of sacrifice or issues of land tenure/indigenous status,¹⁹ by pointing to "sacred space"²⁰ like tombs and churches, or by citing a historical precedent for autonomy/self-determination like an ancient kingdom.²¹

Largely absent, however, are analyses of how this process plays out, especially with regard to second-order minorities. For example, Shane Barter analyzed how separatism triggered reactive nationalism among Aceh's second-order minorities. The Free Aceh Movement targeted indigenous Gayo, Malay, and Alas communities for displacement, assimilation, or extermination. Aceh's second-order minorities fought

¹⁵ Michael E. Brown, "Causes and Implications of Ethnic Conflict," in *Ethnic Conflict and International Security*, ed. Michael E. Brown (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 11-12; Kaufmann, "Possible and Impossible," 141-145; Lake and Rothchild, "Containing Fear," 54-56; Posen, "Security Dilemma," 30-31.

¹⁶ Shesterinina, "Collective Threat Framing," 417. See also Elisabeth J. Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Jocelyn Viterna, *Women in War: The Micro-Processes of Mobilization in El Salvador* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁷ See Walker Connor, *Ethnonationalism: The Quest for Understanding* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Anthony D. Smith, "Culture, Community and Territory: The Politics of Ethnicity and Nationalism," *International Affairs* 72, no. 3 (July 1996): 445-458; D. Morley and K. Robins, "No Place like Heimat: Images of Homeland in European Culture," in *Space and Place: Theories of Identity and Location*, eds. E. Carter et al. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993).

¹⁸ See Ariel Zellman, "Uneven Ground: Nationalist Frames and the Variable Salience of Homeland," *Security Studies* (January 2018): 485-510.

¹⁹ See Monica Duffy-Toft, *The Geography of Ethnic Violence: Identity, Interests, and the Indivisibility of Territory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

²⁰ See Ron E. Hasner, *War on Sacred Grounds* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

²¹ See Friederike Luise Kelle, "To Claim or Not to Claim? How Territorial Value Shapes Demands for Self-Determination," *Comparative Political Studies* 50, no. 7 (June 2017): 992-1020.

back. Elites drove mobilization by manipulating identities around security threats into local ethno-territorial nationalisms. Aceh's second-order minorities positioned themselves as distinct, inseparable from the Indonesian state, but decidedly not Acehnese. These sentiments culminated in demands for new provinces.²²

But Barter's primary concern was not the mobilization process. He provides no account of how political entrepreneurs forged these unique types of local ethno-territorial nationalisms. Of particularly importance here are the specific areas being claimed by elites as homelands. Mylonas and Shelef note that leaders of stateless nations are especially prone to altering the size and scope of the homeland. In fact, they go on to claim that these changes are driven primarily by domestic political competition for leadership of the nationalist movement. Less powerful is the influence of external factors, such as coordination on new real borders, adapting to ethnic geography, concessions to external patrons, changes in relative capacity vis-à-vis the state, and new information on a land's value.²³ This may be true in times of peace or across a movement's history, but within the security dilemma the interplay of these factors, let alone the sheer weight of physical security threats, is likely more complex.

Second-order minorities like those in Aceh inherently lack military capabilities compared to majorities or primary combatants. This means that they cannot secure their long-term goals independently. At some point a second-order minority has to pick between primary combatants. Ethnic (second-order) minority status precludes an identity-based alliance. More likely are alliances based on power and security concerns.

²² See Shane Joshua Barter, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Second-Order Minorities in the Aceh Conflict," *Asian Ethnicity* 16, no. 2 (January 2015): 152-165.

²³ See Harris Mylonas and Nadav G. Shelef, "Which Land is Our Land? Domestic Politics and Change in the Territorial Claims of Stateless Nationalist Movements," *Security Studies* 23, no. 4 (2014): 754-786.

Balancing refers to aligning against the primary threat. *Bandwagoning* occurs when an actor aligns with the source of danger, a situation that is more likely when capabilities are lacking and defeat is inevitable.²⁴

When territory is at the core of group identity, the primary cause of intergroup tension, the object of claim-making, and the lack of power and capabilities makes alliances necessary but the partners unreliable,²⁵ the construction and deployment of an ethno-territorial identity claim to secure political goals becomes a multifaceted and delicate process. Cohesion, capabilities, goals, and security threats, must all be factored. It is here the current research project is located.

A Mechanism-based Account of Second-Order Minority Group Mobilization

My approach is mechanism-based. I seek to uncover and explain the “salient features” of an episode “by means of partial causal analogies.”²⁶ More specifically, how second-order minorities mobilize to retain or reclaim lost lands during state breakdown and state recalibration.

In ethnically divided states, when a sovereign collapses and physical security threats loom, a territorially concentrated second-order minority is confronted with two interrelated decisions. First, it must choose between *flight* and *fight*. Flight amounts to displacement. Fight refers to mobilization for collective violence to retain or reclaim lost lands.

²⁴ On alliances see Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979).

²⁵ On commitment problems with alliance partners see Fotini Cristia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); James D. Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War,” *International Organization* 49, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 379-414; Robert Powell, “War as a Commitment Problem,” *International Organization* 60, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 169-203.

²⁶ Tilly and Goodwin, “It Depends,” 13.

Second-order minority group mobilization to reclaim or retain territory can be disaggregated into a three-step framing process: 1) the identification of the problem, victims, and responsible parties (*diagnostic frame*); 2) the establishment of a set of goals—claims on the state—and strategies for securing them (*prognostic frame*); and 3) the “call-to-arms” that launches political struggles (*motivational frame*).²⁷ Embedded within this process are various relational mechanisms, such as *brokerage*, *diffusion*, *boundary formation*, *boundary activation/deactivation*, *boundary shift*, *attribution of similarity*, and *repression*.²⁸

- **Brokerage**: Production of a new connection between previously unconnected or weakly connected sites
- **Diffusion**: Spread of a contentious performance, issue, or interpretive frame from one site to another
- **Boundary Formation**: Creation of an us-them distinction between two political actors
- **Boundary Activation/Deactivation**: Increase (decrease) in the salience of the us-them distinction separating two political actors
- **Attribution of Similarity**: Identification of another political actor as falling within the same category as your own (by experience or identity)
- **Boundary Shift**: Change in the persons or identities on one side or the other of an existing boundary
- **Repression**: Action by authorities that increases the cost—actual or potential—of an actor’s claim making²⁹

Mobilization begins with the effective construction, (re)negotiation, and deployment of a political identity that resonates with potential recruits and endows a movement with cohesion. Elites mold political identities from boundaries, shared stories about those boundaries, social relations across boundaries, and social relations within

²⁷ See Gamson and Modigliani, “The Changing Culture of Affirmative Action;” Chong and Druckman, “Framing Theory;” Benford and Snow, “Framing Processes and Social Movements;” Benford and Snow, “Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization.”

²⁸ See Tilly and Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, 215.

²⁹ Imported from Tilly and Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, 215.

boundaries.³⁰ It is within this process that a movement's claims and prescriptive actions for realizing them are located.

For many groups ethnic identity is bound up in territory. Homelands are the container of both identities and grievances. Territorial dominance guarantees a second-order minority's cultural and physical survival,³¹ and also its political, economic, and socio-cultural rights. Political entrepreneurs can facilitate mobilization by "spatializing" identities, grievances, and claims. This can be accomplished by framing attachments and entitlements to homelands along one or more of the following lines: economic or strategic defense issues, by invoking land tenure claims, citing the presence of historical, religious, cultural, and otherwise "sacred" markers and places, or with historical-political precedents for autonomy.³²

However, no two individuals or groups relate to the same piece of territory the same way. What one segment of a group may see as indivisible others may see as fungible. As Ariel Zellman notes, "Publics maintain multiple, concurrent valuations of lost territories. Moreover, alternative framings of these territories may induce sharply contrasting attitudes toward not only demands for nationalist interventions, but whether or not they are even identified as integral to the national homeland."³³ In addition, second-order minorities, just like all other ethnic groups, are rife with internal cleavages, be they based on tribal affiliation, language, race, gender, religion, political affiliation, or socio-economic status. At the end of the day the homeland must be defensible, the group

³⁰ Tilly, *Collective Violence*, 32.

³¹ Monica Duffy-Toft, "Indivisible Territory, Geographic Concentration, and Ethnic War," *Security Studies* 12, no. 2 (Winter 2002/2003): 87.

³² See Duffy-Toft, *The Geography of Ethnic Violence*; Hasner, *War on Sacred Grounds*; Kelle, "Self-Determination;" Frances Stewart, "Horizontal Inequalities and Conflict: An Introduction and Some Hypotheses," in *Horizontal Inequalities and Conflict*; Zellman, "Uneven Ground."

³³ Zellman, "Uneven Ground," 504.

that seeks to control it must be able to dominate it, and potential recruits must be willing to fight for it. Ergo, a central component to the instrumental use of notions of historic homelands to facilitate mobilization is delineating what the actual borders of the homeland are.

Such delineations are not made in a vacuum with only group goals in mind. This is particularly true when security threats arise. All nationalist movements, including those of the second-order minority variety, are rife with domestic political struggles. In the struggle for leadership of the movement different actors offer competing visions of homelands in order to bridge intragroup cleavages, obtain resources and new recruits, and, most importantly, marginalize challengers.³⁴ Various external factors can also drive leaders of stateless nations to alter the size and scope of what constitutes the homeland, such as the creation of new de jure or de facto borders, changing ethnic demographics, power capacity relative to the state, the influence of an external patron,³⁵ and the ebb and flow of conflict, power relations, and security dynamics and threats.

Second-order minorities lack the power, military capabilities, and resources of majorities or first-order minorities. The goal of *all* combatants in a civil war is territorial control, defined here as the political entity which retains a monopoly on the use of force.³⁶ It is unrealistic to expect that actors with significantly more offensive military power will allow a second-order minority group to secure political-territorial goals without demonstrating loyalty.

³⁴ See Mylonas and Shelef, "Which Land is Our Land."

³⁵ Adapted from Mylonas and Shelef, "Which Land is Our Land."

³⁶ Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). See also Max Weber, "Politics as Vocation," in Max Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, eds. David Owen and Tracy B. Strong, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2004), 33.

A second-order minority group's second, possibly more important decision, is therefore to determine which primary combatant to align with. It can either *balance* against threats or *bandwagon* with the source of danger.³⁷ This does not mean that preferences play no role in alliance formation. What it does say is that power and security concerns are molded in part by intergroup histories. There is a subjective component to power, security, and threat construction.³⁸

Again, mobilization and alliance formation are bound up together. For example, an inherent lack of military capabilities can mean mobilization can be contingent upon political patronage. An example of this would be a state-sanctioned militia. The (dis)appearance and weight of an external patron can also shape mobilization trajectories.

The ebb and flow of conflict and changing power and security dynamics dictate that fight/flight and alliance decisions are not always permanent. Mobilization may lead to displacement and the disintegration of self-defense forces just as easily as displacement may lead to mobilization. Alliance defection during civil war is common because power and security capacities change.³⁹ All of this is to say that political identities and ethno-territorial identity claims can and do change.

Methodology

Case Selection Justification: The Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM)

The ADM was selected because of the party's unique geopolitical position in the Nineveh Plain relative to the KRG, Iraqi central government, and, most importantly other second-order Christian political parties and religious institutions. This means it is an

³⁷ See Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*; Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*.

³⁸ See Shesterinina, "Collective Threat Framing," 7

³⁹ See Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars*.

outlier case. In brief, the Nineveh Plain is part of Iraq's disputed territories. The Iraqi central government and the Kurdish nationalists controlling the KRG each see the Nineveh Plain as integral to statehood. The ADM's desire to see a Nineveh Plain province attached to Baghdad puts it on a political island.⁴⁰ All other major Christian parties prefer a province attached to the KRG.⁴¹ Iraq's largest church, the Chaldean Catholic Church, is opposed to the formation of a Nineveh Plain province on the grounds that it would invite violence.⁴² However, it would be unreasonable to hypothesize that the Chaldean Church fears an erosion of its power to secular parties if a Nineveh Plain province comes to fruition.

Scope Conditions: June 2014-October 2017

The period under analysis begins with the Islamic State's June 2014 northern Iraq offensive and ends with the fall 2017 Kurdish referendum on independence. This provides me with the opportunity to analyze the ADM within an anarchic environment and during the state recalibration process.

Methodology

To explore the underlying causes and processes driving mobilization this study pairs ethnographic data with existing primary and secondary source materials.

Ethnographic fieldwork allows researchers a first-hand view of how preferences align

⁴⁰ Author's own field work. See also NPU, "Nineveh Plains Protection Units: Mission Statement," Nineveh Plains Defense Fund, accessed December 10, 2018, [https://ninevehplaindefensefund.org/about-npu/#PrettyPhoto\[2\]/0/](https://ninevehplaindefensefund.org/about-npu/#PrettyPhoto[2]/0/).

⁴¹ See Halan Hormuz quoted in Azad Jamkari, "Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council: Christians Demand Inclusion of Nineveh Plain in Kurdistan Referendum," Rudaw, July 14, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.rudaw.net/arabic/kurdistan/140720171>; Mewan Dolamari, "Christians Lobby for Kurdish Independence," Kurdistan 24, January 6, 2016, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/interview/acfebd7b-1bc6-4a03-8df6-747acc455deb>.

⁴² See Statement of the Synod of Bishops of the Chaldean Catholic Church Bishops, Rome, October 4-8, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://saint-adday.com/?p=19632>; Statement of the Chaldean Church on the Brussels Conference, June 28, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://saint-adday.com/?p=18121>.

with actions, particularly amidst security threats. Secondary sources provide historical context and the appropriate reference points needed to locate how current actions and preferences are shaped by past experiences. Integrating these two types of data allows mobilization to be analyzed beyond its purely rhetorical elements, positioning it within its broader social, political, and security environments and the power dynamics embedded therein.⁴³

Data Accumulation

Ethnographic data was obtained during two research trips to northern Iraq: fall 2016 and July 2017. The primary method of data accumulation was surveys and personal interviews. Interviews were conducted in English, Arabic, or both. Surveys were administered in Arabic. Sample surveys/interview formats are located in the indices of this project.

Most interviews were recorded. Individuals who did not consent to the use of a recording device permitted me to take detailed notes. It was common for participants to ask for the recorder to be turned off when sensitive issues were discussed. All interactions began with a project description. This was followed by the informed consent procedure and agreements on the use of a recording device and source citation (name). Consent was obtained orally or by signing the relevant IRB form.

On both trips research was confined to the towns of Ankawa and al-Qosh. Ankawa is the Christian suburb of Erbil, the capital city of the Kurdistan Regional Government. Since the Islamic State's invasion tens of thousands of Christians from

⁴³ See Shesterinia, "Collective Threat Framing," 414. See also Lee Ann Fuji, "Shades of Truth and Lies: Interpreting Testimonies of War and Violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 42, no. 2 (2010): 231; Lisa Weeden, "Reflections on Ethnographic Work in Political Science," *Annual Review of Political Science* 13, no. 1 (2010): 255-272; Elizabeth J. Wood, "Field Research During War: Ethical Dilemmas," in *New Perspectives in Political Ethnography*, eds. Lauren Josphe, Matthew Mahler, and Javier Auyero (New York: Springer Science, 2007), 127.

Mosul and the Nineveh Plain have called Ankawa home.⁴⁴ Ankawa hosts branches of all major Iraqi-Christian political parties. Al-Qosh is located in the Nineveh Plain. It is the site of the main training base of the Nineveh Plains Protection Units (NPU). In October 2016 al-Qosh was the last remaining Christian town in the Nineveh Plain that ISIS did not control.

Together with the temporal variation, each location allowed me to analyze the Assyrian Democratic Movement within different security and political environments: 1) as part of a population forced to seek refuge under a government it did not necessarily trust (KRG); 2) as a second-order minority political party attempting mobilization to reclaim and retain historic homelands; and 3) as a party trying to reassert its place at the top of the Iraqi-Christian political hierarchy.

Subject Identification and Sampling Method

I relied on a two-part snowball strategy to identify potential subjects that fit my research goal while protecting against immersion/referral bias. First, through my own research on Christians in Iraq I identified and contacted prominent journalists, academics, and activists in the U.S., Canada, and Europe, as well as Iraqi-Christian diaspora members. These individuals brokered connections on my behalf to Assyrian Democratic Movement leaders/members and other Christian politicians. Once in Iraq, ADM officials and other Christian politicians introduced me to relevant party members, officers, members, activists, etc.

Second, I contacted several U.S. government officials attempting to secure humanitarian assistance for Christians and other minorities. These individuals provided

⁴⁴ Thousands of Muslims and other ethno-sectarian minorities displaced by ISIS also reside in/around Ankawa and Erbil.

me names and contact information for church officials and NGO workers in Iraq managing humanitarian aid operations. Once in Iraq, church officials and NGO workers arranged access to displaced persons and brokered additional connections on my behalf to relevant individuals.

Interview Strategy 1: Christian Politicians

Interviews followed a semi-structured format and ranged in length from .5-1.5 hours. My interview questions were derived from my surveys. Interviews allowed me obtain more in-depth/nuanced answers and ask important follow-up questions. All interviews were conducted in a place of the subject's choosing. After covering biographical details, including position/rank in political party or organization, I proceeded to the main parts of the interview.

I began by asking about the subject's life, focusing on his role in his respective organization before the Islamic State's invasion. This included life under the Ba'th regime and during and after the U.S. occupation. The discussion then moved to the subject's actions within the context of his organization when state breakdown appeared imminent. The preparations made in advance of ISIS were then covered, followed by a request for the subject to recount events in the aftermath of ISIS's assault. Finally we discussed the situation as it appeared at the time of the interview, focusing on the subject's short and long-term goals.

This method provided me with a high degree of flexibility when it came to discussing sensitive issues, such as the recounting of violent episodes, sources of intragroup or intergroup tensions, and political preferences and goals. The presence of similar answers within and across groups combined with informal interactions and field notes left me confident that saturation was achieved.

Survey/Interview Strategy 2: Nineveh Plains Protection Units Soldiers/Officers

Surveys were administered in groups of two or three; completion took no more than thirty minutes. Interviews with NPU officers ranged from .5-1 hours. The same question format was used for interviews and surveys. All interactions with NPU officials/soldiers took place at the force's main base in al-Qosh or the local Assyrian Democratic Movement office.

Surveys were designed to tease out general participation pathways that could be compared to the rhetoric and actions of other ADM officials. Each survey contained a section on demographic information, prior military experience, how individuals heard about the NPU, role of family and friends in joining, reasons for joining, and goals.

Interviews were semi-structured. They aimed to replicate the survey questions yet allowed me to obtain more nuanced answers in terms of the discussion of sensitive political topics if they came up, such as encounters with ISIS, Iraqi and Kurdish politicians, and how the NPU came together.

A close proximity to ISIS-occupied territory, ongoing training exercises, deployment rotations, and many soldiers' hesitancy to participate for fear of being identified publically were all factors hindering my ability to guarantee a representative sample. In spite of these obstacles, the presence of similar responses within and across research trips leaves me confident saturation was achieved.

Interview Strategy 3: Displaced Persons

Understanding the experiences of displaced persons was of vital importance. It enabled me to obtain a deeper intergroup relations and how events unfolded in northern Iraq in summer 2014 than if I had relied only on the testimonies of politicians, NGO reports, and foreign and domestic media outlets. It also helped me gauge whether or not

the goals espoused by the ADM and other Christian parties were representative of the larger population.

Surveys were administered in Arabic to groups of two or three individuals, took approximately thirty minutes to complete, and usually involved follow-up questions. For security reasons, any citations of displaced persons that appear in this project are based on a numerical coding system. Surveys were designed with two goals in mind: detailing past experiences and understanding present and future concerns. They consisted of questions on place of origin; date of arrival; method of arrival; places lived since displacement; preferences on returning home, migrating abroad, or remaining in Kurdistan; the parties responsible for post-conflict compensation; political preferences within the Iraqi-Christian community, if any; future security arrangements in northern Iraq; and attitudes toward a possible Nineveh Plain province.

Several factors made obtaining a representative sample unlikely. Tens of thousands of displaced Christians were scattered in several camps and other forms of temporary housing. People came and went from camps. There were no guarantees that anyone would participate. Finally, I was not provided demographic information other than total population/number of families. In the end I simply did not have the resources or time to overcome these obstacles.

Two strategies helped me guard against additional selection bias. First, a list of Christian towns in the Nineveh Plain and its surrounding environs, which included information on where the ADM and other parties had local offices, helped me obtain some geographic and political diversity in regards to selecting participants. Second, through maps and background research I was able to parse out which areas in and around

the Nineveh Plain were controlled by either the KRG or Iraqi central government before ISIS invaded. Understanding the security provider was vital to contextualizing preferences for the KRG or Iraqi central government. After comparing my experiences with displaced persons with NGO reports and other secondary sources I am confident saturation was achieved.

Data Integration and Final Analysis

The final analysis integrates ethnographic data with existing primary and secondary sources, such as archived interviews, official statements from politicians or parties, government documents, NGO reports, and other historical and contemporary materials. To accomplish this I designed a modified form of process tracing⁴⁵ based on a multi-layered approach to data classification and integration. Data was organized into one of three categories: Within-group/ADM (micro-level), Historical (macro-level) and Contemporary (meso-level).

ADM/within-group data provided insights into how political entrepreneurs constructed, reinterpreted, and deployed identities to drive mobilization. From the ethnographic data I parsed out the three components of collective action frames—diagnostic frames, prognostic frames, and motivational frames—and searched for relevant mechanisms embedded therein in order to conduct my analysis.

Historical sources provided reference points for the framing process, allowing me to contextualize and understand the sources of intragroup identities, intragroup cleavages, and intergroup tensions. These, in turn, allowed me to unpack how political entrepreneurs assembled frames, deployed identities, and made claims.

⁴⁵ Derek Beach and Rasmus Brun Pedersen, *Process-Tracing Methods: Foundations and Guidelines* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013); Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (MIT Press: Cambridge, 2005).

The use of contemporary sources enabled me to position the ADM’s mobilization within the contemporary security and political context that is the Iraqi-Christian political predicament in the Nineveh Plain, Kurdistan, and Iraq in general. Understanding where the ADM fit into the “bigger picture” allowed me to capture the negative power dynamic that is essence of being a second-order minority.

List of (Potential) Component Mechanisms⁴⁶

- **Brokerage:** Production of a new connection between previously unconnected or weakly connected sites
- **Diffusion:** Spread of a contentious performance, issue, or interpretive frame from one site to another
- **Boundary Formation:** Creation of an us-them distinction between two political actors
- **Boundary Activation/Deactivation:** Increase (decrease) in the salience of the us-them distinction separating two political actors
- **Attribution of Similarity:** Identification of another political actor as falling within the same category as your own (by experience or identity)
- **Boundary Shift:** Change in the persons or identities on one side or the other of an existing boundary
- **Repression:** Action by authorities that increases the cost—actual or potential—of an actor’s claim making⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Imported from Tilly and Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, 215.

⁴⁷ Imported from Tilly and Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*, 215.

Chapter 2

From “Syrian” to “Assyrian” to “Iraqi-Assyrian” and a Second-order Minority in Northern Iraq

In this chapter I examine the political history of Iraq’s Assyrians from the early nineteenth-century until just prior to the fall of Saddam Hussein’s Ba’th regime in 2003. My analysis is divided into three sections. The first section examines the development of Assyrian nationalism within the context of the nineteenth-century Eastern Question. The second section discusses how the Assyrians and other Christians became a second-order minority in northern Iraq. The third section explores how the Christian second-order minority reached for power in independent Iraq. The focus here is on how segments of the group felt the best way to achieve group rights was by assisting the Kurdish struggle against the Iraqi central government. These efforts culminated in the formation of the Assyrian Democratic Movement in 1979.

I make several interrelated arguments. First, homelands were fungible. Of primary importance to the Assyrian refugees in mandatory Iraq was the preservation of the cultural and political autonomy they enjoyed up until the late-Ottoman period. Territorial claims evolved. Second, domestic competitions for leadership of the Assyrian nationalist movement seemed to have little to do with changes in the size and scope of what constituted the Assyrian homeland. More salient was the creation of new borders, changes in the ethnic composition of a given area, the loss of an external patron, security anxieties, and alterations in power vis-à-vis the state. Third, second-order minorities are more inclined to align/balance against threats rather than with them.

The Origin and Development of Assyrian Nationalism

Geography, Autonomy, and Dhimmitude

The story of Assyrian nationalism begins in the early nineteenth-century among the Nestorian Christian populations—“Syrians”¹ when they had to separate themselves from other ethno-sectarian groups, “Easterners” to set themselves apart from other Syriac Christians—that resided in the ill-defined and porous borderland between the Ottoman Empire and Qajar Persia.² With the ruins of Nineveh near Mosul as its focal point, staunch Assyrian nationalists today claim this area—which encompasses the Hakkari in eastern Turkey, Hasakah in northeast Syria, Iraq north of Mosul, and Urmia in northwest Iran—as the Assyrian homeland.³ Inseparable from the Assyrian territorial claim, and all ethno-

¹ Most scholars contend that prior to the nineteenth-century the indigenous Christians in northern Mesopotamia that belonged to the Church of the East identified as “Syrian.” Friction emerges over what exactly “Syrian” means. Most contend it is derived from the use of Classical Aramaic, Syriac, in the liturgies, which points to an Aramean descent. Others argue it is a corruption of “Assyrian,” which means the two terms are merely synonyms. Complicating matters are sources that use “Assyrian” in a more historical-geographical sense than an ethnic one. That is, people residing within the boundaries of the Assyrian Empire. Regardless, it is generally agreed that the group that we now call “the Assyrians” did not think of themselves as such, at least in a communal sense, until about the turn of the twentieth century. For conflicting/overlapping views on the “Syria/Assyria” debate see Adam Becker, *Revival and Awakening: American Evangelical Missionaries in Iran and the Origins of Assyrian Nationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Richard N. Frye, “Assyria and Syria: Synonyms,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 51, no. 4 (October 1992): 281-285; John Joseph, “Assyria and Syria: Synonyms?” *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* 11, no. 2 (1997): 37-43; John Joseph, *The Modern Assyrians of the Middle East: Encounters with Western Christian Missions, Archaeologists, & Colonial Powers* (London: Brill, 2000); Richard N. Frye, “Reply to John Joseph,” *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies* 13, no. 1 (1999): 69-70; Wolfhart Heinrichs, “The Modern Assyrians—Name and Nation,” in *Semetica: Serta Philologica Constantino Tseretli Dicata*, ed. Riccardo Contini (Turin: Silvo Zamorani, 1993), 99-114; Heleen L. Murre-van den Berg, *From a Spoken to a Written Language: The Introduction and Development of Literary Urmia Aramaic in the Nineteenth-century* (Leiden: Brill, 1999). For an example of (the few) continuous references to the “Assyrians” throughout history see Michel Chevalier, *Les Montagnards Chrétiens du Hakkari et du Kurdistan Septentrional* (Publications du Département de Géographie de l’Université de Paris—Sorbonne, 1985).

² Becker, *Revival and Awakening*, 48.

³ Often colloquially called “The Assyrian Triangle.”

territorial claims for that matter, are notions of demographic homogeneity. Few observers, though, if any, have ever described northern Mesopotamia as ethnically homogenous:

The broader region, running from the Tur ‘Abdin in the west to Lake Urmia in the east, from the region of Lake van in the north and south to Mosul, contained in the nineteenth century (as it does today, but far less so) a complex, heterogeneous population of different languages, ethnicities, and religious tradition. Language self-appellation, and religion were often imbricated with one another, and yet the social promiscuity and heterogeneity of the region reveal exceptions anytime we try to make a rule.⁴

In the early nineteenth century there was three main centers of Nestorian Christian life in northern Mesopotamia: the Hakkari, Urmia, and Mosul. Once a stronghold of the Church of the East, Mosul and its environs, including the Nineveh Plain, was now host to a sizeable and still-growing Catholic population. Central to the development of Assyrian nationalism then were the Nestorian communities in the Hakkari and Urmia.⁵

In both the Ottoman Empire and Qajar Persia, non-Muslims were classified under Islamic Law as second-class citizens—*ahl al-dhimma*.⁶ Dhimmitude, however, manifested differently for the Hakkari Nestorians than it did for their co-religionists in Urmia.

Rough, mountainous, and generally difficult-to-access terrain characterize the geography of the Hakkari region. Ottoman tax collectors and military officials seldom appeared.⁷ The Nestorian highlanders retained a significant degree of political, economic, and social autonomy from the Sublime Porte. They were tribal oriented, lived largely independent of other ethno-sectarian groups, and carved out an existence as semi-nomadic herdsmen.⁸ Relations with the Kurdish tribal chiefs whose jurisdiction they were

⁴ Becker, *Revival and Awakening*, 48.

⁵ Becker, *Revival and Awakening*, 45.

⁶ The term *dhimmi* or *ahl al-dhimma* (people of the book) refers to non-Muslims living under Muslim rule and being free to exercise their religious beliefs. Non-Muslims were typically required to pay a special tax to the state (*jizya*) in exchange for protection and exemption from military service.

⁷ J.F. Coakley, *The Church of the East and the Church of England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 17.

⁸ Becker, *Revival and Awakening*, 46-47.

nominally under were often tenuous and uncertain. The Kurds, though, regarded the Nestorians as fierce warriors.⁹ And unlike other Ottoman Christians, which were organized into semi-autonomous religious communities known as *millets*,¹⁰ the leaders of which were elected by the laity but subject to the sultan's approval, the Nestorian Patriarch's position as the group's temporal and spiritual leader was hereditary-based.¹¹

In Urmia, some Nestorians lived independent of other groups in their own small towns and villages. Others lived as a minority amongst the area's ethnically diverse and mostly Shia Muslim population.¹² A feudal system dominated in the Urmia plain. Christians and Muslims toiled as serfs. The local aristocracy was almost always Muslim.¹³ Urmia's Nestorians were under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Hakkari-based patriarch. Tributes to him were voluntary, which meant they varied in terms of occurrence and amount.¹⁴ The group enjoyed its fair share of communal autonomy. It did not, however, match that of their co-religionists in the Hakkari. In Urmia, the yoke of Islam could be felt on a day-to-day basis. The Nestorians were shut out of many occupations, had their testimony in court rejected, and they generally feared a sudden outbreak of

⁹ John Joseph, *The Modern Assyrians of the Middle East: Encounters with Western Christian Missions, Archaeologists, & Colonial Powers* (London: Brill, 2000), 60.

¹⁰ See Karen Barkley, "Islam and Toleration: Studying the Ottoman Imperial Model," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 19, no. 1/2 (December 2005): 5-19; Karen Barkley and George Gavrilis, "The Ottoman Millet System: Non-Territorial Autonomy and its Contemporary Legacy," *Ethnopolitics* 15, no. 1 (2016): 24-42; Kamal S. Abu Jabar, "The Millet System in the Nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire," *The Muslim World* 57, no. 3 (July 1967): 212-223.

¹¹ Joseph, *Modern Assyrians*, 60. The heads of the Christian millets were responsible for arbitrating between their own religious community and the Sublime Porte. Internally speaking, H.L. Luke describes the millets as "autonomous in spiritual and in certain administrative and judicial matters. Their jurisdiction embraced, in the religious sphere, clerical discipline; in the administrative sphere, the control of their properties, including cemeteries, education, and churches; in the judicial sphere, marriage, dowries, divorce and alimony." See Harry Luke *The Making of Modern Turkey* (London: Macmillan, 1936), 98. Chapter 4 discusses the Christian millets more generally.

¹² Becker, *Revival and Awakening*, 46.

¹³ Coakley, *Church of the East*, 17.

¹⁴ Joseph, *Modern Assyrians*, 63.

violence should they violate Islamic law or the general behavioral norms of their overlords.¹⁵

From “Syrian” to “Assyrian”: The Nestorians, the European Powers, Western Missionaries, and Colonial Machinations

By the early nineteenth-century the global balance of power had permanently shifted away from the Ottoman Empire and towards Europe.¹⁶ Britain, France, and Russia began intervening more frequently and more forcefully in the Empire’s affairs with the aim of either speeding up or slowing down its collapse. The European Powers often justified their intrusions by invoking their status as “guardians” of the Empire’s Christian populations, a practice that found legal precedent in a set of diplomatic and commercial treaties known as *Capitulations*.¹⁷ One of the most important ways the relationship between the Europe and Ottoman Christians revealed itself was through the increased presence of Western missionaries.¹⁸ Missionaries had only a modest level of success in terms of winning converts. With the exception of France and its Maronite Catholic clients in Lebanon, they also won little in terms of Middle Eastern territory. Far more significant

¹⁵ Coakley, *Church of the East*, 17.

¹⁶ For a discussion of the changing balance of power and its causes see L. Carl Brown, *International Politics and the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 1984), 21-30.

¹⁷ Albert Hourani, *Minorities in the Arab World* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947), 23-24; Laura Robson, “Refugee Camps and the Spatialization of Assyrian Nationalism in Iraq,” in *Modernity, Minority, and the Public Sphere: Jews and Christians in the Middle East*, eds., S.R. Goldstein-Sabbah and H.L. Murre-van den Berg (Leiden: Brill Books, 2016), 238. On the capitulations and “protections” see James B. Angelli, “The Turkish Capitulations,” *American Historical Review* 6, no. 2 (January 1901): 254-259; Carol Finkel, *Osman’s Dream: The Story of the Ottoman Empire 1300-1923* (New York: Perseus, 2005); Bruce Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹⁸ For Christian missionaries in the Middle East see Mehmet Ali Dogan and Heather J. Sharky, eds., *American Missionaries in the Middle East: Foundation Encounters* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2011); Heleen Murre-van den Berg, ed., *New Faith in Ancient Lands: Western Missions in the Middle East in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Eleanor H. Tejirian and Reeva Spector Simon, *Conflict, Conquest, and Conversion: Two Thousand Years of Christian Missions in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

was the impact of mission-run schools. Secular education paved the way for a re-categorization of sectarian identities into national ones.¹⁹

Unlike their European counterparts, American missionaries did not stake out territorial claims.²⁰ Indeed, the primary goal of the American Evangelical missionaries arriving in Urmia in the early 1830s, as this was the more accessible of the two Nestorian communities, was to revitalize the Church of the East.²¹ The standard missionary playbook was followed. Schools were established. The vernacular was standardized. New forms of media and epistemology were introduced. Gradually a secular “Syrian” national consciousness developed.²²

This period coincided with the rise of biblical archeology. In the 1840s French and British archeologists uncovered the heart of the neo-Assyrian Empire, the ruins of Nineveh, near Mosul.²³ It was not long before missionaries, consular agents, and archeologists, possibly encouraged by their indigenous Christian assistants, began promoting the notion that northern Mesopotamia’s Christians were the heirs to Assyria.²⁴

Assyrian nationalism developed firmly within the context of how the Eastern Question played out at the crossroads of two declining empires. Increasing Great Power intervention in regions traditionally outside of government control, such as the Hakkari, exacerbated an already tense intergroup dynamic. The Ottoman state often exploited tensions to aid centralization efforts and stave off collapse. For example, in the mid-1840s

¹⁹ Laura Robson, *States of Separation: Transfer, Partition, and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 19.

²⁰ See Michael B. Oren, *Power Faith and Fantasy: America in the Middle East 1776 to the Present*, third edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011).

²¹ Joseph, *The Modern Assyrians*, 67-69.

²² Becker, *Revival and Awakening*, 5-6. The entire book deals with this process in great detail.

²³ Joseph, *Modern Assyrians*, 15-16.

²⁴ Robson, *States of Separation*, 38; Sami Zubaida, “Contested Nations: Iraq and the Assyrians,” *Nations and Nationalism* 6, no. 3 (2000): 372-373.

Kurdish Emir Bedr Khan, bearing a grudge against the Nestorian Patriarch and fearing a creeping Christendom, obtained approval from the Sublime Porte to subdue Christians.²⁵ Another round of Ottoman-sanctioned massacres at the hands of the Kurds occurred in the 1890s.²⁶ Urmia's Nestorians were also victims of the plundering Kurdish tribes that passed so easily across the porous border.²⁷

In the second-half of the nineteenth-century the entire border region became an arena of intense missionary competition. The Church of the East found itself in a state of rapid decline.²⁸ Like many Middle Eastern Christians, the Nestorians saw their political future, security included, as bound up with Europe. For example, Nestorian clergy reached out to the Church of England for support. In 1886 the Archbishop of Canterbury's Mission to the Assyrian Christians was established.²⁹ In 1898 Russia established an Orthodox mission after the last Nestorian bishop in the Urmia plain led a mass conversion to Orthodoxy.³⁰

So it was only around the turn of the twentieth century that the Assyrian appellation was taken up by a segment of the Nestorian community.³¹ It became the principal vehicle for 1) addressing the disunity caused by the competing missions and Europe and 2) to secure political goals during a time of socio-political upheaval.³²

Assyrian nationalist sentiments did not pervade the entire Nestorian community. It was

²⁵ See Hirmas Aboona, *Assyrians, Kurds, and Ottomans: Intercommunal Relations on the Periphery of the Ottoman Empire* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2008), Chapter 10; Frederick A. Aprim, *Assyrians: From Bedr Khan to Saddam Hussein* (United States: Xlibris, 2006), 26-33.

²⁶ The Hamidiye Cavalry, essentially a Kurdish militia, was formed by the sultan in late 1890s and used to subdue eastern Anatolia. See Janet Klein, *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

²⁷ Joseph, *Modern Assyrians*, 125-126.

²⁸ Becker, *Revival and Awakening*, 274; pp. 274-280 detail the influx of new missionary enterprises.

²⁹ See Coakley, *Church of the East*.

³⁰ Becker, *Revival and Awakening*, 278-279.

³¹ For a complete description of this process see Becker, *Revival and Awakening*, Chapter 8.

³² Robert William De Kalaita, "On the Road to Nineveh: A Brief History of Assyrian Nationalism, 1892-1990," *Journal of the Assyrian Academic Society* 8, no. 1 (1994): 11.

largely confined to intellectuals and other educated elite.³³ It also suffered from an internal contradiction. Many “Syrians” associated the “cause of national unity,” which as noted earlier was secular in character, “with the patriarch.”³⁴ Crucially, although many Christians who were indigenous to what is today northern Iraq had also taken up the Assyrian appellation, generally speaking, it struggled to find a foothold within neighboring non-Nestorian communities:

Although a number of (Jacobite and Chaldean) intellectuals and professionals...were nationalists, the movement among Jacobites and Chaldeans was extremely confined and subject to internal resistance. Among the clergy in particular, there was grave concern that nationalism would mean ruin, for they possessed institutions that were geographically too close to Ottoman and, after the First World War, to Arab seats of power. And unlike the Assyrian Nestorians of Hakkari and Urmia, they were also significantly more integrated into the economic and social life of the larger societies that surrounded them... Another concern of the clergy was power; secular nationalist leadership would naturally undermine the influence of the church.³⁵

The Hakkari Assyrians revolted against the Ottomans during WWI. They were soon driven into Persia alongside their Russian sponsors and Nestorian co-religionists.³⁶ In the intervening period and beyond, Ottoman forces, including Kurdish and other Muslim irregulars, massacred tens of thousands of Assyrians alongside Greeks, Armenians, and other Christians.³⁷ Assyrian military leader Agha Petros led an armed resistance in Persia. Government officials demanded it be disarmed. In March 1918 Kurdish leader Ismail

³³ De Kalaita, “Nineveh,” 15. De Kalaita notes that it is difficult to assess the degree to which it penetrated “ordinary” people in the Hakkari and Urmia.

³⁴ Becker, *Revival and Awakening*, 282.

³⁵ De Kalaita, “Nineveh,” 14.

³⁶ The Ottoman Empire had also been courting the Assyrians. For a review of the Assyrians during WWI see W.A. D.D. Wigram, *Our Smallest Ally: A Brief Account of the Assyrian Nation in the Great War* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge/New York: Macmillan, 1920).

³⁷ For the Assyrian Genocide see Cathie Carmichael, *Genocide Before The Holocaust* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Hannibal Travis, “Native Christians Massacred: The Ottoman Genocide of the Assyrians during World War I,” *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 1, no. 3 (December 2006): 327-321; David Gaunt, *Massacres, Resistance, Protection: Muslim-Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia during World War I* (London: Gorgias Press, 2006); Hannibal Travis, ed., *The Assyrian Genocide: Cultural and Political Legacies* (Routledge: New York, 2018); Joseph Yacoub, *Year of the Sword: The Assyrian Christian Genocide, A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

Simko murdered the Nestorian Patriarch.³⁸ In the ensuing years the Assyrians suffered from a crisis of temporal leadership. Secular leaders began challenging the patriarchal family's stranglehold over political affairs more frequently and in a more decisive manner.

In summer 1918 Great Britain, which had allied with the Assyrians after the Russian Revolution put an end to Moscow's support, facilitated the relocation of tens of thousands of Christians from Persia into a refugee camp at Baquba near Baghdad.³⁹ The Baquba camp housed almost 25,000 mostly Hakkari Assyrians and some 15,000 Armenians from Van, Mosul, and Urmia.⁴⁰ It was at Baquba that any pre-existing sense of separateness and non-assimilationist tendencies were emboldened. Great Britain took great care to cultivate and nurture a distinct and transferrable Assyrian national and cultural identity. Iraq was presented as only a temporary home.⁴¹ In his brief history of Assyrian nationalism, Robert William De Kalaita has the following to say on the this period:

And although still extant, tribalism began to dissipate as its geographic base disappeared and its economic and social underpinnings eroded; it became clear that this was the entire nation, and not just a tribe that was on the brink of death. Members of the various tribes, for so long isolated, came into contact with other tribes. Marriages took place across tribal and denominational lines at unprecedented numbers. A transformation of the culture—perhaps once could say the very birth of one—took place at this time.⁴²

The collective identity formation that camp life and British tutelage fostered, complete with grievances against Kurd, Muslim, and Ottoman, had profound consequences for how some Assyrians conceptualized their post-WWI political and

³⁸ Yacoub, *Year of the Sword*, 179-180.

³⁹ Yacoub, *Year of the Sword*, 182-183. Yacoub notes that this number was barely half of what actually left Urmia with tens of thousands having died along the way.

⁴⁰ On the Baquba camp see H.H. Austin, *The Baqubah Refugee Camp: An Account of Work on Behalf of the Persecuted Assyrian Christians* (London: Faith House, 1920).

⁴¹ Robson, *States of Separation*, 40-41.

⁴² DeKalaita, "Nineveh," 16.

territorial demands. Muslims that resided alongside the Assyrians and did not enjoy European patronage grew to see them as colonial tools.

After the Great War: From Refugees and British Protégés to Second-order Minority

British State-Building Meets Assyrian Political and Territorial Demands

Britain's state building efforts in mandatory Iraq, which consisted of the defunct Ottoman provinces of Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul, rested less on the concerns of Christians, Assyrian refugees included, and more on easing cleavages among Arabs and Kurds and Sunni and Shia Muslims.⁴³ But the government of King Faisal I, the British-installed Sunni monarch in Baghdad, saw Iraq as one day emerging as the leader of the Arab world.⁴⁴ To be an "Arab" was to share a common language and common history.⁴⁵ This conceptualization of the nation retained no place for the neo-Aramaic speaking Assyrians.⁴⁶ It also marginalized the Kurds, though early in the mandate period they still retained hope for autonomy or statehood. The future security and political rights of stateless peoples like the Assyrians, on the other hand, were codified in the post-WWI treaties and maintained in the neocolonial mandate governments as minority protections—a new set of pretexts for European intervention.⁴⁷

For Christian minorities the lesson of WWI was that political ambitions, security included, required an external patron. The principal concern of the Assyrian refugees in

⁴³ For Britain in Iraq see Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country, 1914-1932* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

⁴⁴ Sherko Kirmanj, *Identity and Nation in Iraq* (Boulder: Lynne Reiner Publishers, 2013), 40-41.

⁴⁵ Sati al-Husri quoted in Bassam Tibi, *Arab Nationalism: Between Islam and the Nation-State*, third edition (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 148. Al-Husri was Iraq's Director of General Education from 1921 until 1927.

⁴⁶ Robson, *States of Separation*, 89.

⁴⁷ See Benjamin Thomas White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

Iraq at this time was returning to their ancestral homelands and regaining the autonomous lifestyle they enjoyed up until the late-Ottoman period. In a letter to the Civil Commissioner in Baghdad in early 1919 the Nestorian Patriarch requested that he be officially recognized as the group's spiritual and temporal leader. He also asked that his community be settled in their "own country," meaning a British protectorate in northern Mesopotamia extending "as far north into Kurdistan as the line from Bashkala to Bitlis, as far west as Jezirat ibn Omar," and including several districts on the western side of Lake Urmia.⁴⁸ That summer the patriarch's territorial demands, still within the context of a British protectorate, evolved into an area encompassing Mosul, Jezirah, Bashkala, and Urmia.⁴⁹

The patriarch's demands were unrealistic. The establishment of a protectorate required displacing Arab and Kurdish Muslims and other ethno-sectarian minorities. This would deepen anti-British and anti-Christian sentiments and potentially lead to additional regional turmoil. And this is to say nothing of the protectorate's proposed position in relation to the creation of new borders. Turkish officials in particular resented the Nestorians for rising against them during WWI. With the wounds of Christendom's impact on the Empire still fresh, a virulent and exclusionary ethno-nationalism gripped Turkey.⁵⁰

Britain and the international community could not accommodate the Assyrians' demands. The patriarch's representative to the Paris Peace Conference, his sister, met with

⁴⁸ For full text of the Patriarch's letter see R.S. Stafford, *The Tragedy of the Assyrians* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1935), 77-78.

⁴⁹ For full list of reformulated demands, see R.S. Stafford, *Tragedy*, 78.

⁵⁰ See Luke, *The Making of Modern Turkey*.

British officials in London but was unable to partake in negotiations.⁵¹ Most Urmian Nestorians would eventually return home. Resolving the situation of those from the Hakkari proved more difficult.

Britain's Repatriation and Settlement Schemes

The Kurds were northern Iraq's majority population. Like many groups during WWI, the Allies had stirred up Kurdish nationalist aspirations. In mid-1919 they revolted. Britain proposed using the Assyrians as security buffer. Officials concocted a scheme whereby Amadiya's rebellious Kurdish population would be replaced with an Assyrian millet enclave. Though approved by London, the plan never got off the ground. British officials cited more pressing military concerns.⁵²

In March 1920 Great Britain commissioned Assyrian military leader Agha Petros to lead an armed contingent of refugees to an area along the Turko-Persian border—essentially Urmia via Zab.⁵³ British officials hoped that if the Assyrians could hold and defend the territory tensions with the neighboring Kurds would subside. Historian John Joseph notes that this was a perspective shaped by the ongoing negotiations over the abortive Treaty of Sèvres, which was then signed two months before the Assyrian expedition was set to launch.⁵⁴ The Treaty established protocols for the realization of a Kurdish state where the rights of the “Assyro-Chaldeans” would be protected.⁵⁵ In October 1920 Agha Petros's expedition set off. A few weeks later the Hakkari Assyrians

⁵¹ Racho Donef, *Assyrians Post-Nineveh: Identity Fragmentation, Conflict and Survival (672 BC-1920)* (Sydney: Tatavla Publishing, 2012), 142.

⁵² Joseph, *Modern Assyrians*, 159-160.

⁵³ R. S. Stafford, “Iraq and the Problem of the Assyrians,” *International Affairs* 13, no. 2 (March-April 1934): 162.

⁵⁴ Joseph, *Modern Assyrians*, 162.

⁵⁵ “The Treaty of Peace Between the Allied Powers and Turkey” (Treaty of Sèvres), signed at Sèvres, Allied Powers and Turkey, August 10, 1920, U.K.T.S. 11, Cmd. 964. Article 62 references Kurdish autonomy and minority protections. Article 64 discusses Kurdish statehood.

broke ranks, looting and pillaging their way towards their ancestral homes.⁵⁶ This decision doomed all involved. Most Assyrians, including Agha Petros, ended up returning to the Mindan refugee camp near Mosul, which was established after the Baquba camp was shuttered.⁵⁷

In summer 1921 the Mindan refugee camp was closed. Great Britain began laying the groundwork for enshrining the Assyrians and other Christians as a second-order minority in northern Iraq. Mandatory officials distributed a financial stipend to the refugees and helped settle many across the region.⁵⁸ By fall approximately 8,000 refugees were located in Amadiya or just north of it. Another 7,400 resided in Dohuk, Akho, Akre, and Sheikhan.⁵⁹ There, in the heart of the proposed Kurdish state, within an earshot of the ancestral homes in the Hakkari they wanted nothing more than to return to, the Assyrian refugees attempted to carve out a living.

The Assyrians' last hope for formal repatriation ended in December 1925, when the League of Nations rejected Great Britain's demands for a Turko-Iraqi frontier north of Mosul and encompassing parts of the Hakkari.⁶⁰ Many Assyrians hoped they would be settled as a compact community in northern Iraq complete with a measure of local autonomy. Instead, British and Iraqi officials proposed dispersing the Assyrians in small groups across northern Iraq. The "Z Plan," as it was termed, served two strategic purposes. First, it prevented an autonomous Assyrian enclave from forming that could lead to a separatist rebellion. Second, it diluted the mobilizing potential of the ever-agitated

⁵⁶ Percy Sykes, "A Summary of the History of the Assyrians in 'Iraq, 1918-1933," *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 21, no. 2 (1934): 261.

⁵⁷ Stafford, "Problem of the Assyrians," 162.

⁵⁸ Aprim, *Assyrians*, 116.

⁵⁹ R. S. Stafford, *Tragedy of the Assyrians* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1935), 42.

⁶⁰ Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, third edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 57-58.

Kurds.⁶¹ British and Iraqi officials were not simply playing the Assyrian component of the Christian second-order minority against the Kurdish first-order minority with the goal of weakening both. It would be more accurate to state that Britain was using the second-order minority to police the more dangerous first-order minority.

Many Assyrians settled and integrated. Others remained bitter over the decision to abandon mass settlement schemes. It was particularly insulting to these Assyrians that they were now tenants of Kurdish landowners. Many Kurds also opposed the Assyrian settlements, seeing them as illegal land grabs.⁶² The poverty and disease-stricken condition that prevailed in many areas emboldened the Assyrians' repatriation desires.⁶³ This dynamic and the intergroup hostilities that sprang forth can only be appreciated by accounting for Britain's use of the Assyrians as local security proxies: the Iraq Levies.

The Assyrian Levies: Alienation from Iraq's Arab and Kurdish Populations

The Iraq Levies⁶⁴ were Imperial troops. Their primary purpose was to protect the mandatory authority's interests and "police dissident tribal minorities whose loyalty to the Baghdad Sunni state was at best doubtful."⁶⁵ Several interrelated factors influenced Britain's decision to recruit the Hakkari highlanders in 1921.

First, the formation of the Arab-dominated Iraqi national army left the Levies in need of recruits.⁶⁶ Second, British authorities perceived the Kurds as somewhat

⁶¹ Vahram Petrosian, "Assyrians in Iraq," *Iran and the Caucasus* 10, no. 1 (2006): 132.

⁶² Stafford, "Problem of the Assyrians," 165; Sykes, "History of the Assyrians," 263.

⁶³ Sargon George Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History: Iraq and the Assyrians in the Twentieth Century*, paperback edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 79.

⁶⁴ On the Iraq Levies see J. Gilbert Browne, *The Iraq Levies, 1915-1932*, reprinting (London: Royal United Service Institution, 1932); David Omissi, "Britain, the Assyrians and the Iraq Levies," *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 17, no. 3 (1989): 301-322; Laura Robson, "Peripheries of Belonging: Military Recruitment and the Makings of a 'Minority' in Wartime Iraq," *First World War Studies* 7, no. 1 (2016): 1-20; Soloman (Sawa) Soloman, *The Assyrian Levies* (Chicago: Atour, 2006).

⁶⁵ Omissi, "Britain, the Assyrians and the Iraq Levies," 303.

⁶⁶ Browne, *Iraq Levies*, 14.

unreliable.⁶⁷ By and large, the Kurds retained no desire to be a part of an Arab Iraq. In July 1919 Kurdish members of the Levies in Amadiya murdered their British officers and joined the local insurgency.⁶⁸ Third, the Assyrians had already demonstrated their fighting prowess. They beat back Kurdish and Arab attacks on the refugee camps in 1919 and 1920, respectively.⁶⁹ Fourth, the Assyrians were estranged from Arab and Kurdish nationalists and economically dependent on the British.⁷⁰

The Assyrians initially saw no benefit to joining the Levies. Many feared that serving would further alienate them from the Kurds.⁷¹ Moreover, it cannot be understated that most Assyrians' wanted only to return to their ancestral lands—*which they had lost by aligining with the Allies in WWI*.⁷² Famine and economic desperation eventually led many to enlist.⁷³ This does not mean that the Assyrians' anxieties were unfounded. The manner in which the Levies were formed, used, and tied to Great Britain reified the non-assimilationist tendencies of some members and drove a wedge between them and the rest of Iraqi society in two key ways.

First, as noted earlier, the Assyrians in Iraq were undergoing a crisis of temporal leadership. During WWI the patriarch ordered a contingent of rivals massacred for fielding Ottoman overtures.⁷⁴ Between 1918 and 1921 three different people occupied the position of patriarch, including the one murdered by Ismail Simko. Agha Petros's failed military expedition was initiated without the consent of the patriarchal family.⁷⁵ So when

⁶⁷ Stafford, "Problem of the Assyrians," 163.

⁶⁸ Omissi, "Britain, the Assyrians and the Iraq Levies," 304.

⁶⁹ Browne, *Iraq Levies*, 14.

⁷⁰ Omissi, "Britain, the Assyrians and the Iraq Levies," 304.

⁷¹ Joseph, *Modern Assyrians*, 165.

⁷² Browne, *Iraq Levies*, 15.

⁷³ Joseph, *Modern Assyrians*, 165.

⁷⁴ Omissi, "Britain, the Assyrians and the Iraq Levies," 312.

⁷⁵ Stafford, "Problem of the Assyrians," 162-163.

British officials awarded the principal commission of the Assyrian Levies to the patriarch's father—as the patriarch at the time was then just a boy—which carried with it commissions for supporting tribal chiefs and their sons, both the traditional group hierarchy and the family's political influence, still focused on repatriation to the Hakkari, were restored.⁷⁶

Second, throughout the 1920s the nascent Iraqi army was weak and relatively useless.⁷⁷ Yet the Assyrian Levies proved highly effective at suppressing Arab uprisings, Kurdish rebellions, and Turkish invasions.⁷⁸ Ernest Main notes that the Assyrians “despised the Arabs in general and the Arab army in particular.”⁷⁹ The feeling seemed to be mutual. In May 1923 some 150 notables from Mosul petitioned British and Iraqi officials to evict Assyrians from the region lest they be forced to settle the matter themselves.⁸⁰

Relations with Kurds were particularly fragile. The Assyrians were often charged with subduing the rebellious Kurdish first-order minority in its aim to resist integration into the Iraqi state. This, of course, when combined with the ongoing conflict between the two groups over settlement allotments, increased Kurdish resentment towards the

⁷⁶ Joseph, *Modern Assyrians*, 165-166; Omissi, “Britain, the Assyrians and the Iraq Levies,” 312-313; Stafford, “Problem of the Assyrians,” 163.

⁷⁷ Ariel I. Ahram, *Proxy Warriors: The Rise and Fall of State-Sponsored Militias* (Stanford: Stanford Security Studies/Stanford University Press, 2011), 62.

⁷⁸ Petrosian, “Assyrians in Iraq,” 120. For example, Assyrians helped repel Turkish invasions in 1922 and 1923; subdue the Arab uprising in 1920; and defeat Sheikh Barzanji's Sulaymaniya-based Kingdom of Kurdistan between 1922 and 1924. For more information see Eli Amariyo, “History, Memory, and Commemoration: The Iraqi Revolution of 1920 and the Process of Nation-Building in Iraq,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 51, no. 1 (January 2015): 72-92; Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History*, 73; Abbas Kadhim, *Reclaiming Iraq: The 1920 Revolution and the Founding of the Modern State* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012); Yusuf Malek, *The British Betrayal of the Assyrians* (Chicago: Assyrian National Federation/Assyrian National League of America, 1935); Amal Vinogradav, “The 1920 Revolt in Iraq Reconsidered: The Role of Tribes in National Politics,” *Journal of Middle East Studies* 3, no. 2 (April 1972): 123-139.

⁷⁹ Ernest Main, “Iraq and the Assyrians—1932-1933,” *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 20, no. 4 (1933): 665.

⁸⁰ Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History*, 77.

Assyrians and their British patrons.⁸¹ Every time the Assyrian Levies moved against the Kurds it weakened the former's prospects for peaceful assimilation and settlement in northern Iraq. The Assyrians could tolerate this situation so long as Britain remained. But in 1930 the Assyrians were forced to confront their anxieties about a future in Iraq without British protection.

The End of the British Mandate

In June 1930 the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty⁸² was signed, indicating the end of the British mandate was near. Tensions between Baghdad and the Kurds escalated when it was realized that the 1930 agreement failed to grant the Kurds any special privileges in the Arab state. Iraqi officials, in an effort to ease the country's acceptance into the League of Nations, agreed to certain Kurdish cultural and administrative rights. The failed implementation of these pledges aside, the seeds of distrust between the Kurds and Baghdad were already sown.⁸³

Between 1930 and 1932 Kurdish uprisings gripped northern Iraq. The most notable of these was the one that pitted the Assyrian Levies and British and Iraqi forces against the pro-independence Barzani tribe led by Sheikh Ahmed and assisted by his brother Mustafa. Mustafa Barzani would later become the future leader of Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Iraq and vanguard of the Kurdish nationalist movement there. When the rebellions broke out Assyrian leaders requested that the Levies not be used to combat

⁸¹ Omissi, "Britain, the Assyrians and the Iraq Levies," 308.

⁸² "Treaty of Alliance between His Majesty in Respect of the United Kingdom and His Majesty the King of Iraq," signed in Baghdad, June 30, 1930, U.K.T.S. 15. Cmd. 3797.

⁸³ Adeer Dawisha, *Iraq: A Political History from Independence to Occupation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 88-89.

Kurdish forces for fear it would worsen intergroup relations. British officials denied the request.⁸⁴

In June 1932 the Assyrian Levies resigned to protest the end of the British mandate.⁸⁵ This event coincided with the Assyrian National Pact. Formulated by the patriarch and his supporters, the Pact put forth the following demands:

- That the Assyrians should be recognized as a millet (nation) domiciled in Iraq and not merely as an Iraqi religious minority
- That the Hakkari Sanjak (district) in Turkey, in which some of the Assyrians formerly lived, should be annexed to Iraq and its villages restored to the Assyrians
- That if this could not be done, a national home should be found for the Assyrians which should be open to all Assyrians scattered in Iraq and to all other ex-Ottoman Assyrians from all over the world
- That this new home should be arranged to include the whole of the Amadiya district and the adjacent parts of Zakho, Dohuk, and Akre districts and that it should be made into a sub-liwa (sub-district) under the Mosul liwa with its headquarters at Dohuk under a Arab Mutassarif (governor) and a British adviser
- That existing settlement arrangements should be wholly revised by a committee provided with adequate funds, and that the land chosen for Assyrian settlement should be registered in their names as their own property
- That preference should be given to Assyrians in the selection of officials for this sub-liwa
- That the temporal and spiritual authority of the patriarch over the Assyrian nation should be officially recognized and that an annual subsidy should be given to him.
- That the Assyrians should have a member in the Chamber of Deputies nominated by the people and the Patriarch
- That the Iraqi government should establish schools in consultation with the Patriarch in which the language of the Assyrians should be taught
- That the League of Nations or the Iraq government should make a gift of 5,000,000 rupees for the creation of a church waqf (endowment) for the Nestorian church
- That a hospital should be established at the headquarters of the sub-liwa and dispensaries at other places
- That the rifles earned by the Assyrians by their service in the Levies should not be confiscated⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Joseph, *Modern Assyrians*, 186.

⁸⁵ Stafford, "Problem of the Assyrians," 165.

Several important points warrant mentioning. First, the Pact makes it clear that the Assyrians did not seek a nation state. Political ambitions continued to reflect the desire to regain the cultural and political autonomy they enjoyed up until the late-Ottoman period.⁸⁷ Second, though the Hakkari region lay at the core of Assyrians' territorial ambitions, the claim on Amadiya and its surrounding areas as a "back-up plan" demonstrates homelands were fungible. Third, the demand for an Arab governor to oversee the proposed millet enclave indicates the group continued to see political goals and security as bound up with an alliance with the state rather than through participation in public life. Here, the Sunni Arab monarchy replaced Britain as the intergroup security provider. This was an alliance of necessity driven by power and security concerns. Compared to the Kurdish first-order minority, the Arab nationalists in Baghdad, far from an ideal partner, were the lesser of two evils. And under this proposed relationship, the Assyrians would have one foot in the Iraqi state and one foot outside it.

Domestic political competition for leadership of the Assyrian nationalist movement had little to do with the Assyrians' changing political and territorial claims. The patriarchal faction's rivals were not nationalist leaders seeking independence. Nor did they desire a specific territorial foothold to the extent the patriarch and his supporters did. Generally speaking, the anti-patriarchal faction in Iraq was a loose coalition of individuals, families, and tribes intent on making the best of a bad situation and integrating. Far more consequential to the Assyrians' changing territorial and political claims on the state than was the creation of new borders, the loss of an external patron in

⁸⁶ Reprinted in full with transliteration alterations and translation notations made by this author from Stavros T. Stavridis, "Britain, Iraq and the Assyrians: The Nine Demands," Assyrian International News Agency, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.aina.org/articles/biata.htm>.

⁸⁷ Robson, *States of Separation*, 86.

Britain, security anxieties, changes in the ethnic geography of an area—though still a minority compared to Kurds, Assyrians had been settled in and around Amadiya alongside other Christians while the Hakkari was depopulated, and finally changes in power vis-à-vis the state. Comparatively speaking, the Sunni Arab monarchy's power was increasing while that of Britain and the Kurds was decreasing.⁸⁸

The Assyrian National Pact was presented to the British and the League of Nations. Britain was committed to reducing its foothold in Iraq. In Geneva, British authorities were firmly behind the Iraqi government.⁸⁹ Baghdad could not risk its own destruction by granting the Assyrians a millet enclave while not providing Kurds with their own special privileges:

To the Iraqi nationalists, faced with a host of challenges that called for long-term, well thought-out policies, the Assyrians were mere refugees who owed Iraq immense gratitude with no special rights to claim; the country certainly did not owe them any special rights that the other minorities of the land did not have.⁹⁰

In October 1932 Iraq obtained independence. Two months later the League of Nations released its final decision on the Assyrians, which amounted to a wholesale rejection of the patriarch's petition.⁹¹ The Iraqi government agreed to settle those that wished to remain in the country in small units rather than in one enclave. The patriarch refused to cooperate. His position was influenced as much by security anxieties in the Kurdish-dominated north as it was by the Iraqi government's decision to appoint a rival to head of the Assyrian Settlement Committee while he was in Geneva.⁹² In May 1933 the Iraqi government summoned the patriarch to Baghdad. He was informed that he would

⁸⁸ Harris Mylonas and Nadav G. Shelef, "Which Land is Our Land? Domestic Politics and Change in the Territorial Claims of Stateless National Movements," *Security Studies* 23, no. 4 (2014): 758-766.

⁸⁹ Stafford, "Problem of the Assyrians," 165.

⁹⁰ Joseph, *Modern Assyrians*, 191.

⁹¹ Ernest Main, *Iraq: From Mandate to Independence* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1935), 144.

⁹² Stafford, "Problem of the Assyrians," 165-166.

have to relinquish his hold over the community's temporal affairs. The patriarch refused. He was promptly detained.⁹³

At a meeting in Mosul that July British and Iraqi officials publically informed Assyrian leaders that the League of Nations rejected their request for local autonomy. They were also told that the patriarch would have to abstain from political dealings.⁹⁴ At the end of the meeting a violent confrontation nearly broke out between the patriarch's supporters and his opponents.⁹⁵ A segment of the pro-patriarch faction then decided to seek protection in French-controlled Syria. Upon receiving no significant assistance they attempted to return to Iraq. A brief but intense conflict with government troops broke out, the instigators of which remain unknown.⁹⁶

Tensions between the Assyrians and the Iraqi government increased. From August 7-11, near the northern town of Simele, General Bakr Sidqi, acting with the support of the national police, Kurdish irregulars, and Arab tribesmen, massacred hundreds of Assyrians and ransacked dozens of villages.⁹⁷

Comments historian Kanan Makiya on the events at Simele: "The historical importance of what happened in Iraq that summer lies not in the events themselves but in how they were interpreted by the population."⁹⁸ The crushing of the Assyrian revolt—

⁹³ Sykes, "History of the Assyrians," 265.

⁹⁴ Joseph, *Modern Assyrians*, 194-195.

⁹⁵ R.S. Stafford, "The Assyrians in the Mosul Vilayet," *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 21, no. 2 (1934): 241.

⁹⁶ Stafford, "Mosul Vilayet," 241-244.

⁹⁷ For various, often conflicting accounts of the massacres see John Joseph, "The Assyrian Affair: A Historical Perspective," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 6, no. 1 (January 1975): 115-117; Khaldun S. Husri, "The Assyrian Affair of 1933, I," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 5, no. 2 (April 1974): 161-176; Khaldun S. Husri, "The Assyrian Affair of 1933, II," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 5, no. 3 (June 1974): 344-360; Malek, *British Betrayal of the Assyrians*; Mar Eshai Shimun, *The Assyrian Tragedy* (published privately, 1988); Paul Shimon, *The Assyrian Tragedy* (Annemass: Granchamp, 1934); R.S. Stafford, "The Assyrians in the Mosul Vilayet."

⁹⁸ Kanan Makiya, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq*, updated paperback edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 168.

though anything but a revolt—is often called the birth of Iraqi nationalism.⁹⁹ In Mosul, the returning troops were given “an enthusiastic welcome... Triumphal arches were erected, decorated with watermelons shaped as (presumably Assyrian) skulls into which daggers were thrust and with red streamers suspended, intended, it is assumed, to represent blood.”¹⁰⁰

During the British mandate the Iraqi army’s fighting capacity lagged behind British air and ground forces and the Assyrian Levies. After Simele the army emerged as an institution capable of maintaining law and order independently and, by extension, a symbol of the country’s independence.¹⁰¹ Those Iraqis that turned out to greet the returning troops were “celebrating one modern institution, the army, and one way of dealing with problems, force, over all others, and calling that choice ‘national,’ as opposed to, for example, ‘problems of minorities.’”¹⁰² Hanna Batatu makes the following observation on these political developments and what the Iraqi army’s ascendancy meant for the new state:

The ease and grim rapidity with which Bakr Sidiqi’s soldiers and airplanes suppressed the tribal outbreaks of 1935 and 1936 presaged the end of the sheikh’s era. Prior to this, Iraq’s history was to a large extent the history of its sheikhs and their tribes. Its problems, its convulsions, its politics were essentially tribal... After the thirties, the towns came conclusively into their own. The history of Iraq became henceforth largely the history of Baghdad, and its arresting feature the transient but recurring sovereignty of the masses of the capital city.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ See Russel Hopkins, “The Simele Massacre as a Cause of Iraqi Nationalism: How an Assyrian Genocide created Iraqi Martial Nationalism,” (Master’s thesis, University of Akron, 2016).

¹⁰⁰ Paul Knabenshue, U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, cable to Secretary of State, August 30, 1933, quoted in Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History*, 122.

¹⁰¹ Ahram, *Proxy Warriors*, 65.

¹⁰² Makiya, *Republic of Fear*, 171-172.

¹⁰³ Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and Revolutionary Movements of Iraq: A Study of Iraq’s Old Landed and Commercial Classes and of its Communists, Ba’athists and Free Officers*, revised edition (London: Saqi Books, 2004), 118-119.

Simele had the opposite effect on the Assyrians. It broke their spirits.¹⁰⁴ The patriarch was forced into exile. The Assyrian nationalist project failed to take root within the country's other Syriac Christian communities to the same extent it did the Nestorians.¹⁰⁵ Iraq's other Christian communities would basically continue as confined millets. The Christian clergy's primary concerns remained less about political advancement and more about navigating safely between Islam, authoritarianism, Arabs, and Kurds.¹⁰⁶ This often meant disassociating from the Assyrians who, going forward were seen as threats to the Iraqi state's cohesion:

Unlike the Assyrian leadership in Iraq, the Arabic-speaking Jacobite, Syrian Catholic, and Chaldean leaders proclaimed their unity and loyalty with the Iraqi government, emphasizing that they claimed no temporal power for themselves. When the provisional constitution of Iraq provided for the representation of non-Muslim minorities in the Chamber of Deputies, the 'Syro-Chaldean' hierarchy opposed it, maintaining that they sought no special 'rights.' They preferred to place trust in the good will of their Muslim compatriots... One of their newspapers warned 'not to forget the fate of the Armenians and Assyrians, who put their trust in the Christian powers of Europe and were practically exterminated in consequence.'¹⁰⁷

The failure of the Assyrian nationalist project is perhaps best exemplified by the political appellation problem described in Chapter 1. Additional evidence is found in the changing ethnic affiliations of the Syrian Orthodox Church and the Chaldean Catholic Church. Post-Simele, some officials in the Syrian Orthodox Church began promoting an

¹⁰⁴ Hourani, *Arab World*, 102.

¹⁰⁵ See Aryo Makko, "The Assyrian 'Concept of Unity' After Seyfo," in *The Assyrian Genocide: Cultural and Political Legacies*, ed. Hannibal Travis (London: Routledge, 2018), Chapter 9.

¹⁰⁶ See F. Kristian Girling, "The Chaldean Catholic Church: A Study in Modern History, Ecclesiology and Church-State Relations (2003-2014)" (PhD diss., University of London-Heythrop College, 2015); Anthony O'Mahony, "The Chaldean Catholic Church: The Politics of Church-State Relations in Modern Iraq," *Heythrop Journal* 45, no. 4 (October 2004): 235-250.

¹⁰⁷ John Joseph, *Muslim-Christian Relations and Inter-Christian Rivalries in the Middle East: The Case of the Jacobites in an age of Transition* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1983), 115.

Aramean heritage.¹⁰⁸ Leaders of the Chaldean Catholic Church have alternated between stressing either an ethnic Assyrian heritage or a Chaldean/neo-Babylonian one.¹⁰⁹

The Assyrians and the Christian Second-order Minority in Independent Iraq

Exile, Assimilation, and Opposition

After the Simele massacre the League of Nations set out to permanently resettle those Assyrians who wished to leave Iraq. Initial efforts focused on Europe, South America, and Australia. All failed. Officials then turned their attention to French-controlled Syria.¹¹⁰ Of the two plans proposed, the only one that yielded tangible results centered on the Khabur River Valley in the Jezirah region.¹¹¹

French and Iraqi officials both endorsed the Khabur project. Villages were built. Thousands were transferred.¹¹² It was during this period that Jezirah's Kurds and Christians, like the Druze and Alawites in other parts of the country as well as many other Middle Eastern communities being forcibly integrated into new states, exhibited separatist tendencies.¹¹³ Many Assyrians retained their own political ambitions and resented their transfer from Iraq. It should not be surprising then that the Arab nationalists in Damascus disapproved of the presence of an additional several thousand non-Arab Christians.

¹⁰⁸ See Sargon Donabed and Shamiran Mako, "Ethno-Cultural and Religious Identity of Syrian Orthodox Christians," *Chronos* 19 (2009): 69-111.

¹⁰⁹ See Statement of the Synod of Bishops of the Chaldean Catholic Church Bishops, Rome, October 4-8, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://saint-adday.com/?p=19632>.

¹¹⁰ See Robson, *States of Separation*, 91-96.

¹¹¹ The first attempt focused on settling the Assyrians in al-Gab in northwest Syria. Financing concerns and vocal opposition from Syrian nationalists meant this plan never materialized. See Bayard Dodge, "The Settlement of the Assyrians on the Khabbur," *Journal of Royal Central Asian Society* 27, no. 3 (1940), 307-308.

¹¹² Stephen Hemsley Longrigg, *Syria and Lebanon under French Mandate* (New York: Octagon Books, 1972), 213; 250; Robson, *States of Separation*, 98.

¹¹³ On the Kurdish-Christian autonomy movement see Jordi Tejel, *Syria's Kurds: History, Politics, and Society* (London: Routledge, 2009), 29-37.

Baghdad, still struggling for national unity, also grew concerned. Officials did not wish to keep contributing funds to the settlement project unless all Assyrians were transferred.¹¹⁴

The Khabur project ground to a halt. So too did the League's efforts on behalf of the Assyrians. Historian John Joseph cites a 1938 Iraqi government report indicating that thousands of Assyrians were settled in Amadiya, Sheikhan, Dohuk, and Zibar districts of Mosul province as well as the Rawanduz district in Erbil. Baghdad promised to uphold their rights as a minority but demanded their loyalty.¹¹⁵ The central government also refused to readmit those who were transferred to Syria.¹¹⁶

After the failed 1941 Rashid Ali al-Gaylani coup, the Sunni ruling class in Baghdad doubled down on its commitment to Iraq's Arab identity.¹¹⁷ New attempts, often inconsistent and not well received, were made to incorporate Shia Muslims. The Kurdish-dominated north, however, remained isolated. Baghdad saw the Kurds as a threat to Arab unity. The Kurds preferred independence to assimilation.¹¹⁸ Another round of Barzani-led uprisings broke out in the mid-1940s.¹¹⁹ The socio-political position of the Assyrians and many other Christians was mapped onto the cultural and political divide between the country's Arab and Kurdish regions. For those in southern and central Iraq, integration was the primary aim. This typically meant Arabization and urbanization. The monarchy's lack of influence in the north enabled the Assyrians there to retain a measure of their traditional autonomist/tribal lifestyle.¹²⁰

¹¹⁴ Robson, *States of Separation*, 99.

¹¹⁵ Joseph, *Modern Assyrians*, 200.

¹¹⁶ Dodge, "The Settlement of the Assyrians on the Khabur," 310.

¹¹⁷ Dawisha, *Iraq*, 139.

¹¹⁸ Dawisha, *Iraq*, 143.

¹¹⁹ David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds*, revised edition (London: I.B. Tauris, 1997), 290-293.

¹²⁰ Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History*, 125-126.

The Assyrians and the Christian Second-order Minority Reaches for Power

By themselves, the Assyrians and the rest of the Christian second-order minority in northern Iraq did not constitute a threat to the Iraqi state. The Assyrians were small in number, without a foreign protector, and devoid of any large independent political representation.¹²¹ This does not mean that the Christian second-order minority did not play an important role in Iraqi politics. The group's political significance lay in associating with opposition movements, specifically the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP).¹²²

Like many minorities, Assyrians and other Christians found the Iraqi Communist Party appealing due to its secular underpinnings and commitment to remedying socioeconomic and ethno-sectarian injustices.¹²³ It is difficult to assess how many Assyrians and other Christians joined the ICP. What can be stated confidently is the important role they played in the party's history and leadership structure. One of ICP's founders, Yusuf Salman Yusuf, was an Assyrian.¹²⁴ "The Panther," as Yusuf Salman was commonly known, is credited with transforming a fractured and rivalry-plagued party into a coherent organization with a diverse ethno-sectarian membership.¹²⁵ Hanna Batatu reports that between 1941-1948 Christians made up 22.7 percent of the ICP's leadership. But between 1949-1955, when the central government's repressive tactics drove the ICP into the north and Kurds briefly took over its leadership before the party began to Arabize,

¹²¹ Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History*, 126-127.

¹²² Alda Benjamen, "Assyrians in Iraq's Nineveh Plains: Grass-Root Organizations and Inter-Communal Conflict," *TAARII Newsletter* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 13.

¹²³ Alda Benjamen, "Assyrians and the Iraqi Communist Party," in *Minorities and the Modern Arab World: New Perspectives*, ed. Laura Robson (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2016), 106-107.

¹²⁴ Robert Brenton Betts, *Christians in the Arab East*, revised edition (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1978), 184.

¹²⁵ Batatu, *Social Classes*, 485. See the entirety of Chapter 18 for more information on Salman's tenure.

the percentage of Christians in the leadership structure dropped to 3.1.¹²⁶ This would not be the last time the Kurds were able to subsume the Assyrians and other elements of the Christian second-order minority into their own political platform.

Though KDP leader Mustafa Barzani was allegedly of “Nestorian stock,”¹²⁷ it should be quite clear that Assyrians and many other Christians did not position themselves within the Kurdish ethno-nationalist ideology. What led many to sympathize if not outright support the Kurds after decades of intergroup animosity was 1) a common desire for autonomy and 2) a common enemy in the Arab nationalists in Baghdad. This is not to say most or all Assyrians and other Christians in northern Iraq found common cause with the Kurds. Most were Iraqi patriots.¹²⁸ Vahram Petrosian estimates that the Assyrians constituted fifteen percent of Kurdish military forces.¹²⁹ For those that were holding out for autonomy it is not unreasonable to conclude that they felt the best way to secure such a goal was by aiding the Kurdish first-order minority.¹³⁰ For example, at one point Chaldean Bishop Paul Bedari, a Barzani ally and member of the Supreme Command Council of the Kurdish Revolution, tried and failed to convince Mulla Mustafa to agree to an autonomous Assyro-Christian district.¹³¹

After Abd al Karim Qasim came to power in the 1958 Republican Revolution the ICP and KDP were both permitted to operate freely.¹³² The Qasim regime’s concessions

¹²⁶ Batatu, *Social Classes*, 699-701.

¹²⁷ Betts, *Arab East*, 186.

¹²⁸ Betts, *Arab East*, 187.

¹²⁹ Petrosian, “Assyrians in Iraq,” 122.

¹³⁰ Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History*, 146.

¹³¹ Betts, *Arab East*, 186-187.

¹³² For the 1958 revolution see Robert A. Fernea and Wm. Roger Louis, eds., *The Iraqi Revolution of 1958: The Old Social Classes Revisited* (London: I.B. Tauris and Co., 1991). For Iraq under Qasim see Uriel Dann, *Iraq under Qasim: A Political History, 1958-1963* (London: Praeger, 1969).

towards Kurds¹³³ and other non-Arab minorities proved hollow: “The Republican revolution...abolished the parliament in favor of rule by a succession of military and revolutionary councils with no provision for confessional representation.”¹³⁴ Tension between the Kurds and the Qasim regime increased. In 1961 the Kurds revolted.¹³⁵

Northern Iraq’s Assyrians and other Christians found themselves between a rock and a hard place. Many may have preferred neutrality. But second-order minorities are seldom able to sustain neutrality when separatist conflicts break out. Thousands of Assyrians and other Christians relocated to urban centers, their lands often taken over by pro-government Kurds. Reasons for taking up arms against the central government include personal conviction, political ideology/grievances that overlapped with those expressed by the Kurds or were formed exclusive of them, fear of land expropriation by the central government or pro-government Kurds, or the fight-or-flight choice that the KDP leadership presented to them.¹³⁶

In 1968 the Arab Socialist Ba’th Party seized power.¹³⁷ Military operations to suppress Baghdad’s main rivals in the ICP and KDP went hand-in-hand with

identity manipulation social engineering. This essentially meant attempts by the Ba’th Party, its northern branches, and its security forces to exploit ethnic and sectarian cleavages in order to incite other minority communities not only against

¹³³ For Qasim and the Kurds see Avshalom H. Rubin, “Abd al-Karim Qasim and the Kurds of Iraq: Centralization, Resistance, and Revolt, 1958-1963,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 43, no. 3 (May 2007): 363-382.

¹³⁴ Betts, *Arab East*, 183.

¹³⁵ See Edgar O’Ballance, *The Kurdish Revolt, 1961–1970* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973).

¹³⁶ Information here is largely summarized from Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History*, 142-151. The author discusses the complex dynamic Assyrians and other Christians encountered during the 1960s Kurdish uprisings and how it is difficult to assess if Assyrians and other Christians fought for themselves or with the Kurds. He also covers how pro-government Kurds resettled villages vacated by Assyrians and other Christians.

¹³⁷ On the Ba’th and the Saddam Hussein regime see Amatzia Baram, *Culture, History, and Ideology in the Formation of Ba’thist Iraq, 1968-89* (London: Macmillan, 1991); Ofra Bengio, *Saddam’s Word: Political Discourse in Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Aaron Faust, *The Ba’thification of Iraq: Saddam Hussein’s Totalitarianism* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015); Makiya, *Republic of Fear*; Joseph Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein’s Ba’th Party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Kurdish nationalists, whose leadership was predominantly of Sunni background, but also against each other.¹³⁸

In March 1970 the central government and the Barzani-led KDP signed a peace agreement. The March Manifesto recognized Iraq as a bi-national state (Arab/Kurd). It also set March 1974 as a deadline for negotiating Kurdish autonomy. The Ba'th was not committed to honoring the March Manifesto. The conflict with the Kurds was at a stalemate. A peace agreement allowed the regime to regroup and adjust its strategy.¹³⁹

Indeed, the Ba'th attempted to turn the Assyrian component of the Christian second-order minority against the Kurdish first-order minority. For example, at two different points in the early 1970s Iraqi officials invited the exiled Nestorian Patriarch¹⁴⁰ and an exiled officer from the Assyrian Levies¹⁴¹ to return for negotiations. The central government apparently offered to help the Assyrians form a militia to attack the Kurds. Both leaders rejected the offer.¹⁴²

Perhaps the most important concession made towards Assyrians and other Christians designed to undermine their role in the Kurdish-armed struggle was Decree 251. Issued on April 16, 1972, Decree 251 granted "Syriac-speaking nationals" the following rights:

- a) The Syriac language shall be the teaching language in all primary schools whose majority of pupils are from speakers in such language, and teaching of Arabic language shall be compulsory in such schools
- b) The Syriac language shall be taught in intermediate and secondary schools whose majority of pupils are from speakers in such language, and Arabic language shall be the teaching language in such schools

¹³⁸ Yaniv Voller, "Identity and the Ba'th Regime's Campaign against Kurdish Rebels in Northern Iraq," *Middle East Journal* 71, no. 3 (Summer 2017): 384.

¹³⁹ Voller, "Identity and the Ba'th," 390.

¹⁴⁰ The patriarch's visit occurred in 1970.

¹⁴¹ Malik Yaku's visit occurred in 1973.

¹⁴² Petrosian, "Assyrians in Iraq," 122-123.

- c) The Syriac language shall be taught in the College of Arts at the University of Baghdad as one of the old languages
- d) Special programs in the Syriac language shall be set up at the Broadcasting Service of the Republic of Iraq and at Kirkuk and Nineveh TV stations
- e) To issue a Syriac-language monthly magazine by the Ministry of Information.
- f) To establish a society for Syriac-speaking writers, and ensure their representation in literary and cultural societies and the country
- g) To help Syriac-speaking writers and translators morally and materially by printing and publishing their cultural and literary works
- h) To enable Syriac-speaking nationals to open cultural and artistic clubs¹⁴³

In the early 1970s the Ba’th regime was attempting to forge national unity through an ancient Mesopotamian identity to which all groups could presumably identify.¹⁴⁴ The use of “Syriac-speaking nationals” functioned to isolate Assyrians and Christians from the Kurdish elements of the opposition. If the Ba’th had used “Assyrian” in some form it would have potentially undercut those efforts by recognizing the group as a distinct nation in Iraq. This, in turn, would have further fomented internal dissent by legitimizing the Assyrians’ ethno-territorial identity claims.

The Assyrian component of the Christian second-order minority attempted to capitalize on the gains made by the Kurds and the Ba’th’s outreach efforts. In 1973 the Assyrian Committee, composed of Syriac Christians of all denominations in Iraq, submitted a petition to the Iraqi government that presented arguments for an autonomous zone. Little is known about the exact make-up of the Assyrian Committee.¹⁴⁵ The same can be said, at least in regards to this author’s research, of the proposed location for the autonomous zone. In any event, the central government apparently never responded to the petition. One observer

¹⁴³ Iraq Ministry of Information, “Granting the Cultural Rights to the Turkman and Syriac-speaking Nationals,” Information Series 58 (Baghdad: al-Hurriya, 1974), 11-12 cited in Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History*, 188.

¹⁴⁴ See Baram, *Culture and Ideology in the Formation of Ba’thist Iraq*.

¹⁴⁵ Petrosian, “Assyrians in Iraq,” 134.

believed this was due to the Assyrians' unwillingness to support the regime against the Kurds.¹⁴⁶

In 1973 the Ba'th managed to bring the Iraqi Communist Party into the National Progressive Front.¹⁴⁷ Relations between ICP and the KDP had always been tenuous, the former seeking change in Iraq while the latter demanded separation, de facto or de jure, from it.¹⁴⁸ Yet the ICP's decision to align with the regime was still a significant blow to the opposition. The KDP was still attempting to negotiate for autonomy pursuant to the March Manifesto. The Communists' defection weakened Barzani's bargaining position.

In 1974 Kurdish autonomy negotiations collapsed. With hostilities in the north renewed, Christians finally realized the Ba'th's generosity was an illusion. Many cultural organizations that sprang up in the wake of decree 251 were co-opted into pro-regime propaganda outlets. The regime nationalized all schools. When parochial schools opened to the public ethno-sectarian diversity increased. This threatened to negate sections (a) and (b) of decree 251.¹⁴⁹

In 1975 Iran and Iraq concluded the Algiers Agreement. Iran cut funding to the Kurds, which reduced their capacity to wage war in northern Iraq.¹⁵⁰ The Ba'th used "border clearings" as a pretext to Arabize the region, including "contested" areas like Kirkuk, Nineveh, and Diyala. Farms and property owned by non-Arabs was nationalized. Identities were "corrected" by force or through inducements. For example, the 1977 Iraqi census forced Assyrians and other ethno-sectarian minorities to register as Arabs or Kurds.

¹⁴⁶ Petrosian, "Assyrians in Iraq," 134.

¹⁴⁷ Dawisha, *Iraq*, 228.

¹⁴⁸ See McDowall, *Kurds*, 294. McDowall talks about tensions between the ICP and Kurdish nationalists; See also Yohan Franzén, "From Ally to Foe: The Iraqi Communist Party and the Kurdish Question, 1958-1975," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 38, no. 2 (2011): 169-185.

¹⁴⁹ Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History*, 170-172.

¹⁵⁰ "Treaty Concerning the State Frontier and Neighborly Relations," Iran-Iraq, June 13-December 26 1975, U.N.T.S. Vol. 1017, no. 14903-14907.

Minorities were forcibly relocated into collective towns. When Arab tribesmen were imported into vacated areas it completed the Arabization process. Human Rights Watch estimates that by the end of the decade the Iraqi government had displaced at least 250,000 Kurds and other non-Arabs.¹⁵¹

In the face of this existential threat, Assyrians and other Christians in northern Iraq began negotiating a framework for national unity. April 1979 leaders from an underground organization known as Assyrian Brotherhood¹⁵² succeeded in uniting several small religious, political, and student organizations into the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM).¹⁵³ The ADM established itself as an independent, secular, and democratic organization seeking political and cultural rights through government recognition of the group's distinct non-Arab ethnic identity.¹⁵⁴ The ADM did not call for an Assyrian state.¹⁵⁵

It is important to note that there was not a direct line connecting the Assyrian refugees from the Hakkari and their descendants to the ADM. Nor should the ADM be seen as being made up of purely Nestorian Christians. The ADM counted Syriac Christians of all denominations as members. Assyrian nationalism was still far from being a pan-Syriac mass movement. Denominational affiliations or "Iraqi Christian" remained the primary means of self-identification. Many Christians within the ADM were

¹⁵¹ Much of the information in this section is summarized from several reports. See Human Rights Watch, "Claims in Conflict: Reversing Ethnic Cleansing in Northern Iraq," Volume 15, no. 4(E), August 2004; Human Rights Watch, "Iraq: The Forcible Expulsion of Ethnic Minorities," Volume 15, no. 3(E), March 2003; International Federation for Human Rights/Alliance for International Justice, "Iraq: Continuous and Silent Ethnic Cleansing: Displaced Persons in Iraqi Kurdistan and Iraqi Refugees in Iran," January 2003.

¹⁵² The four main leaders with Assyrian Brotherhood were Yousif Toma Zibari, Youbert Benyamen, Ninos Betyo, and Yonadam Kanna, the current Secretary General of the ADM.

¹⁵³ ADM official Susan Patto, email exchange with author, August-September 2018.

¹⁵⁴ ADM official Susan Patto, email exchange with author, August-September 2018.

¹⁵⁵ ADM official Susan Patto, email exchange with author, August-September 2018; Petrosian, "Assyrians in Iraq," 136.

themselves indigenous to northern Iraq. With the ruins of Nineveh near Mosul and the entirety of the Nineveh Plain making up the very heartland of the Assyrian ethno-nationalist territorial claim, indigenous status—Assyrians as “the first Iraqis”—thus became the vehicle for rights, recognition, and equality in the Iraqi state.

In fall 1980 Iraq invaded Iran. Seeking to undercut the alliance between Iran and the Kurdish-led opposition, the Ba’th stepped up its efforts to subdue northern Iraq. It was during this period that several of the ADM’s founding members began consultations with fellow opposition figures. In April 1982 the ADM joined with the KDP, the Iraqi Communist Party, the Kurdish Socialist Party, and other small groups in the National Democratic Front.¹⁵⁶ ADM fighters then began setting up bases throughout Dohuk province to protect ethnic kin.¹⁵⁷

Not all Christians within the opposition were ADM members. There were other, yet smaller, Assyrian groups dedicated to overthrowing the Saddam Hussein regime. Two prominent examples include the Bet-Nahrain Democratic Party (BNDP)¹⁵⁸ and the Assyrian Patriotic Party (APP).¹⁵⁹

Political-territorial goals differed. For example, the Bet-Nahrain Democratic Party desired an Assyrian state.¹⁶⁰ In 1983 the BNPD issued the Assyrian National Manifesto. The document stated that the Assyrian homeland was either the province of Dohuk or the province of Mosul.¹⁶¹ The Assyrian homeland was indeed fungible. The Assyrian Patriotic

¹⁵⁶ ADM official Susan Patto, email exchange with author, August-September 2018; Kamran Karadaghi, “The Two Gulf Wars: The Kurds on the World Stage, 1979-1992,” in *A People Without a Country: The Kurds and Kurdistan*, ed. Gerard Chaliand, trans. Michael Pallis (London: Zed Books, 1993), 221.

¹⁵⁷ ADM official Susan Patto, email exchange with author, August-September 2018.

¹⁵⁸ See Bet-Nahrain Democratic Party, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.bet-nahrain.org/>.

¹⁵⁹ See Assyrian Patriotic Party, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.atranaya.net/>.

¹⁶⁰ Petrosian, “Assyrians in Iraq,” 136; Bet-Nahrain Democratic Party website.

¹⁶¹ Fred Aprim, “The Assyrian Statehood: Yesterday’s Denial and Today’s Moral Obligation,” Nineveh.com, November 12, 2002, accessed December 10, 2018,

Party and ADM originally cooperated with one another. Friction over the ADM's ties to the Kurds eventually drove the two apart.¹⁶² Some Christians remained aligned with leftist organizations or Kurdish parties of various ideological currents. The lack of intra-group cohesion and second-order minority status stymied Christians' political potential within northern Iraq and the struggle for political rights therein:

The Assyrians made inroads with other opposition groups, but even there they remained relegated to the margins. In the case of attempts by Assyrian political parties to work towards a united front alongside the Kurds in the 1980s, the failure of Assyrian nationalism in Iraq to minimize or amalgamate tribal and religious components allowed the Kurds to dismiss their former allies or, from the perspective of Kurdish leader Idris Barzani concerning Assyrian-Kurdish collaboration, to effectively subsume them as part of Kurdish forces in 1984.¹⁶³

By 1984 Iraq's war with Iran was at a virtual stalemate but far from over. The regime's fear of a united opposition aligned with Tehran remained high. Attacks against the Kurds and their opposition allies continued. In July, central government forces attacked ADM locations in Baghdad. Some 150 members were taken into custody. Plans were also set into motion to infiltrate the ADM and help sow discord among it, other Christians, and with Kurds.¹⁶⁴ On February 3, 1985 three ADM members were executed.¹⁶⁵ Today, the ADM and Assyrian nationalist worldwide remember Yousip Toma Hurmiz, Youbert Benyamin Shlemon, and Youkhanna Esho Jajjo as martyrs. The anniversary of their execution is often treated as a day of collective mourning.

Between July 1987 and May 1988 the main Kurdish opposition parties formed a military and political alliance called the Iraqi Kurdistan Front (IKF). The IKF consisted of

<http://www.nineveh.com/Education/The%20Assyrian%20Statehood.htm>; Sargon Dadesho, *The Assyrian National Question* (Modesto: Bet-Nahrain, 1987), 275.

¹⁶² Joseph, *Modern Assyrians*, 220-221.

¹⁶³ Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History*, 195-196.

¹⁶⁴ Donabed, *Reforging a Forgotten History*, 194-195.

¹⁶⁵ David A. Korn (Human Rights Watch), *Human Rights in Iraq* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 76.

the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) the KDP, the Kurdistan Popular Democratic Party (KDPDP), the Socialist Party of Kurdistan in Iraq (SPKI), the Kurdish Socialist Party (PASOK), the Kurdish branch of the Iraqi Communist Party, and the Kurdistan Toilers' Party. Its main goals were 1) deposing the Saddam Hussein regime; 2) the establishment of a democratic Iraq; and 3) Kurdish autonomy.¹⁶⁶ As David McDowall notes, "If such developments were a measure of Iran's growing need for help from Iraq's dissidents, they were also a measure of the growing menace for Baghdad."¹⁶⁷

The Ba'th quickly moved to crush the IKF and subdue the Kurds once and for all. From February-September 1988 the central government launched a series of genocides known as the Anfal campaign. The culmination of Arabization, it is estimated that somewhere near 100,000 individuals, many of whom were women and children, were massacred. Christians and other second-order minorities were not immune from attacks. Dozens of villages were destroyed. Abductions were common. Thousands fled to neighboring countries. The whereabouts of some that returned remains unknown.¹⁶⁸

Though severely crippled, the Anfal did not succeed in crushing the IKF and other opposition elements. In fact, in 1989 the ADM joined the Iraqi Kurdistan Front.¹⁶⁹ Immediately following the Gulf War in March 1991, Syria, Iran, and Saudi Arabia brought together Iraq's various anti-Saddam groups at the Iraqi Opposition Conference in Beirut. The move failed to unite all opposition elements in a united front.¹⁷⁰ However, the

¹⁶⁶ Michael Gunter, *Historical Dictionary of the Kurds*, third edition. (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 2018), 158-159.

¹⁶⁷ McDowall, *Kurds*, 352.

¹⁶⁸ On the Anfal see Human Rights Watch, *Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1993).

¹⁶⁹ ADM official Susan Patto, email exchange with author, August-September 2018.

¹⁷⁰ Robert G. Rabil, "The Iraqi Opposition's Evolution: From Conflict to Unity?" *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 6, no. 4 (December 2002), 9, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.mafhoum.com/press4/ira114.htm>

final declaration is notable because it officially recognized the Assyrians as a distinct ethnic group.¹⁷¹

Concurrent to these events, the IKF launched a massive uprising against the Ba'ath. The ADM's several thousand-man militia fought alongside their IKF allies. The establishment of the Western-backed no-fly zone in northern Iraq paved the way for de-facto Kurdish autonomy. The IKF pushed for elections. In 1992 the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) formed in the provinces of Erbil, Sulaymaniya, and Dohuk, and small portions of Kirkuk, Diyala, and Nineveh.¹⁷²

Second-order minority status and the lack of an external patron to extent that the Kurds relied on the U.S. precluded the ADM from pursuing its own autonomous zone. Nevertheless, the ADM and other second-order minorities derived a measure of political benefits from their role in the armed struggle and the founding of the KRG. The Kurdish parliament contained reserved seats for Turkmen and Christians. Of the five seats reserved for Christians in the first election, the Assyrian Democratic Movement won four.¹⁷³ Yonadam Kanna, one of the ADM's founding members, was invited into the first KRG cabinet as Minister of Public Works, Housing, and Environment.¹⁷⁴ The ADM held its first Congress in September 1992.¹⁷⁵

Numerous Assyrian civic and cultural organizations formed within the KRG, such as the Assyrian Student and Youth Union, the Assyrian Cultural Center, the Assyrian Women's Union, and the Assyrian Aid Society. Several of these organizations, including

¹⁷¹ Aprim, *Assyrians*, 243.

¹⁷² For KRG formation see Voller, *The Kurdish Liberation Movement in Iraq: From Insurgency to Statehood* (New York: Routledge, 2014), Chapter 4.

¹⁷³ The remaining seat went to the Christian Union of Kurdistan.

¹⁷⁴ Herman G. B. Teule, "Christians in Iraq: An Analysis of Some Recent Political Developments," *Der Islam* 88, no. 1 (October 2012): 181-182.

¹⁷⁵ Aprim, *Assyrians*, 242.

the ADM, were instrumental in successfully lobbying the KRG to create the Directorate of Syriac Education in 1993.¹⁷⁶ In 1996 the events at Simele found public recognition when the Iraqi-Kurdistan Parliament declared August 7 a day of national remembrance.¹⁷⁷

These gains should not be overstated. Efforts to integrate second-order minorities into the KRG were more a tactical ploy than the product of genuine concern. Second-order minorities buttressed the KRG's image as secular, tolerant, diverse, and democratic—everything the Saddam Hussein regime was not.¹⁷⁸ Denise Natali notes that the reality of the situation was that the KRG was rife with tribal cleavages, devoid of international recognition, administratively separated from Baghdad, and dependent on external aid and an oil-smuggling economy.¹⁷⁹ When the Kurdish Civil War broke out, it was the ADM that acted as a peacekeeping force between the KDP and the PUK.¹⁸⁰

The relationship between the ADM and the Kurdish nationalists controlling the KRG remained fragile. ADM members accused the Kurds of harassment and political intimidation. The most notable of these instances occurred in 1993, when Francis Shabo, an ADM member of the Kurdish parliament, was assassinated outside his home in Dohuk.¹⁸¹ Prior to his assassination, Shabo had apparently assembled a list of villages taken over by Kurds.¹⁸² ADM officials presented this author with dozens of documented cases of land seizures in Dohuk province, including the districts of Amadiya, Zahko, Akre,

¹⁷⁶ Benjamen, "Assyrians in Iraq's Nineveh Plains," 14.

¹⁷⁷ Teule, "Christians in Iraq," 182.

¹⁷⁸ Aprim, *Assyrians*, 256.

¹⁷⁹ Denise Natali, "The Kurdish Quasi-State: Leveraging Political Limbo," *Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 146.

¹⁸⁰ ADM official Susan Patto, email exchange with author, August-September 2018; Petrosian, "Assyrians in Iraq," 124.

¹⁸¹ Ashur Shirsha, "Assyrian Leaders Have a History of Disappearing in Northern Iraq," Assyrian International News Agency, February 10, 2009, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.AssyrianInternationalNewsAgency.org/guesteds/20090210174658.htm>.

¹⁸² Aprim, *Assyrians*, 290. Aprim does not state who Shabo presented the list to. It is assumed the Kurdish parliament.

and Bardaresh.¹⁸³ In his book, *The Assyrians: From Bedr Khan to Saddam Hussein*, historian Fred Aprim cites a 1992 communiqué issued by Assyrian intellectuals that paints Kurdish land expropriation in a way that cannot help but stir up images of the Ba’th’s Arabization campaigns:

The Kurdish leadership, and in a well-planned program, had begun to settle Kurds and in large numbers around Assyrian regions like Sarsank, Barwari Bala and others. This Kurdish housing project was naturally to change the demographic, economic, and civic structure of the Christian regions in only a few short years: a process that forced the Christian to emigrate as the vacant homes were overtaken by the Kurds.¹⁸⁴

This was just the beginning of “Kurdification.” Tensions between the ADM and Kurdish nationalists, particularly the KDP, would boil over after Saddam Hussein was deposed by the United States in 2003.

Concluding Remarks

Assyrian nationalism developed within the context of how the Eastern Question played out between two declining empires. At the conclusion of WWI the primary goal of the Assyrian refugees in Iraq, particularly those from the Hakkari, was to return to their ancestral lands and live free from external influence yet under British protection. Integrating into the Iraqi state let alone living as a second-order minority surrounded by the autonomy-minded Kurds was intolerable. Tensions between Kurds and Assyrians were further complicated by Britain’s use of the Hakkari highlanders to police dissident Kurdish tribal/nationalist chiefs. That is, they used the Assyrian component of the Christian second-order minority to police the Kurdish first-order minority.

¹⁸³ See appendix II.

¹⁸⁴ “Assyrian Communiqué” quoted in Aprim, *Modern Assyrians*, 257. Aprim provides no further details in terms of the citation of this document.

By the time the British mandate was set to expire both Arabs and Kurds despised the Assyrians as colonial tools. With no hope for repatriation the Assyrians made a claim for a semi-autonomous homeland in northern Iraq. Homelands were fungible, a process that seemed to be driven more by external factors than domestic political competitions. The establishment of such a political entity was sought through Baghdad. This proved to be a strategic miscalculation. The Arab-dominated government was supposed to be the lesser of two evils. Yet in 1933 the Iraqi central government moved to exterminate the autonomy-minded Assyrians.

For a time the Assyrian nationalist movement in Iraq lay dormant. Many Assyrians and other Christians sought power through opposition movements like the Iraqi Communist Party and, for those that still retained dreams of territorial and political autonomy in northern Iraq, the Kurdistan Democratic Party. Assyrians and other Christians in northern Iraq thus reimagined the Kurdish first-order minority as potential allies in the struggle for group rights in northern Iraq. But increasing marginalization within the KDP-led opposition's ranks drove many to seek their own political representation. These efforts culminated in the formation of the Assyrian Democratic Movement in 1979.

The formation of the KRG provided the ADM, Assyrians, and Christians in general with a respite from oppressive Ba'th rule. Relations between the ADM and the Kurdish nationalists dominating the KRG were fluid. Standing in the way of the Kurdish ethno-nationalist project were the pro-Baghdad components of the Christian second-order minority. On the eve of the 2003 U.S. invasion the stage was set for the ADM to realign with Baghdad and push for a measure political and cultural autonomy in northern Iraq.

Chapter 3

2003-2014: The Assyrian Democratic Movement in the New Iraq

The Assyrian Democratic Movement emerged from the 2003 U.S. invasion as arguably Iraq's most powerful Christian political actor. The ADM felt self-determination in the Nineveh Plain would help distance it and the rest of the Christian second-order minority in northern Iraq from the KRG-Iraqi central government conflict. To help realize this goal the ADM turned to Baghdad, effectively balancing against its former Kurdish allies. A brief period of intra-Christian unity undergirded by a common desire for self-determination quickly broke down. Iraq devolved into two civil wars: one between Shiites and Sunnis, the other a new phase of Arab-Kurdish struggle for northern Iraq. As a second-order minority, the ADM and other Christians were forced to maneuver independently through two conflicts they did not set the tempo to yet were often the primary victims of.

This chapter provides additional evidence that homelands are ultimately fungible. What began as a desire to secure ancestral lands in the Hakkari and had evolved into a claim centered on Amadiya district in Dohuk province was now focused squarely on Nineveh Plain. This shift seems to be influenced primarily by the Nineveh Plain's status as the last administrative area in northern Iraq where Christians constituted an overwhelming majority. Over the course of several decades Amadiya and its environs, though still home to a large Christian population, had increasingly been "Kurdified."

Crucially, many Christians residing in the Nineveh Plain, including ADM supporters, were indigenous to the area. The ADM invoked Christian's indigenous status as a means to buttress the case for self-determination in Nineveh.

Other important factors that shaped the ADM's territorial claim included the (perceived) re-appearance of an external patron in the U.S. and a changing power balance vis-a-vis the state. These factors seem to have functioned to both embolden the ADM's belief it could achieve its ambitions and "harden" its territorial claim. The ADM played a valuable role in helping the U.S. and officials in Baghdad reconstitute the Iraqi state. It should not be surprising then that the ADM felt it was poised to secure self-determination and political rights comparable to the country's larger ethno-sectarian groups. The Iraqi Constitution recognized the KRG and established legal mechanisms for it to expand into the Nineveh Plain. Yet the ADM did not alter its territorial claims. The document also contained provisions for concentrated groups to secure self-determination. The same can be said in regards to the effects of Baghdad and the U.S.'s indifference to the plight of Nineveh's second-order minorities in their battle to resist Kurdification. Though the ADM was now part of the Iraqi state, it was not until January 2014 that the central government endorsed the creation of a Nineveh Plain province. Many observers questioned Baghdad's motive for doing so. The ADM, however, saw the move as a legitimization of its claim over the Nineveh Plain.

Particularly interesting is that the Chaldean Church's refusal to support a province as well as intra-Christian feuds over the proposed administrative unit's political position in relation to Baghdad or Erbil did not trigger reductions in territorial claims. If anything, these factors also seemed to have "hardened" the ADM's claim over the Nineveh Plain.

The Assyrian Democratic Movement’s Hope for the New Iraq

In December 2002 the Assyrian Democratic Movement was recognized by the Bush administration as part of Iraq’s legal democratic opposition.¹ During the U.S. invasion ADM fighters coordinated with the U.S. military to secure northern Nineveh province. An ADM official worked with U.S. General David Petraeus to establish Mosul’s first post-Ba’th city council.² ADM Secretary General Yonadam Kanna was the only Christian member of the Iraq Governing Council (IGC), the provisional government serving under the U.S.-led Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) from July 2003 until June 2004.³

ADM officials tried to build a bridge to the country’s other Christian political and religious leaders. In October 2003, a few months after the U.S. had toppled the Saddam Hussein regime, ADM leaders met in Baghdad with other Christian politicians, church leaders, civil society members, and academics for the Chaldean-Syriac-Assyrian General Conference. There, among other things, participants agreed to adopt “ChaldoAssyrian” as a national political appellation and committed to work for its enshrinement in the country’s new constitution. “Syriac” would henceforth denote the mother tongue.⁴ Iraq’s Christian leaders also agreed to set self-determination in the Nineveh Plain as the primary political goal.

¹ Presidential Determination 03-05, “Presidential Determination of Designations under the Iraqi Liberation Act of 1998,” *Federal Register* 67, no. 246 (December 23, 2002).

² William Warda, former ADM official, email exchange with author, December 10, 2016.

³ The council’s members consisted of 13 Shiites, 5 Kurds, 5 Sunnis, 1 Turkmen, and 1 Christian.

⁴ Closing Statement of Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Conference in Baghdad, October 24, 2003, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://bethnahrin.de/2003/10/24/closing-statement-of-the-chaldean-syriac-assyrian-conference-in-bagdad/>.

This represented a departure from Assyrians' claim for autonomy within Amadiya and its surrounding districts in Dohuk province. Dohuk was once considered to be *the* ADM's stronghold. It was where the ADM first deployed its Ba'th-era militia. But over the course of several decades the area had been gradually "Kurdified." Though a significant number of Assyrians and other Christians still called Dohuk province home, some of whom were indigenous to the area, the demographic dynamic therein now contained a more balanced mix of Muslims and Christians.

In claiming the Nineveh Plain the ADM and its Christian allies were not seeking a purely Christian administrative unit:

The Conference stressed the need to designate an administrative region for our people in the Nineveh plain with the participation of other ethnic and religious groups, where a special law will be established for self-administration and the assurance of administrative, political, cultural rights in towns and villages throughout Iraq where our people reside.⁵

Nevertheless, it was widely believed that Christians were the majority population in the Nineveh Plain. The ADM had emerged from the U.S. invasion as Iraq's strongest Christian political actor as well as northern Iraq's most powerful second-order minority. It was now part of the Iraqi state rather than estranged from it. It therefore made sense for group to pursue its political and territorial ambitions in the Nineveh Plain in conjunction with other Christian political actors rather than in competition against them. In principle, all desired the same goal. The ADM was so confident in its position and the prospects for a democratic Iraq it agreed to Washington's request to disband its several thousand member militia.⁶ But support for the ADM among Christians in Iraq was not ubiquitous.

⁵ Closing Statement of Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Conference in Baghdad.

⁶ William Warda, former ADM official, email exchange with author, December 10, 2016. See also The Voice of Free Assyrians, "ADM Alone in Disbanding 5000-Strong Assyrian Militia in 'The New Iraq,'" published online June 21, 2016, accessed December 10, 2018,

The new political appellation and a commitment among Christian leaders to seek self-determination in the Nineveh Plain did not heal existing intra-Christian cleavages. Nor did they prevent new ones from forming.

The ADM faced fierce competition for leadership of the Iraqi-Christian community. On one side were other secular political parties, such as Assyrian Patriotic Party (APP), the Bet-Nahrain Democratic Party (BNDP), and the Chaldean National Congress.⁷ On the other side were Iraq's churches, none larger and more powerful than the Chaldean Catholic Church.

Denominational affiliations still outweighed secular nationalist sentiments built around an Assyrian ethnicity that many Christians in Iraq continued to reject. Some ADM members distanced themselves from the new political appellation on the grounds that it equated denominational identities with ethnic ones.⁸ In his doctoral dissertation exploring the Chaldean Church's ecclesiastical and political history in Iraq between 2003-2014, F. Kristian Girling comments on the difficulties the ADM encountered building a support base outside the Kurdish region even after relocating its main office to Baghdad:

The ADM's lack of a support base to the same degree which the Chaldeans held from 1950-2003 in the city (Baghdad) inhibited their ability to extend their influence given the majority of their supporters were in northern Iraq. I suggest the patriarch's status as it had existed to 2003 carried with it some political influence and was broadly recognized across Iraqi society even if it was not widely understood as to his role and purpose. Inserting an ostensibly Christian party, which agitated for an autonomous region, which was perceived to represent explicitly Western values and an uncertain relationship with the KRG and ICG (Iraq central government) were not factors favoring its facilitating Christian

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2cQA1dgFlo>. This figure may be slightly exaggerated. The number was likely closer to 2,000-3,000.

⁷ See Assyrian Patriotic Party, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.atranaya.net/>; Chaldean National Congress, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.chaldeansonline.org/chaldean/>; Bet-Nahrain Democratic Party Declaration, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://assyriatimes.com/engine/modules/news/article.php?storyid=3236>; and Bet-Nahrain Democratic Party, accessed December 10, 2018, www.bet-nahrain.org.

⁸ Authors field work.

interests in the capital. Nor could it be said the ADM represented Christians in the same way as the patriarch given the normative focus of political parties is to gain political ends through political means representing only parts of the entire Christian community—the attempt to act as a universal influence in Iraqi society incomparable with that of the patriarch.⁹

In 2004-2005 American and Iraqi officials were negotiating the finer points of Iraqi federalism. The de-centralization of political power to provinces and regions that was to come meant new opportunities for groups to maximize local autonomy. Again, like many groups, leaders of the Christian second-order minority in northern Iraq saw their fate as tied up with the assertion of group or collective rights, here meaning self-determination. Yet second-order minority status meant there was little chance that such a goal could be secured without the patronage of either Arabs in Baghdad or the Kurdish first-order minority.

Christian leaders agreed on the location of the province for minorities: the Nineveh Plain. They were not united on whether it should be attached to Baghdad or the KRG. Complicating matters, both of Iraq's dueling centers of power had their sights set on the resource rich and strategically valuable Nineveh Plain. Pre-existing tensions with Kurds meant the ADM preferred Baghdad.¹⁰ In a departure from earlier ambitions, the Bet-Nahrain Democratic Party and the Assyrian Patriotic Party would both eventually conclude Kurdistan the better option.¹¹ The Kurdish-controlled north was more secular and secure after the U.S. invasion than central and southern Iraq. Favoring Erbil over Baghdad also led to financial support and inclusion in Kurdish electoral lists. The ADM's turn toward Baghdad did not provide a similar set of financial or political benefits. The

⁹ F. Kristian Girling, "The Chaldean Catholic Church: A Study in Modern History, Ecclesiology and Church-State relations (2003-2014)" (PhD diss., University of London-Heythrop College, 2015), 169.

¹⁰ This information comes from interactions with ADM leaders/members in Iraq.

¹¹ See U.S. Embassy Cable 07BAGHDAD978_a, Wikileaks, March 20, 2007, accessed December 10, 2018, https://www.wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/07BAGHDAD978_a.html.

party's financial independence was one of its main selling points to constituents. Officials argued that not taking external assistance helped the party's leadership retain a monopoly over policy decisions.¹² But this also exposed the ADM to marginalization by Iraq's larger political forces, who simply did not need the support of second-order minorities.

The ADM's position at the top of the Iraqi Christian political community was tenuous. The unity among Christian political actors the ADM helped forge in Baghdad soon frayed. Sectarian violence, pre-existing intra-group friction, and Kurdish territorial encroachments were all factors in this process. The cumulative effect being that the ADM's hopes for self-determination in the Nineveh Plain quickly began to crumble.

Sectarian Violence, the End of Christian Unity, and Creeping Kurdistan

The first issue confronting the ADM and Christians in general was the country's descent into sectarian chaos. Christians were targeted because of their faith, but also because the U.S. appeared to show them favor. Said one Syriac Catholic priest:

Most Iraqis consider Christians first and foremost as foreigners, that is, as Westerners, but also as collaborators who help U.S. forces in their efforts to colonize our country. In 2006, my church was partially destroyed by a grenade at a time when U.S. soldiers and officers were praying inside. Shortly prior to that, the imam of the adjacent al-Safar mosque incited against us, enjoining his followers not to purchase our goods, because, sooner or later, we would flee and leave our belongings behind. He considered it merely a matter of time before Muslims could seize our homes. The U.S. military did us no favors by showing partiality toward Christians in recruiting people to work on their bases or by using our Churches for religious services.¹³

¹² "Exclusive Zinda Interview with Ninos Bithyou," Zinda Magazine, Volume XII, no. 26, January 13, 2007, accessed December 10, 2018, http://www.zindamagazine.com/html/archives/2007/01_13.07/index_sat.php.

¹³ Father Najeeb Mikhael quoted in *International Crisis Group, Iraq's New Battlefield: The Struggle Over Ninewa* (Washington, D.C.: International Crisis Group, 2009), 25.

In March 2004 extremists shot and killed several small children in Baghdad.¹⁴ That August car bombs detonated near five churches in the capital city and Mosul. Eleven people died; dozens were wounded.¹⁵ Two more churches in Baghdad were attacked that November.¹⁶ Sectarian attacks like these, and many others, triggered a mass Christian migration from urban areas into the Kurdish region. Most Christians resettled in the Nineveh Plain, Dohuk, Sulaymaniya, or in Ankawa, the Christian suburb of Erbil. If U.S. forces were unable to protect Christians it was unlikely the ADM could. Compared to central and southern Iraq, the Kurdish region was seen as a safe-haven.

The second issue confronting the Assyrian Democratic Movement was maintaining Christian political unity. In March 2004 Iraq adopted its Transitional Administrative Law (TAL). The TAL came into effect in June. Article 53d preserved the cultural and political rights of *one* Christian community, defined as “ChaldoAssyrians.”¹⁷ The Chaldean Church soon withdrew support for the new political appellation.¹⁸ Officials feared it would be used by the ADM to push for an autonomous Christian area. The Chaldean Church favored intergroup coexistence and a common Iraqi citizenship.¹⁹ I suggest power concerns were another factor in the Chaldean hierarchy’s decision. Political unity with secular parties leading the way eroded the clergy’s power. The loss of

¹⁴ Annia Ciezadlo, “Iraq’s Christians Consider Fleeing as Attacks on them Rise,” *Christian Science Monitor*, July 13, 2004, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0713/p07s01-woiq.html>; Yochi J. Dreazien, “Iraq Sees Christian Exodus,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 27, 2004, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB109623707240128253>.

¹⁵ “Leaders Condemn Iraq Church Bombs,” *BBC*, August 2, 2004, accessed December 10, 2018, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3527032.stm.

¹⁶ “Fallujah Assault Underway; Baghdad Church Burning,” *USA Today*, November 7, 2004, accessed December 10, 2018, https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/world/iraq/2004-11-07-emergency-iraq_x.htm; Omar Sinan, “Bombings Rock Iraqi Capital; 6 People Die,” *Associated Press*, November 9, 2004, accessed December 10, 2018, http://legacy.sandiegouniontribune.com/uniontrib/20041109/news_1n9baghdad.html.

¹⁷ Law of Administration for the State of Iraq in the Transitional Period, article 53d.

¹⁸ Herman Teule, “Christianity in Iraq: The Development of Secular Christian Political Thinking,” *One in Christ* 45, no. 2 (2011): 315-316.

¹⁹ Girling, “Chaldean Catholic Church,” 148-149.

the support of Iraq's largest and most powerful church did not trigger a change in a claim over the Nineveh Plain. But it did make self-determination harder to realize.

The third issue confronting the ADM was the creeping Kurdish first-order minority. To help secure northern Iraq U.S. military commanders authorized the Kurdish Peshmerga to move south of the Green Line—the unofficial but very much real and enforceable border separating the KRG from central government controlled territory—into areas of Nineveh, Kirkuk, Salahadin, and Diyala.²⁰ In Nineveh, this included the districts of Sinjar, Hamdaniya, Telkaif, Makhmour, and Sheikhan.²¹ Hamdaniya, Telkaif, and southern Sheikhan constitute the very heart of the Nineveh Plain. So too does Sheikhan's northern half, which the KRG had controlled since 1991. The Kurds were more than happy to occupy territories Arabized by the Ba'th yet claimed as historically Kurdish. With oil-rich Kirkuk as the centerpiece, these areas are now called "Iraq's disputed territories." They are not, however, disputed to the area's minorities.

Kurdish leaders seized on Washington and Baghdad's focus on quelling sectarian violence in central and southern Iraq, extending administrative and security services to Arabs and second-order minority populations long neglected by the central government yet technically under its administrative authority. This included distributing generators, salary stipends, medical services, jobs, and schooling.²² The Kurds saw their actions as righting historical wrongs.²³ Many second-order minorities welcomed the Kurdish outreach; others saw it as a less subtle form of demographic makeover than the Ba'th had employed.

²⁰ Sean Kane, *Iraq's Disputed Territories* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2011), 9, footnote 11.

²¹ Kane, *Iraq's Disputed Territories*, 17, footnote 36.

²² Kane, *Iraq's Disputed Territories*, 9.

²³ International Crisis Group, *Iraq's New Battlefield*, 2.

The Kurdish security presence in Nineveh was renewed by the Iraqi central government in 2004 to help combat the country's growing insurgency.²⁴ This made pro-Baghdad Christians and other like-minded second-order minorities essentially powerless to resist Kurdish territorial encroachments. The full effect of this dynamic would only be felt after Iraq's first round of elections and its constitutional referendum in 2005.

A Second-Order Minority Reaches for Power: The ADM, Iraq's Christians, and the Nineveh Plain at the Ballot Box

On January 30, 2005 Iraq held elections for provincial councils and a 275 person temporary parliament called the Transitional National Assembly (TNA). The TNA's principal function was to form a government and write a permanent constitution the Iraqi population would then vote on. Candidates were elected through a closed²⁵ party-list proportional representation system. The minimum number of votes required to win a seat was based on dividing the total number of eligible voters in a jurisdiction (federal/provincial) with the number of seats being contested.²⁶

As second-order minorities, Christians had three strategies to secure electoral victories. First, they could run on their own electoral list and hope they met the vote threshold. This was a questionable decision, considering demographic realities/second-order minority status and intragroup cleavages. Second, they could align with other Christian parties. Demographics also made this a questionable endeavor. The third strategy seemed to present the Christian second-order minority with the best chance of

²⁴ Kane, *Iraq's Disputed Territories*, 9.

²⁵ It was feared that if candidates were identified they would be targeted for violence.

²⁶ This includes diaspora communities, which were of supreme importance to Christians and other minority candidates.

obtaining a seat at Iraq's political table and realizing political ambitions. They could forge an alliance with Arab or Kurdish parties that had a larger demographic base to pull from as well as money and name recognition.²⁷

Individual Christian candidates from the Assyrian Patriotic Party (APP), the Bet-Nahrain Democratic Party (BNDP), and the Chaldean Democratic Union (CDU) joined with the Democratic Patriotic Alliance of Kurdistan (Kurdistan List). One Christian candidate joined with acting Iraqi Prime Minister Ayad Allawi's secular Iraqi National List. Two exclusively Christian electoral alliances formed. The Assyrian National Assembly List brought together several smaller organizations such as the Assyrian National Congress and the Assyrian Bet-Nahrain Democratic Party. The Bet-Nahrain Democratic Coalition consisted of the Syriac Independent Gathering Coalition and the Patriotic Bet-Nahrain Party. The ADM essentially ran on its own electoral ticket: The Rafidain List (Mesopotamian List).²⁸

Results confirm the importance of Christians and second-order minorities in general making electoral alliances with one of Iraq's larger political forces. Four candidates under the Kurdish List and one from the Iraqi List won parliamentary seats while an APP candidate won a seat on Kirkuk's council.²⁹ No candidates from the combined Christian lists won seats in parliament or on provincial councils. The ADM

²⁷ Electoral strategies are largely summarized from Wilfred Bet-Alkhas, "Calculators Don't Lie," *Zinda Magazine*, Volume X, no. 58, January 18, 2005, accessed December 10, 2018, http://www.zindamagazine.com/html/archives/2005/1.18.05/index_tue.php.

²⁸ For descriptions of the coalitions, where much of the information here is summarized from, see Herman G.B. Teule, "Christians in Iraq: An Analysis of Some Recent Political Developments," *Der Islam* 88, no. 1 (October 2012): 183.

²⁹ A candidate from the APP won a seat on Kirkuk's provincial council under the Kurdistan List.

saw only one candidate win a seat in parliament while another secured a place on Nineveh's provincial council.³⁰

The ADM, unhappy with the weak performance of its candidates, protested the results to the Iraqi government.³¹ Officials issued a thinly veiled attack on the Kurds occupying the Nineveh Plain for allegedly prevented ballot boxes from reaching parts of Hamdaniya and Sheikhan districts,³² areas with significant or majority Christian populations:

The sides that are responsible for this act, who wanted to deprive our people of this national right, are seeking to forge the votes and to deny the national and ethnic rights of our people in this region, where these irresponsible groups have known in the past that they do not have any support in this region. We would like them to know that our people who have preserved their cultural and national identity and remained attached to its historical homeland for thousands of years will remain here forever.³³

Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) recognized security issues made voting difficult. But the Commission condemned "how some tried to give this

³⁰ All electoral results in this project are taken from Independent High Electoral Commission (Iraq) website, see IHEC, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.ihec.iq/en/>.

³¹ Protest letter available at Zinda Magazine, Volume XI, no. 3, February 2005, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://zindamagazine.com/>.

³² See "Kurds Prevent Assyrian Representation, Continue Divisive Formula in Iraq;" editorial, Assyrian International News Agency, March 28, 2005, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.Assyrian International News Agency.org/releases/20050328112133.htm>; Erwin Decker, "Assyrian Christians of Iraq Wanted to Vote but Were Not Allowed," Assyrian International News Agency, February 27, 2005, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.Assyrian International News Agency.org/news/20050227125922.htm>; "Were Assyrians, Turkmen, Yezidis Intentionally Locked Out of Iraq Election?" editorial, Assyrian International News Agency, February 10, 2005, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.Assyrian International News Agency.org/releases/20050210161241.htm>; "Assyrians Prevented by Kurds from Voting in North Iraq," editorial, Assyrian International News Agency, January 31, 2005, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.Assyrian International News Agency.org/releases/20050131003708.htm>.

³³ Statement by the Assyrian Democratic Movement Statement on Iraq's January elections, January 31, 2005, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.Assyrian International News Agency.org/news/20050201115432.htm>.

security-logistical problem political attributes unrelated to the factual situation.”³⁴ The election results were certified.

Being a second-order minority made it difficult enough to achieve political rights, including self-determination in the Nineveh Plain. Going forward it would be all but impossible. Allegations of Kurdish voter fraud aside, the Iraqi parliament contained no fewer than six Christian members working for three different coalitions. Each retained its own viewpoint on the relationship between the KRG and the central government as well as the position of Christians within that struggle and in Iraq.³⁵ A divided Christian political bloc made it all the more easy for Arabs and Kurds to treat the second-order minority as political tools in their own struggle over Nineveh rather than important security and political partners.

In fall 2005 Iraqis prepared to vote on approving a constitution.³⁶ The document defined Iraq as a federal state.³⁷ Regional and provincial governments were given significant legislative, executive, and judicial powers.³⁸ For example, they could form administrative councils, which may pass legislation if it does not undermine the federal government. This includes the establishment of local police forces and programs for education, culture, health, agriculture, and social welfare. Each region and province would also receive a percentage of the federal budget depending on its needs, resources, and population. Perhaps most important was article 125: “The Constitution shall guarantee the administrative, political, cultural, and educational rights of the various

³⁴ Independent High Electoral Commission, Bulletin no. 15, February 7, 2005, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.Assyrian International News Agency.org/news/20050208111414.htm>.

³⁵ Teule, “Christians in Iraq,” 183.

³⁶ The specific articles cited here are based on Iraq’s approved constitution and not the draft version, as the location of several articles changed. This was done to make it easier for the reader to locate upon inspection.

³⁷ Constitution of the Republic of Iraq, 2005, article 1.

³⁸ Constitution of Iraq, Section 5, Chapters 1-2.

nationalities, such as Turkmen, Chaldeans, Assyrians, and all other constituents, and this shall be regulated by law.” Beyond recognizing Assyrians as a distinct nation in Iraq, as critical as that was, Section 5 (Chapters 1-2) and article 125 are the vehicles the ADM employs today to secure self-determination.

Sunni Arabs opposed ratification while Shia Arabs and Kurds supported it. Sunni Arabs feared federalism and unwritten sectarian power sharing agreements would lead to political marginalization.³⁹ The document did the opposite for Kurds and Shia Arabs. It ended their second-class status in Iraq. Shia Muslims were now the country’s most powerful political bloc. The Constitution also recognized the KRG as an official political entity inside Iraq. Under article 112 the Kurds would receive a fair/equitable share of oil and gas revenues.⁴⁰ Power sharing agreements meant that a Kurd would also occupy Iraq’s presidency and one deputy position under the Sunni prime minister and Shia speaker of parliament. Article 140 established December 2007 as the deadline for holding a referendum on adding Kirkuk and other disputed territories to the KRG.⁴¹

The ADM and many other Christians opposed the document. Generally speaking, there were three main areas Christians objected to. First, article 140 did not actually define which territories beyond Kirkuk were disputed. On the contrary, it endorsed the

³⁹ A major concern was the emergence of a Shia region backed by Iran in the oil rich south. See “Iraq’s Sunnis Reject Constitution,” BBC News, August 28, 2005, accessed December 10, 2018, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4192122.stm.

⁴⁰ Under Article 112 the Kurds would receive 17 percent of oil and gas revenues. This would later be reduced to approximately 13 percent after adjustments. See Denise Natali, *The Kurdish Quasi-State* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2010), 82.

⁴¹ Article 140 set out a three step process of 1) normalization; 2) census; and 3) a referendum. Normalization entailed importing Kurds back into Arabized areas and then compensating Arabs to entice them to leave voluntarily. The census would calculate which areas were majority Kurdish and should be annexed. Finally, the referendum would act to validate the census’s results.

pre-U.S. invasion lines.⁴² This meant that part of the area the ADM and other Christians proposed for the Nineveh Plain province, northern Sheikhan district, was now officially under the legal jurisdiction of Erbil. The Kurds made no secret of their desire to annex additional areas of the Nineveh Plain. With Baghdad and the U.S. continuing to support the Kurdish security presence there, any chance that the ADM had at wresting these areas away from the KRG would be almost impossible.⁴³ At a minimum it would have to wait until sectarian chaos in central and southern Iraq ended. Only then could Baghdad refocus its attention to Nineveh and other areas undergoing Kurdification. But there was no telling how long the bloodshed in Iraq's urban centers would continue. And there were certainly no guarantees that Baghdad would show sympathy to the political preferences of the region's second-order minorities to the point that it jeopardized its own territorial ambitions.⁴⁴

Second, the disputed territories referendum seemed to contradict the autonomy clause contained in article 125. Some felt it put Kurdish ethno-nationalist claims above those of the second-order minorities that dominated the area, many of which, including Christians and ADM supporters, could claim indigenous status. These groups did not consider such territories as "disputed." Only Baghdad and Erbil did.⁴⁵

The third area of concern was the language used in article 125. Chaldeans and

⁴² Article 140 incorporated article 53(a) of the Transitional Administrative Law, which defined the KRG as the "territories that were administered by that government (KRG) on March 19, 2003 in the governorates of Dohuk, Erbil, Sulaymaniya, Kirkuk, Diyala, and Nineveh."

⁴³ Author's field work.

⁴⁴ Author's field work.

⁴⁵ See "Assyrians Join Sunnis in Opposition to Iraq's Draft Constitution," editorial, Assyrian International News Agency, August 24, 2005, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.Assyrian International News Agency.org/releases/20050824145138.htm>; author's field work.

Assyrians were now designated as two separate communities.⁴⁶ The TAL defined Christians as one group. Cohesion was needed to advance self-determination. A formally divided Christian community only enabled Iraq's larger political forces to continue disenfranchising second-order minorities. Article 125 also functioned to help churches maintain their power advantage over secular political parties. The ADM blamed the appellation change on clergy members.⁴⁷

Christians were expected to join with Sunni Arabs in Nineveh to vote “no,” and, along with rejections in the majority Sunni Arab provinces of Anbar and Salahadin, force the central government to make amendments.⁴⁸ Nineveh fell just short of the required “no” vote total. Allegations of voter fraud soon emerged.⁴⁹ Reports compiled by U.S. military officials turned over to journalists describe instances of Kurds being bused into non-Kurdish areas of the Nineveh Plain. In the Christian town of Qaraqosh in Hamdaniya district, a city of 50,000, Kurds were thought to make up only one percent of the population. Yet “yes” votes outnumbered “no” votes by a six-to-one margin.⁵⁰ Despite the document's approval, the ADM's territorial and political goals remained fixed. Again, despite its flaws, the Iraqi Constitution provided mechanisms for second-order minorities to realize a measure of self-determination.

⁴⁶ See “Growing Assyrian Opposition to Divisive Iraqi Constitution,” editorial, Assyrian International News Agency, September 16, 2005, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.Assyrian International News Agency.org/releases/20050916112808.htm>; author's field work.

⁴⁷ See Statement by the Assyrian Democratic Movement on the Constitution of Iraq, September 19, 2005, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.Assyrian International News Agency.org/releases/admconsten.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Gareth Porter, “Kurdish Voting Shenanigans May Tip Referendum,” Inter-Press Agency, September 29, 2005, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.antiwar.com/orig/porter.php?articleid=7436>.

⁴⁹ Gareth Porter, “Vote Figures for Crucial Province Don't Add Up,” Inter-Press Agency, October 20, 2005, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.antiwar.com/orig/porter.php?articleid=7695>.

⁵⁰ Gareth Porter, “Witnesses Describe Ballot Fraud in Nineveh,” Inter-Press Agency, November 5, 2005, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://original.antiwar.com/porter/2005/11/05/witnesses-describe-ballot-fraud-in-nineveh/>. See also IHEC website, <http://www.ihec.iq/en/>.

The lack of Christian political unity and the advantages of an electoral alliance with Arabs or Kurds were evident again in Iraq's December 2005 elections for its first "permanent" parliament. Three Christian lists formed: the ADM's Rafidain List, the Bet-Nahrain Democratic Party List, and the Assyrian General Conference. Other Christian candidates joined the Kurdish List (Kurdistan Alliance), the Iraqi National List, and the Iraqi National Dialogue Front.⁵¹

Three ADM candidates won parliamentary seats while two Christians were elected under the Kurdish List.⁵² Once again Christian representatives in the Iraqi parliament stood for two opposing political viewpoints on the best way to secure rights—Baghdad or Erbil. Consequently, the prospect of forming a Christian coalition to promote self-determination in the Nineveh Plain remained dim.

The ADM would continue to lean towards Baghdad. Its goals of a Nineveh Plain province remained unchanged. But as long as the central government and its U.S. partners supported a Kurdish military presence in the Nineveh Plain the ADM would be unable to prevent the Kurdish first-order minority from consolidating its power over the area. To truly understand how this situation unfolded one must look at events in Nineveh between 2005 and 2009.

The Kurdification of the Nineveh Plain and the Marginalization of the ADM

The Sunni Arab boycott of the January 2005 provincial elections enabled Kurdish candidates to win 31 out of 41 seats on Nineveh's provincial council.⁵³ Control of the

⁵¹ Teule, "Christians in Iraq," 183.

⁵² See IHEC website, <http://www.ihec.iq/en/>.

⁵³ See IHEC website, <http://www.ihec.iq/en/>.

provincial council meant Kurds retained the final say over resource distribution and development projects. The Nineveh Plain was almost entirely devoid of a Kurdish population. Erbil's efforts to extend its administrative and security apparatuses over the region was at least partially contingent upon courting the loyalties of second-order minorities traditionally more loyal to Baghdad. Second-order minorities helped balance against the province's pro-Baghdad Arabs. No second-order minority was more important to the Kurds than Christians.

The chief architect of the KRG's outreach program towards the Nineveh Plain's Christians was its Assyrian Minister of Finance Sarkis Aghajan Mamendo.⁵⁴ Aghajan and his backers in Erbil had several pre-existing factors working in their favor. First, Baghdad had neglected the Nineveh Plain for decades. Christian-dominated towns like Bartella and Karamlesh resembled slums.⁵⁵ Many Christians thus welcomed Kurdish assistance.

Second, and similarly, Christians were pouring into the Nineveh Plain from urban centers seeking security, humanitarian aid, and jobs.⁵⁶ According to the Iraq Sustainable Democracy Project (ISDP), a U.S.-based think tank dedicated to a pluralist and free Iraq, close to 3,000 Christian families entered the Nineveh Plain between January 2005-August 2006. Approximately 430 migrated out in that same time period. Between Septembers 2006-2008, nearly 7,000 families arrived and just over 1,300 exited. While Christians

⁵⁴ For information on Aghajan, see U.S. Embassy Cable 06BAGHDAD4471, Wikileaks, December 6, 2006, accessed December 10, 2018, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/06BAGHDAD4471_a.html.

⁵⁵ Ken Timmerman, "Christians Face Extinction in Northern Iraq," Newsmax, April 24, 2008, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.newsmax.com/KenTimmerman/christians-mosul-iraq/2008/04/24/id/337436/>.

⁵⁶ Michael Youash, "Assyrians at the Tipping Point: A Nineveh Plain Province and Related Solutions to Iraq's Indigenous Minority Crisis," 1, Iraq Sustainable Democracy Project, March 2011, accessed December 10, 2018, [http://www.iraqdemocracyproject.org/pdf/Assyrians%20At%20twentieththe%20Tipping%20Point%20-%20Iraq%20\(final\).pdf](http://www.iraqdemocracyproject.org/pdf/Assyrians%20At%20twentieththe%20Tipping%20Point%20-%20Iraq%20(final).pdf). Youash's data was compiled from raw data provided by Assyrian Aid Society-Iraq and Nineveh Center for Research and Development (Iraq).

were certainly pouring out of Iraq, the group's majority status in the Nineveh Plain actually appeared to be solidifying. Moreover, a January 2008 study produced by the Nineveh Center for Research and Development (NCRD), an Iraq-based NGO for minority rights, revealed 80 percent of displaced persons reported having pre-existing ties to the Nineveh Plain. Nearly half the respondents desired to build a future there.⁵⁷ If one's desire were to remain in the Nineveh Plain, and the U.S. and Baghdad could not be counted on for meaningful support, it made sense to seek assistance from Erbil.

The record of Aghajan and his KRG backers in assisting Christians is mixed. There were times when outreach efforts appeared sincere and significantly improved the lives of Christian second-order minorities. For example, Aghajan funneled millions of dollars through his Christian Affairs Committee to establish sports clubs, schools, distribute humanitarian aid, and form cultural associations.⁵⁸ He also formed "Councils of Notables" from local Christian leaders, of which International Crisis Group had the following to say:

These often act as proto-states, providing constituency services such as supplemental schooling and medical care and playing a role in the appointment of civil servants and police at both the local and national levels by providing lists of candidates who are then endorsed by Kurdish parties. They also intervene on behalf of individuals who suffered under the Ba'th regime (for example, from land confiscation), demanding compensation from the central government.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Nineveh Center for Research and Development, "Assyrian Christian IDP Flow (Nineveh Plains, Iraq)," quoted/cited in Youash, "Assyrians at the Tipping Point: A Nineveh Plain Province and Related Solutions to Iraq's Indigenous Minority Crisis," 2.

⁵⁸ Human Rights Watch, *On Vulnerable Ground: Violence against Minority Communities in Nineveh Province's Disputed Territories* (U.S.A: Human Rights Watch, 2009), 25, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/iraq1109webcover.pdf>.

⁵⁹ International Crisis Group, *Iraq's New Battlefield*, 29.

Dozens of derelict churches were refurbished.⁶⁰ Land was purchased from a Chaldean Church in Karamlesh to build housing units for internally displaced persons.⁶¹ Aghajan also established Christian security proxies to protect towns and churches. Nicknamed “Sarkis Guards,” each member was given a salary, radio, and gun.⁶²

Aghajan was committed to self-determination in the Nineveh Plain; unlike the ADM, he desired Kurdish patronage.⁶³ He privately expressed a desire to U.S. officials for an Assyrian autonomous area stretching from Ankawa near Erbil and across the northern border of Dohuk.⁶⁴ Yet it is precisely Aghajan’s close ties to the KRG and the Barzani tribe that made such a territorial claim unrealistic. Within a few years he was replaced as KRG Finance Minister, though the exact reasons for his departure remain unclear. To this author’s knowledge, Aghajan appeared to only publically profess a desire for Assyrian autonomy in the Nineveh Plain.

Aghajan’s programs benefitted thousands of poor, displaced, and unemployed Christians in ways the central government or groups like the ADM had never done nor could have. Unpaid volunteers staffed the ADM. Financing came from Christians in Iraq and diaspora communities. The ADM, in other words, was perpetually cash-strapped. It is easy to see why many Christians in Iraq and abroad came to see Aghajan and the KRG as

⁶⁰ Leila Fadel, “Kurdish Expansion Squeezes Northern Iraq’s Minorities,” McClatchy, November 11, 2008, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/nation-world/world/article24509785.html>.

⁶¹ Timmerman, “Extinction.”

⁶² See Sam Dagher, “Iraqi Christians Cling to Last, Waning Refuges,” *Christian Science Monitor*, March 6, 2008, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/2008/0306/p01s05-wogn.html>); Peter Kenyon, “Christian Security Forces Growing Stronger in Iraq,” NPR-Morning Edition (audio transcript), October 6, 2008, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=95343489>; Ernesto Londono, “In Iraq’s North, Ethnic Strife Flares As Vote Draws Closer,” *Washington Post*, January 28, 2009, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/01/27/AR2009012703436.html>.

⁶³ See Sarkis Aghajan quoted in Peter Lamprecht, “Iraq: Christians Debate Self-Autonomy to Halt Exodus,” *Religoscope*, December 23, 2006, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://english.religion.info/2006/12/23/iraq-christians-debate-self-autonomy-to-halt-exodus/>.

⁶⁴ U.S. Embassy Cable 06BAGHDAD4471.

saviors. For example, in 2006 Pope Benedict XVI awarded Aghajan the title of Knight Commander for his work. The Syriac Orthodox Church and Assyrian Church of the East also bestowed honorific titles upon him.⁶⁵ In 2009 Pope Benedict XVI praised Erbil for fostering peace.⁶⁶

But many Christian representatives, especially those from the ADM, accused Aghajan and the KRG of buying loyalties and distributing inducements unevenly to undermine pro-Baghdad Christians. Allegations of harassment, land grabs, and detentions were common. Food rations, rent assistance, jobs, and church reconstruction aid could be contingent upon political loyalty.⁶⁷ Argued one priest interviewed by Human Rights Watch: “Before 2005, no one cared about our communities or churches and then overnight we started to receive funding. The Kurds have a hidden agenda and are using money to co-opt Christians—it’s not because they want to help our people... I believe that anyone who disagrees with their agenda puts their life at risk.”⁶⁸

If loyalty was not forced it appeared at the very least to be expected. After receiving aid local clergy, business leaders, and village heads would sometimes endorse Kurdish annexation in letters to the central government.⁶⁹ Jamal Dinha, the ADM-affiliated mayor of Bartella, accused Aghajan of mismanagement: “We have asked Sarkis

⁶⁵ Kurdistan Regional Government UK Representation, “The Status of Christians in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq,” 6, December 2009, accessed December 10, 2018, http://cabinet.gov.krd/uploads/documents/Status_Christians_Kurdistan_Region_Dec_09_2009_12_22_h16m26s16.pdf.

⁶⁶ Kurdistan Regional Government, “President Barzani Arrives in Germany to Meet Chancellor Angela Merkel after Italy Visit,” September 19, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?l=12&s=02010100&r=223&a=28236&s=010000>.

⁶⁷ Timmerman, “Christians Face Extinction;” Fadel, “Kurdish Expansion.” See also Assyria Council of Europe and Hammurabi Human Rights Organization, *The Struggle to Exist*, published online through the Assyrian International News Agency, February 2010, particularly 44-51, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.Assyrian International News Agency.org/reports/acetste.pdf>; Human Rights Watch, *On Vulnerable Ground*, 25-28.

⁶⁸ Priest from Qaraqosh quoted in Human Rights Watch, *On Vulnerable Ground*, 25.

⁶⁹ For copy of an original letter from a clergy member to the central government see Assyria Council of Europe and Hammurabi Human Rights Organization, *The Struggle to Exist*, 47.

to build schools, not churches. Here in our town, Sarkis bought land for a cemetery. We say that he pays more attention to the dead than to the living.”⁷⁰

In 2007 the U.S. Department of State submitted a report to Congress that reveals American officials were fully aware funds were being misused by Aghajan and the KRG to the detriment of the Christian second-order minority: “In Nineveh, the Christian minority faces considerable hardship. Some factions are under-represented politically; some suffer from uneven resource transfers from the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Ministry of Finance; and some experience human rights abuses.” The U.S. seemed to turn a blind eye. The report goes on to say, “On the basis of relative need, it would be inappropriate to single out this group for special treatment.”⁷¹

Aghajan and officials in Erbil also helped constitute several Christian political parties with pro-KRG platforms. In 2003 the Kurdistan Democratic Party helped establish the Chaldean Democratic Union (CDU).⁷² In 2007 Aghajan helped unite several small anti-ADM parties into the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council (CSAPC). The CSAPC, today the ADM’s main rival, favors self-determination in the Nineveh Plain but under Kurdish tutelage.⁷³

A multiplicity of parties and grassroots political organizations among second-order minorities may be seen as a welcomed sign of increased political activity after a long period of repression. But Aghajan himself claimed to U.S. officials that no more

⁷⁰ Jamal Dinha quoted in Timmerman, “Extinction.”

⁷¹ U.S. Department of State, *Report on U.S. Assistance to the Ninewa Plains in Iraq*, Report submitted to State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, Committee on Appropriations, House of Representatives, Washington, D.C., November 13, 2007, 2-3. (Author is in possession of copy of this report).

⁷² “Assyrian Political Group Admits Kurdish Funding,” Assyrian International News Agency, July 24, 2008, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.Assyrian International News Agency.org/news/20080724130442>; Beth K. Dougherty and Edmund A. Ghareeb, *Historical Dictionary of Iraq*, second edition (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2013), 144.

⁷³ International Crisis Group, *Iraq’s New Battlefield*, 28.

than 15 percent of Christians voted for their own parties.⁷⁴ It was true that many Christians were politically disengaged, the result of security threats, second-order minority status, and a lifetime of repression. It is also true that many Christians simply favored a political future in Kurdistan. But demographics, disunity, and low voter turnout make it difficult to see how the KRG's creation of additional Christian parties did anything but weaken an already fractured community, undermine financially independent voices within it like the ADM, and, by extension, serve the Kurdish first-order minority's interests in the Nineveh Plain. ADM official Gevara Zia had this to say on the matter:

Kurds see the Nineveh plain as a strategic space, with both significant agricultural potential and the ability to serve as a buffer between them and the Arabs. That's why they want to forcefully Kurdicise it, establishing irreversible facts on the ground. The self-determination they pretend to support is the same as Saddam's: it is purely formal.⁷⁵

Representatives from the Assyrian Democratic Movement did push back, both abroad and at home. For example, ADM representatives teamed up with diaspora organizations in the United States to lobby Congress to support the establishment of a Nineveh Plain province. At various points between 2005 and 2010 it appeared members of Congress were on the verge of backing a resolution to do just that. Nothing materialized. The reasons for the inaction remain unclear. Some observers alleged Christians aligned with the KDP and their diaspora allies amounted an effective counter-lobbying strategy.⁷⁶ This certainly may have taken place. It may also be true that members of Congress did not want to appear to add another layer of ethno-sectarian

⁷⁴ U.S. Embassy Cable 06BAGHDAD4471.

⁷⁵ Gevara Zia quoted in International Crisis Group, *Iraq's New Battlefield*, 28.

⁷⁶ Anna Eshoo (D-CA) is the member of Congress whose name is often associated with the Nineveh Plain Province Resolution. Representative Eshoo is of Assyrian heritage. For discussions of this issue see "How Assyrian Representatives Shelved Nineveh Plains Discussions in Washington," editorial/investigative report, Zinda Magazine Volume XII, no. 27, January 29, 2007, accessed December 10, 2018, http://www.zindamagazine.com/html/archives/2007/01.27.07/index_sat.php#TheLighthouse; Youash, "Assyrians at the Tipping Point," 7.

tension to Iraq by appearing to favor second-order minorities with little to no political and military power. This position would be in line with the U.S. Department of State document cited above.

In Iraq, the ADM's immediate focus was on local security, the foundation of self-determination. In late 2005 Baghdad agreed to establish a Nineveh Plain police force composed of approximately 1000 persons and pulled primarily from the area's Christian and Shabak populations.⁷⁷ The Nineveh provincial council's deputy governor, KDP member Khisro Goran, convinced the governor to halt the force's formation, calling it a "Christian militia."⁷⁸ This is a somewhat ironic statement considering the "Sarkis Guards" were composed entirely of Christians and by all accounts fell outside Iraq's official security forces.

The order to form a police force remained blocked for two years until American officials intervened. A few months later the KDP-led provincial council succeeded in halting it.⁷⁹ The ADM issued a thinly disguised attack directed at the KDP through its North American branches:

This Iraqi Government order requiring a Nineveh Plain local police force came about after relentless work by the Assyrian Democratic Movement. The ADM is fighting for equal opportunities for all defenseless minorities to have official policing and self-protection for their areas. The June 2006 original order was blocked by the prejudicial policies of neighboring parties who say they will protect our people with their militias while denying us the right to policing in order to keep us dependent on them. In March-April of 2008, the Iraqi order for Nineveh Plain official policing was revived and 269 officers out of 711 were hired in the Nineveh Plain. Until today there has not been any development on this issue and the remaining 442 officers are blocked from protecting their

⁷⁷ Michael Youash, "Creating a Nineveh Plain Local Police Force: Overcoming Ethno-Religious Minority Insecurity," 5-6, Iraq Sustainable Democracy Project, September 2007, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.iraqdemocracyproject.org/pdf/Minority%20Policing%20-%20policy%20brief.pdf>.

⁷⁸ Youash, "Nineveh Plain Local Police Force," 6.

⁷⁹ Hanna and Barber, *Erasing Assyrians*, 21,

communities, as the dominant parties controlling the Nineveh Governorate deny us our basic right to security.⁸⁰

A similar situation occurred among other second-order minorities under the thumb of Kurdistan. In 2007 Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki approved a 500-person Shabak police force. Kurdish officials dismissed al-Maliki's order.⁸¹ A *New York Times* article cited a Shabak tribal sheik's retelling of how the KDP blocked the force: "He (KDP official) put the folder in his drawer and told me, 'Let the prime minister come and take it out and implement it.'"⁸²

The Kurds were also accused of courting segments of the Yazidi second-order minority while pressuring others. In Sinjar, pro-Baghdad Yazidi politicians were harassed and prevented from entering the town when returning from the capital.⁸³ Yazidi political parties with pro-KRG agendas appeared on the eve of elections. Welfare checks were withheld until just before individuals were scheduled to vote. At that point larger sums were distributed.⁸⁴ Other inducements included paving roads to difficult-to-access religious sites, opening Kurdish universities to students too scared to leave the territory, funding Lalish cultural centers, and staffing KDP offices with women. Like Christians, locals were happy to exchange votes for jobs, security, or development aid.⁸⁵ None should be criticized for doing so.

As 2007 came to a close it was clear the disputed territories referendum would not take place. The Bush administration managed to convince Erbil to delay the referendum

⁸⁰ See Statement by the Assyrian Democratic Movement, October 27, 2008, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.Assyrian International News Agency.org/news/20081027161054.htm>.

⁸¹ Sam Dagher, "Minorities Trapped in Northern Iraq's Maelstrom," *New York Times*, August 15, 2009, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/16/world/middleeast/16khazna.html>.

⁸² Sheikh Thanoun Wali quoted in Dagher, "Minorities Trapped."

⁸³ Christine van den Toorn, "Fake Parties, Frauds, Intimidation and Other Strong-arm Tactics," *Niqash*, May 9, 2013, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/3216/>.

⁸⁴ Christine van den Toorn, "Fake Parties."

⁸⁵ Christine van den Toorn, "Fake Parties."

six months and allow the United Nations to make non-binding recommendations as to which territories should be annexed to Kurdistan and which should remain under Baghdad's jurisdiction.⁸⁶ The ADM tried to walk a fine line on the issue, which was increasingly difficult with little to no meaningful support from the U.S. or Baghdad, as well as the growing influence of Kurdish-backed Christian proxies in the Nineveh Plain like the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council. In May 2008 the ADM reaffirmed its commitment to the implementation of article 140 in the Nineveh Plain but rejected the “intimidation, threats, or other unlawful means recently practiced by the aforementioned groups,” meaning the CSAPC and KRG, “in order to force citizens to declare loyalty in advance (of such a referendum).”⁸⁷ Concurrently, ADM officials continued to push for the implementation of article 125 and, by extension, a Nineveh Plain province for the area's second-order minorities. This seems to indicate the ADM remained confident that, free from external interference, local residents would favor Baghdad over Erbil:

We affirm our commitment to implement article 125 of the Iraqi constitution. This article respects the will of our people and the Nineveh Plain constituents. No one has the right to turn this matter into a bargaining issue for special interest, which degrades the will and rights of the people. The reality on the ground is far from what these groups (CSAPC/KRG) are promoting—they are merely empty slogans.⁸⁸

In June 2008, a few weeks before the referendum deadline extension expired, the United Nations recommended that some areas of the Nineveh Plain currently occupied by Kurds, such as Hamdaniya, should remain with the central government. The U.N. also made recommendations as to the position of one district under KRG control since 1991,

⁸⁶ U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *The Kurds in Post-Saddam Iraq*, by Kenneth Katzman, RS22079 (2010), 7.

⁸⁷ Assyrian Democratic Movement Statement on its Position on Implementation of Article 140, May 6, 2008, in *Zinda Magazine*, Volume XIV, no. 5, May 23, 2008, accessed December 10, 2018, http://www.zindamagazine.com/html/archives/2008/05.23.08/index_mon.php.

⁸⁸ Assyrian Democratic Movement Statement on Article 140.

Akre, and two other districts besides Hamdaniya that were under central government control until 2003: Makhmour and Mandali. U.N. officials recommended that Akre, which formally belonged to Nineveh but was administratively part of Dohuk since 1991, should remain under KRG jurisdiction. Makhmour, formally part of Erbil province but administratively connected to Nineveh from 1991-2003, was split between the KRG and Baghdad. Finally, the U.N. recommended that Mandali, in Diyala province, remain under central government control. Suffice to say that the U.N. recommendations were controversial and did not result in any solution to the disputed territories or political gridlock in Iraq.⁸⁹

That July the disputed territories issue manifested as a debate over a revised provincial elections law containing clauses for minority representation and power sharing proposals for Kirkuk. A bill passed by the central government that month guaranteed no fewer than thirteen seats for Christians: three in Baghdad, three in Nineveh, two in Kirkuk, two in Dohuk, two in Erbil, and one in Basra. Two seats in Nineveh were reserved for Yazidis and the Shabak, respectively.⁹⁰ Kurdish leaders took issue with the Kirkuk formula. By granting Christians 4 percent of the council's seats its put Arabs (32 percent), Kurds (32 percent), and Turkmen (32 percent) on equal footing. All three groups claimed the area as historically theirs. Kurdish officials also called Baghdad's attempt to set aside seats for minorities within the KRG legislative overreach. In addition, Kurds argued that Yazidis and the Shabak were actually ethnic Kurds. They just retained

⁸⁹ Information here is summarized from International Crisis Group, *Oil for Soil: Toward a Grand Bargain on Iraq and the Kurds* (Washington D.C.: International Crisis Group, 2010), 10-13.

⁹⁰ Fred Aprim, "The Iraqi Provincial Elections Law and the Terror against the Assyrians in Mosul," Assyrian International News Agency, November 4, 2008, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.aina.org/guesteds/20081104142436.htm>; International Crisis Group, *Iraq's Provincial Elections: The Stakes* (Washington D.C.: International Crisis Group, 2009, 11, footnote 60.

different religious and linguistic traditions.⁹¹ With a resolution for Kirkuk the primary objective, a new bill in September contained no reserved minority seats.⁹² Segments of the Christian second-order minority in northern Iraq protested.⁹³ In Mosul, they were met with a wave of sectarian violence.⁹⁴

In fall 2008 it appeared a new UN-proposed plan would be adopted. In Basra, Christians would receive one seat. In Baghdad, Christians would get three seats while Sabaens received one. Seven total seats were set aside for second-order minorities in Nineveh: three for Christians, three for Yazidis, and one for the Shabak.⁹⁵ Kurdish leaders, initially against the seat allotment in Nineveh, likely on the grounds that it could cut into their newfound influence there, were now in favor of this arrangement. Some observers linked the Kurdish reversal to a plan to co-opt second-order minority candidates to their side. This may have influenced Baghdad's position on the matter.⁹⁶ When a third bill was passed in November Christians were given only one seat on the

⁹¹ Reidar Vissar, "The Iraqi Parliament Passes the Provincial Elections Law," *Historia.org* (blog), July 22, 2008, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.historiae.org/muhafazat.asp>; Reidar Vissar, "Iraqi Minorities Get Special Representation in the Provincial Elections Law," *Historia.org* (blog), November 3, 2008, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://historiae.org/minorities.asp>.

⁹² Aprim, "Iraqi Law;" Vissar, "Iraqi Minorities."

⁹³ Bill Meyer, "Iraqi Christians Protest End to Legislative Quotas," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, September 28, 2008, accessed December 10, 2018,

http://www.cleveland.com/world/index.ssf/2008/09/iraqi_christians_protest_end_t.html; "Iraqi Christians Claim Loss of Rights in New Elections Law," Assyrian International News Agency, September 25, 2009, accessed December 10, 2018, www.aina.org/news/2008092515444.htm.

⁹⁴ Erica Goode and Sudad al-Salhy, "Violence in Mosul Forces Iraqi-Christians to Flee," *New York Times*, October 10, 2008, accessed December 10, 2018,

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/11/world/middleeast/11iraq.html>; "Terrified Christian Families Flee Iraq's Mosul," Associated Press, October 11, 2008, accessed December 10, 2018,

<http://www.foxnews.com/story/2008/10/11/terrified-christian-families-flee-iraq-mosul.html>.

⁹⁵ Vissar, "Iraqi Minorities."

⁹⁶ Vissar, "Iraqi Minorities."

provincial councils of Baghdad, Basra, and Nineveh. Yazidis, the Shabak, and Mandean were also awarded one seat each.⁹⁷

Second-order minority group leaders rejected the final allotment. For Christians, it ensured they had no real political power in their homelands. They would instead continue to be at the mercy of the Kurdish first-order minority or Arabs. ADM Secretary General Yonadam Kanna argued, “We completely reject this approval. This appeases the ethnic and religious ignorance of the parliament. It is a disappointment and depressing to Christians in Iraq. It is deeply regrettable.”⁹⁸

Seven seats in Nineveh were not enough to control the 41-member council. There was also no guarantee second-order minorities would act as one voting bloc. But the number was large enough to ensure the council’s rival Arab and Kurdish factions would have to take the preferences of second-order minorities into account. Such groups would therefore retain an important say on the distribution of resources, developmental projects, and perhaps the Nineveh Plain’s future as a province and its position between Baghdad or Erbil. In the end, Yonadam Kanna’s concerns fell on deaf ears.

In the ensuing years the Nineveh Plain became the flashpoint in the Arab-Kurdish struggle and a microcosm of the problems facing the country: tensions over federalism, Sunni alienation, and the disputed territories. The primary victims in this fight were of course Christians and other second-order minorities, who found themselves boxed in and with no place to turn.

⁹⁷ The Mandaean seat was in Baghdad; the Shabak and Yazidis received one seat each in Nineveh; See Tina Susman, “Iraq Oks Minority Quotas on Councils,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 2008, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/nov/09/world/fg-iraq9>.

⁹⁸ Yonadam Kanna quoted in Waleed Ibrahim, “Iraq Lawmakers Approve Minority Seats for ‘09 Polls,” Reuters, November 3, 2008, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-minorities/iraq-lawmakers-approve-minority-seats-for-09-polls-idUSTRE4A22NX20081103>.

2009-2014: The ADM and the Nineveh Plain within the Renewed Arab-Kurdish Struggle for Northern Iraq

The effects of sectarian violence, intragroup cleavages, and Kurdish territorial encroachments, and outreach programs on the ADM's base of support in northern Iraq all came together in Iraq's 2009 provincial elections. The ADM was shut out in Nineveh, Baghdad, and Basra. Nineveh's seat went to a Kurdish-backed candidate on the Ishtar List, a coalition of Christian parties led by the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council.⁹⁹ Reports from Nineveh soon emerged describing Kurdish electoral manipulation, intimidation, and fraud. Christians reported being fired from their jobs with the Christian Affairs Committee for expressing support for ADM candidates.¹⁰⁰ ADM Secretary General Yonadam Kanna condemned the KDP:

There were many violations against Assyrians, especially concerning the militia in the Nineveh Plain which is affiliated with the Ishtar slate. They used extortion, threats and other kinds of pressures against voters. The Ishtar slate violated several articles in the election law. We have filed complaints with the independent electoral commission of Iraq and are hoping they will investigate the matter.¹⁰¹

The fact that ADM supporters worked for the Sarkis Aghjan-created Christian Affairs Committee should not go unnoticed. On one hand, it speaks volumes about the inability of the ADM to deliver benefits to its supporters, security included. On the other hand, it typifies the complicated political realities second-order minorities operate within.

⁹⁹ The list was made up of the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council, the Bet-Nahrain Democratic Party (BNDP), the Chaldean National Congress (CNC), the Patriotic Union of Bet-Nahrain (PUBN), the Syriac Independent Gathering Movement (SIGM), the Notables of Qaraqosh, and the Chaldean Cultural Society; the seat went to a member of the Syriac Independent Gathering Movement. For additional information on the various Christian lists in the election see "List of Assyrian Slates Running in the 2009 Iraqi Provincial Council Elections," Assyrian International News Agency, December 23, 2009, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.Assyrian International News Agency/news/20081222201334.htm>.

¹⁰⁰ "Assyrians in North Iraq Fired for Not Voting for Pro-Kurdish Slate," editorial, Assyrian International News Agency, February 20, 2009, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.Assyrian International News Agency/releases/20090220154846.htm>.

¹⁰¹ Yonadam Kanna quoted in "Many Election Violations Against Assyrians in North Iraq," editorial, Assyrian International News Agency, February 10, 2009, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.Assyrian International News Agency/releases/2009029193222.htm>.

Individuals that do not adhere to the first-order minority's political agenda are nonetheless often forced to hide their political preferences for the sake of accruing resources, security, and retaining the right to live in their homelands. In short, neutrality and self-determination for second-order minorities is often untenable.

Nineveh's 2009 provincial election produced an important political shift. The Sunni Arab nationalist al-Hadba party now controlled the provincial council.¹⁰² Al-Hadba set its sights on rolling back Kurdish territorial encroachments and enhancing the political position of Sunni Arabs. Resource distribution and developmental projects ground to a halt. Two separate administrative and security arrangements emerged in northern Nineveh, one Arab and one Kurdish, that were mapped onto competing ethno-nationalist territorial claims in areas neither side could claim majority status within. The concerns of second-order minorities like Christians mattered little.

Al-Hadba refused to award Kurds key council positions. The council's Kurdish members responded with a boycott, asserting the failure to award them senior positions was a violation of power sharing agreements.¹⁰³ The Kurds then threatened to annex areas already under their control.¹⁰⁴ The governor of Nineveh refused to negotiate unless Kurds withdrew to pre-U.S. invasion lines. The Kurds refused, insisting the disputed territories issue must be resolved.¹⁰⁵

In June 2009 the KRG passed a draft constitution. Article 2 claimed Kirkuk and areas of Nineveh, including the districts of Akre, Sheikhan, Sinjar, Telkaif, and

¹⁰² See IHEC website, <http://www.ihec.iq/en/>.

¹⁰³ International Crisis Group, *Iraq's New Battlefield*, 13.

¹⁰⁴ UPI Staff Report, "Mosul Teeters on the Brink of Conflict," August 17, 2009, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.upi.com/Mosul-teeters-on-brink-of-conflict/49091250544442/>.

¹⁰⁵ Sam Dagher, "Iraqi Christians Cling to Last, Waning Refugees," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 6, 2008, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/2008/0306/p01s05-wogn.html>.

Hamdaniya and the sub-districts of Zummar, Bashiqa, and Aski Kalak as “Kurdish lands.” Several of these areas were in the Nineveh Plain and under the legal jurisdiction of Baghdad. Article 5 took the division of the Christian second-order minority one step past the Iraqi Constitution: “The people of the Kurdistan Region are composed of Kurds, Arabs, Chaldo-Assyrian-Syriacs, Armenians and others who are citizens of Kurdistan.” Article 35 stipulated that minorities had the right to administrative autonomy wherever they constituted a majority.

Administrative autonomy was the prize goal of much of the Christian second-order minority. Some groups had unquestionably been holding out for annexation to the Kurdish region.¹⁰⁶ The ADM was not one of them. De-facto Kurdish occupation since 2003 demonstrated to the ADM and its supporters that Erbil was neither trustworthy nor did it tolerate dissenting political views among Nineveh’s second-order minorities. Similar to their grievances with the Iraqi Constitution, ADM officials felt the autonomy clause was in direct contrast to the KRG’s territorial claims over the Nineveh Plain.¹⁰⁷

The division of the Christian second-order minority into what amounted to three communities reified intragroup cleavages. This only functioned to further weaken the ADM’s position within the Christian second-order minority community. Many ADM members therefore saw the KRG Draft Constitution as another tool in the Kurdish ethno-nationalist program rather than a statement on the benefits of citizenship, democracy, and

¹⁰⁶ See “Five-Parties Memo on KRG Draft Constitution,” Zinda Magazine, Volume XII, Issue 23, November 20, 2006, accessed December 10, 2018, http://www.zindamagazine.com/html/archives/2006/11.20.06/index_thu.php#goodmorningassyrria.

¹⁰⁷ ADM officials had expressed this view throughout the drafting process. For example, see ADM official Galawizh Shaba Jarjez quoted in Michael Youash, “Proposing the Operationalization of the Article 125 Solution: Establishing the Nineveh Plain Administrative Unit,” Iraq Sustainable Democracy Project, October 2007 (Updated February 2008), accessed December 10, 2018, https://www.google.com/url?q=http://www.iraqdemocracyproject.org/policy_brief3.html&source=gmail&ust=1536855151271000&usg=AFQjCNGyWMKbYFkH-SmqFeINq1_iQJe-yQ.

inclusion.¹⁰⁸ Needless to say, the document also elevated tensions between Baghdad and Erbil.

The expansion of the Iraqi national assembly from 275 seats to 325 for the 2010 parliamentary elections brought with it five reserved seats for Christians, one each in Dohuk, Erbil, Nineveh, Baghdad, and Kirkuk. No fewer than five Christian Lists formed: The ADM's Rafidain List, the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular List, Chaldean National Congress, Chaldean Democratic Union, and the Ishtar Democratic List.¹⁰⁹ The principal cleavage among competing factions continued to be Christians' and the Nineveh Plain's place between Baghdad and Erbil. The ADM won three seats while the KRG-supported Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council won two, including the reserved seat from Nineveh.¹¹⁰ A continuously divided Christian parliamentary bloc only served the interests of Iraq's larger political forces, especially Nineveh's Kurdish occupiers.

Iraq's 2010 parliamentary elections were initially interpreted as promising. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki managed to form a unity government with the support of Kurds, Sunnis, and Shiites during a time of increasing sectarianism and tensions over federalism. The spirit of national unity did not last. Al-Maliki quickly moved to marginalize Sunnis, blocking them from taking up positions promised to them in the unity government and using state security services to pursue "Ba'thists." The ongoing withdrawal of U.S. troops meant Iraq would soon be left to its own devices. It should be no surprise then that some

¹⁰⁸ ADM official Zia Yawoo, interview by author, Ankawa, Iraq, October 2016; author's field work.

¹⁰⁹ Teule, "Christians in Iraq," 185. Two independent Christian candidates ran on non-Christian electoral lists.

¹¹⁰ As noted earlier, electoral results are derived from the Independent High Electoral commission. See IHEC website, <http://www.ihec.iq/en/>.

Sunnis, initially wary of federalism, actually came to see it as a way to protect against al-Maliki's authoritarianism.¹¹¹

In terms of the Kurds, tensions with the central government were particularly combustible when it came to oil and gas concessions. Christians and other second-order minorities continued to be caught in the middle, unable to shape the political agenda in their homelands. Erbil maintained Baghdad was not distributing oil and gas revenues in equitable manner.¹¹² The Kurds claimed this gave them the right to independently develop the region's natural resources. By 2011 the KRG had signed at least 37 contracts with 41 companies across seventeen countries.¹¹³ Baghdad insisted such deals were illegal.¹¹⁴ Tensions peaked in October 2011 when Erbil awarded ExxonMobil concessions in six areas, two of which were in "disputed territories," including Bashiqa in the Nineveh Plain.¹¹⁵ The KRG did not pay any attention to the will of second-order

¹¹¹ Maria Ottaway and Danial Kaysi, "The State of Iraq," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2012, 7, accessed December 10, 2018, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/state_of_iraq.pdf

¹¹² Article 112 of the Iraqi Constitution: First: The federal government, with the producing governorates and regional governments, shall undertake the management of oil and gas extracted from present fields, provided that it distributes its revenues in a fair manner in proportion to the population distribution in all parts of the country, specifying an allotment for a specified period for the damaged regions which were unjustly deprived of them by the former regime, and the regions that were damaged afterwards in a way that ensures balanced development in different areas of the country, and this shall be regulated by a law. Second: The federal government, with the producing regional and governorate governments, shall together formulate the necessary strategic policies to develop the oil and gas wealth in a way that achieves the highest benefit to the Iraqi people using the most advanced techniques of the market principles and encouraging investment.

¹¹³ *The Oil and Gas Year: Kurdistan Region of Iraq 2011* quoted in Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Assessing Iraq's Oil Industry," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, July 1, 2012, accessed December 10, 2018, 6, <http://www.rubincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Jawad-YA-au1-PDF.pdf>.

¹¹⁴ Aymenn al-Tamimi, "Assessing Iraq's Oil Industry," 6; Reidar Vissar, "Exxon Moving into Seriously Disputed Territory: The Case of Bashiqa," *Iraq and Gulf Analysis*, November 17, 2011, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://gulfanalysis.wordpress.com/2011/11/17/exxon-moving-into-seriously-disputed-territory-the-case-of-bashiqa/>.

¹¹⁵ Vissar, "Exxon."

minorities before making the deal. Bashiqa's Arab and Yazidis residents leaned towards Baghdad. Christian loyalties were split.¹¹⁶

Erbil's trust in the central government was at an all time low. Oil and gas revenue was paramount to developing the independent economy needed before making a bid for independence. By 2013 Prime Minister al-Maliki was contending with the prospects of another civil war. Sunni protests due to government alienation had given way to a growing insurgency concentrated primarily in Anbar and led by an al-Qaeda offshoot calling itself the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS).¹¹⁷ Security anxieties among Christians throughout Iraq grew.

In the lead up to Nineveh's provincial elections that June the ADM actually joined with the Kurdish-backed Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council on one electoral list. This decision was driven by calls for unity among Christians.¹¹⁸ I suggest that ADM officials did so because they feared further marginalization in Nineveh as well as the dangers of disunity at a time when the Iraqi state was collapsing. Nineveh's second-order minorities capitalized on discontent with Sunni Arab and Kurdish leadership, securing a number of new council seats.¹¹⁹ The reserved Christian seat ended up going to a Kurdish-backed candidate from the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council.¹²⁰

The ADM's inability to deliver political benefits to its followers eventually took its toll on the party's base. In July 2013 several key members defected and formed a new

¹¹⁶ Al-Tamimi, "Assessing Iraq's Oil Industry," 5-6.

¹¹⁷ On the origins of ISIS see Simon Mabon and Stephen Royal, *The Origins of ISIS: The Collapse of Nations and Revolution in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017).

¹¹⁸ ADM official Gevara Zia, phone interview by author, September 15, 2017.

¹¹⁹ See Abdullah Salem, "Local Minorities take over Provincial Government," Niqash, August 22, 2013, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/3276/local-minorities-take-over-provincial-govt.htm>. See IHEC website, <http://www.ihec.iq/en/>.

¹²⁰ See IHEC website, <http://www.ihec.iq/en/>.

organization, the Sons of Mesopotamia (SOM). Reasons for the decision included the erosion of communal rights, a lack of trust in ADM leadership, the monopolization of party authority by key figures (Yonadam Kanna), and a departure from the party's core principles and strategies.¹²¹

The Sons of Mesopotamia was a protest party.¹²² Many of their goals overlapped with the ADM's. They both shared a commitment to addressing 1) the oppressive policies implemented by the KRG toward Assyrians, 2) Kurdish land encroachments and demographic changes, 3) the political marginalization and underrepresentation of Assyrians within the KRG, and 4) the establishment of a Nineveh Plain province.¹²³ The key difference between the two parties is that the SOM contended that the Assyrian Democratic Movement, particularly Secretary General Yonadam Kanna, had done little to accomplish any of these goals. In its own eyes, the SOM was a renewal or rebirth of the ADM's original mission.¹²⁴ But overlapping goals and conflicting methods meant only one thing: a continually divided Christian second-order minority and the weakening of the pro-Baghdad voices—in reality all voices—within it. This played directly into the hands of Iraq's larger forces, especially Kurds.

In January 2014 the central government agreed in principle to create three new provinces: Fallujah (west-central), Tuz Khormato (Salahadin province near Kirkuk) and

¹²¹ Sons of Mesopotamia Statement on Formation/Split with ADM, July 20, 2013, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.bnaynahrain.com/%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%86/>.

¹²² See Max Joseph, "What Does the Upcoming Iraqi Election Mean for Assyrians in 2018," *Medium* (blog), entry posted May 10, 2018, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://medium.com/@DeadmanMax/what-does-the-upcoming-iraqi-election-mean-for-assyrians-in-2018-9c97ee3c0777>.

¹²³ Sons of Mesopotamia Statement.

¹²⁴ Sons of Mesopotamia Statement.

the Nineveh Plain.¹²⁵ The ADM hailed the central government's decision. It was hoped self-determination could counter Kurdish encroachment, remove the Nineveh Plain from the Arab-Kurd feud, provide the Christian second-order minority with a veritable physical and cultural safe-haven, and generally stop Christians from leaving Iraq.¹²⁶ A pre-U.S. invasion population of near one million was now estimated to be approximately 500,000.¹²⁷

The central government's approval of three new provinces was more a strategic political calculation than it was an effort to reward the disenfranchised Christian second-order minority and other Iraqis.¹²⁸ A Nineveh Plain province undermined Kurdish annexation plans. The same can be said for a province near Tuz Khormato, just south of Kirkuk (Salahadin province). No major Sunni political faction had asked for the partition of Anbar. Al-Maliki's move looked like another way to marginalize Sunnis rather than tout the virtues of federalism.¹²⁹ The provinces never came into existence. By mid-2014 Iraq was in its second civil war in ten years.

Concluding Remarks

¹²⁵ General Secretariat for the Council of Ministers–Republic of Iraq, Decision no. 2 of the Council of Ministers for the 3rd Session on 1/21/14, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.cabinet.iq/ArticleShow.aspx?ID=4226>. Author is in possession of copy of Iraqi government document regarding the Nineveh Plain province decision. The document is titled as “Law, Council of Ministers, No. 16 for 2014.”

¹²⁶ Peter BetBasoo and Nuri Kino, “Will a Province for Assyrians Stop their Exodus from Iraq?” Assyrian International News Agency, January 22, 2014, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.AssyrianInternationalNewsAgency.org/releases/20140122133822.htm>; author's field work.

¹²⁷ Reliable statistics are difficult to come by. This is a composite number pulled from several sources. For example, see Mina al-Lami, “Iraq: The Minorities of Nineveh,” BBC News, July 21, 2014, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-28351073>; “The Christians of Iraq and Syria,” *Economist*, August 20, 2014, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2014/08/19/the-christians-of-iraq-and-syria>.

¹²⁸ Anthony H. Cordesman and Sam Khazi, *Iraq in Crisis* (Lanham: Roman and Littlefield, 2014), 105-106.

¹²⁹ Cordesman and Khazi, *Iraq in Crisis*, 105-106.

The Assyrian Democratic Movement had great hope for the new Iraqi state. The ADM emerged from the U.S. invasion as the country's most powerful Christian political actor, a position buttressed in part with Washington's support. The ADM was now a part of the Iraqi state and not the target of it. A democratic state undergirded by federal principles provided the opportunity for the ADM and other segments of Christian second-order minority in northern Iraq to realize self-determination. Instead of focusing on Amadiya and its surrounding districts in Dohuk province, areas long considered Assyrian strongholds in northern Iraq, the ADM and its allies staked a claim over the Nineveh Plain, which was thought to be the last area in northern Iraq where Christians were the undisputed majority.

But Christian unity soon fractured. The ADM balanced against the KRG while other segments of the Christian second-order minority inched closer to Erbil. The country's Arab and Kurdish majorities each retained their own agenda for Nineveh. The Kurdish first-order minority was not about to let the Christian second-order minority prevent it from realizing statehood ambitions and collecting debts from Baghdad. The U.S. seemed disinterested. And there is certainly a case to be made that the central government cared only enough to use Nineveh's second-order minorities as bargaining chips to thwart Kurdish separatism.

Chapter 4

The Breakdown of the Iraqi State: The Assyrian Democratic Movement Mobilizes

“The Nineveh Plain lies between Kurdistan and Sunni people. Sunnis and Kurds are struggling against each other. The area is full of oil and very rich. After ISIS is beaten, there will be another battle.”¹

This chapter explores how the Assyrian Democratic Movement in Iraq responded to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). It examines the ADM’s creation of a self-defense force, the Nineveh Plains Protection Units (NPU), and how the party positioned itself for the post-conflict state. The ADM created the NPU to liberate occupied homelands. More importantly, the NPU was created to ensure Christians retained a place in their historic homelands after ISIS was evicted.

The name “Nineveh Plains Protection Units” held strategic importance. The binding principle of the NPU was an indigenous-based attachment to the Nineveh Plain and a shared Christian faith. Both elements captured the common threads among all Iraqi Christians’ ethno-denominational identities. Second-order minority status meant the ADM had no choice but to pick sides between Baghdad and Erbil. The party eventually aligned with Baghdad, balancing against the KRG and ISIS. The ADM, however, was left alone to navigate the Nineveh Plain’s position within the Kurdistan independence referendum.

¹ ADM official Kaldo Oghana quoted in Dan Damon, “The Christian Militia Taking on the Islamic State in Iraq,” BBC News, September 8, 2015, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34176641>.

Homelands were no longer fungible. The ADM's claim over the Nineveh Plain did not change despite intense domestic political rivalries, security threats, a measure of foreign assistance, the area's changing ethnic composition (de-population), and alterations in the territories controlled by Iraq's dueling centers of power. Yet these factors seemed to have forced the ADM to alter its public stance on the province's position, and that of the homeland, between Baghdad and Erbil. The ADM believed that the establishment of an internationally supported safe haven in the Nineveh Plain would afford residents an opportunity to return and rebuild. Only then would a referendum be held to decide the province's attachment to either Baghdad or Erbil.

The Seeds of a Second-order Minority Mobilization: The Iraqi Army's Collapse, the Kurdish Peshmerga's Retreat, and Life as a Displaced Person

The Iraqi Army's Collapse

On June 4, 2014 Islamic State forces attacked Mosul, the capital of Nineveh province. The Iraqi army collapsed. Federal troops fled alongside tens of thousands of civilians.² The Christian residents of Mosul believed they were facing almost certain death. Many fled east into the Nineveh Plain, north into Dohuk province, or to Ankawa,

² See Ned Parker, Isabel Coles, and Raheem Salman, "Special Report—How Mosul Fell: An Iraqi General Disputes Baghdad's Story," Reuters, October 14, 2014, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-gharawi-special-report/special-report-how-mosul-fell-an-iraqi-general-disputes-baghdads-story-idUKKCN0I30ZA20141014>; Suadad al-Salhy and Tim Arango, "Sunni Militants Drive Iraqi Army Out of Mosul," *New York Times*, June 10, 2014, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/11/world/middleeast/militants-in-mosul.html>; Martin Chulov, "ISIS Insurgents Seize Control of Iraqi City of Mosul," *Guardian*, June 10, 2014, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/10/iraq-sunni-insurgents-islamic-militants-seize-control-mosul>.

the Christian suburb of Erbil some 90 km away. Thousands more left Iraq. The Islamic State's genocidal campaign against northern Iraq's ethno-sectarian minorities had begun.³

The Christian second-order minority in the Nineveh Plain interpreted the Iraqi army's collapse at Mosul as a sign that the state was unable to provide intergroup security. They now had to fend for themselves. ADM officials in Qaraqosh, a city of approximately 50,000 Christians located 30 km southeast of Mosul, began making preparations to fight back. M.Toma, a high-ranking ADM official involved with the initial mobilization attempt, described the security predicament in northern Iraq that Christians found themselves in (diagnostic frame) and how self-help (prognostic frame) was driven by the fear of additional violence (motivational frame):

First of all, after ISIS invaded Mosul, we knew and had a feeling that something dangerous was about to happen.... We knew the situation won't include Mosul only, but the danger was going to spread to other nearby lands. That's when the Assyrian Democratic Movement made a decision to do something, to organize a force...⁴

ADM officials began registering recruits across Christian towns in the Nineveh Plain, including Karamlesh, Qaraqosh, Telskuf, and Batnaya.⁵ Mobilization required the construction of a collective political identity that the Nineveh Plain's Christian residents, ADM members or not, could rally around. ADM officials proposed various names, such as the "Christian Regiment" and the "Christian Army." The decision to use a religious appellation was later abandoned. The Islamic State's attacks had certainly heightened the

³ For information on genocide of Yazidis see Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Thirty-second Session, Agenda item 4, They Came to Destroy: ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis, prepared by Human Rights Council (A/HRC/32/CRP.2), June 15, 2016, accessed December 10, 2018, http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/CoISyria/A_HRC_32_CRP.2_en.pdf. For information on the genocide of Christians see The Knights of Columbus and In Defense of Christians, "Genocide Against Christians in the Middle East," a report submitted to U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, March 9, 2016, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.stopthechristiangenocide.org/en/resources/Genocide-report.pdf>.

⁴ ADM official M. Toma, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, July 2017.

⁵ ADM official M. Toma, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, July 2017.

salience of Christians' identities (boundary activation). But framing the conflict along religious lines emboldened the Islamic State.⁶ All of Iraq's ethno-sectarian groups were under attack, including Sunnis (attribution of similarity). Meanwhile, the Kurdish Peshmerga held a fragile line beginning just north of Mosul near Telkaif and stretching southeast into the Hamdaniya district in the Nineveh Plain.

The Kurdish Peshmerga's "Betrayal" in the Nineveh Plain

On July 14 Peshmerga officials in Hamdaniya issued the following order to the Christian residents of Qaraqosh (Bakhdida), Bartella, and Karamlesh:

To the residents of Bakhdida, Karamlesh, and Bartella:

Anyone who owns any middle-caliber weapons, heavy weapons, or ammunitions of the said weapons must deliver them to the Security Committee. In case of inspection and finding the said weapons, the person possessing them will be subject to the maximum legal penalties. We hereby call on all citizens to cooperate with the Security Committee.

Kindest regards,

Head of the Security Committee
Al-Hamdaniya District 14 JUL 2014⁷

No further explanation was given. I suggest the Kurds feared the outbreak of a multi-layered ethno-sectarian war they could not control. In any event, the Christian second-order minority in the Nineveh Plain was promised protection should ISIS invade.

On the evening of August 6 ISIS forces approached Qaraqosh. A group of the town's male residents recalled checking the Peshmerga's forward positions. They claimed that the Kurds had retreated without warning. The men rushed into town,

⁶ ADM official Athra Kado, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, July 2017.

⁷ For a copy of the order (in Arabic), see Max Joseph, "The Kurds and the Assyrians: Everything You Didn't Know," Assyrian International News Agency, March 31, 2016, accessed December 10, 2018. <http://www.Assyrian International News Agency.org/news/20160331123112.htm>. See also Reinne Hanna and Mathew Barber, *Erasing Assyrians: How the KRG Abuses Human Rights, Undermines Democracy, and Conquers Minority Homelands* (Sweden: Assyrian Confederation of Europe, 2017), Appendix 16.

warning residents by honking horns, pounding on doors, and ringing church bells. Soon mortars began falling.⁸

That same night in al-Qosh, a small Christian town 50 km north of Mosul at the northern edge of the Nineveh Plain, residents running a makeshift checkpoint stopped a convoy of cars. Many felt the convoy was suspicious. They decided to search several, finding Peshmerga uniforms in the trunks. The occupants claimed they were on vacation. They were eventually allowed to pass. Later that night a Christian member of the Peshmerga arrived and informed the town's residents that Islamic State forces were coming. Alqoshians pleaded for weapons from nearby Peshmerga soldiers; their requests were denied. Women and children fled north into Dohuk province. The men remained. ISIS's advance was stopped just outside the town.⁹ By the morning of August 7 the Islamic State was in control of the Christian towns of Qaraqosh, Bartella, Karamlesh, and Telkaif.¹⁰ Al-Qosh was the only Christian town in the Nineveh Plain that did not fall to ISIS.

Other second-order minority communities felt similarly betrayed by the Peshmerga. Yazidis in the city of Sinjar, 125 km west of Mosul, reported being encouraged to remain in their homes as ISIS approached.¹¹ One KDP official boasted on

⁸ Information in this section comes from conversations with church officials in Iraq, displaced Christians, and ADM officials in Iraq.

⁹ This particular anecdote comes from ADM official Athra Kado, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, October 2016. Mr. Kado and his family reside al-Qosh.

¹⁰ Alroy Menezes, "ISIS Captures Largest Christian Town in Iraq and Several Others, Thousands of Minorities Flee," International Business Times, August 7, 2014, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.ibtimes.com/isis-captures-largest-christian-town-iraq-several-others-thousands-minorities-flee-1651618>.

¹¹ Christine van den Toorn, "How the U.S.-Favored Kurds Abandoned the Yazidis When ISIS Attacked," The Daily Beast, August 17, 2014, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/how-the-us-favored-kurds-abandoned-the-yazidis-when-isis-attacked>.

social media of his intent to defend Sinjar “ ‘until the last drop of blood.’ ”¹² But when ISIS showed up, the Kurds were nowhere to be found.¹³

Kurdish leaders claimed that they did not purposely expose minorities to attacks; Washington’s refusal to commit to airstrikes left them fearing that Erbil would fall.¹⁴ In this scenario the Kurds believed retreat was necessary. It was a strategic miscalculation to promise protection; not an intentional act of betrayal designed to leave local populations vulnerable.

Christians and other second-order minority communities were nonetheless left defenseless. The Iraqi army’s collapse at Mosul and the Kurdish Peshmerga’s retreat in the Nineveh Plain served as core components of the diagnostic frames that drove the formation of the NPU. According to Benham Abush, a former general in the Iraqi army and the NPU’s first commanding officer,

Neither the Iraqi state nor the Kurds supported us that day, but they (the central government) was always repeating that the ‘Kurdish army’ will help you and protect you from any danger. Though they did send us the Peshmerga to Qaraqosh to protect us, but that day (when ISIS showed up), and with no previous alarm all these forces (the Kurds) left us at 10:30.... and they expected us to empty the whole village within 4-5 hours.¹⁵

Similarly, Athra Kado, the head of the ADM in the town of al-Qosh, who also serves as the NPU’s public affairs officer argued, “The Iraqi army betrayed us; left us

¹² Sarbast Baiperi Facebook post quoted in Christine van den Toorn, “U.S.-Favored Kurds.”

¹³ Van den Toorn, “U.S.-Favored Kurds.”

¹⁴ See “Obama Authorizes Air Strikes, Humanitarian Aid Mission in Iraq,” ABC News, August 7, 2014, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/obama-authorizes-air-strikes-iraq/story?id=24884633>; Jeremy Diamond, “Why Obama Decided to Strike ISIS,” CNN, August 9, 2014, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/08/08/politics/obama-iraq-turning-point-political/index.html>; Mindy Belz, *They Call us Infidels: On the Run from ISIS with Persecuted Christians* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House, 2016), 249-251.

¹⁵ NPU Commanding Officer Abush, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, October 2016.

alone. The Iraqi army failed us in Mosul. The KRG failed us in the Nineveh Plain. ISIS took it without a bullet.”¹⁶

Life as an Internally Displaced Person: Abandonment, Betrayal, and Loss of Dignity as a Call-to-arms

On the morning of August 7 over 12,000 Christian families, approximately 70,000 people, from Mosul and the Nineveh Plain arrived by foot or by car in Ankawa, the Christian suburb of Erbil. The KRG was not equipped to handle the humanitarian crisis. The Islamic State was threatening the capital. Kurdish officials placed the management of the displaced Christians in the hands of Chaldean Catholic Archdiocese of Erbil. For weeks the displaced slept in churches, parish courtyards, unfinished apartments and office buildings, in tent shelters, or with friends and relatives. Kurdish schools closed for summer break housed Christian families. Church officials and volunteers worked around the clock. They distributed blankets, clothes, and medical supplies, counseled traumatized families, and helped prepare meals in church courtyards. The generosity of ordinary citizens, Christian and Muslim, helped supplement for a lack of immediate aid from the central government, the KRG, and the international community.¹⁷

ADM officials who were either displaced or had family members living in camps consistently claimed that ISIS, the Peshmerga, and the Iraqi army all took something from them (diagnostic frame). Being a displaced person was unacceptable (diagnostic frame). Relying on others for basic necessities robbed them of their dignity. Herein lie

¹⁶ ADM official Athra Kado, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, October 2016.

¹⁷ Information from this section is summarized from conversations with Chaldean Church officials and Christian IDPs. See also Helsinki Commission Hearing on Atrocities in Iraq and Syria: Relief for Survivors and Accountability for Perpetrators, 114th Cong. (September 22, 2016) (Written testimony of Stephen M. Rasche, Esq., Legal Counsel and Director of IDP Resettlement Programs, Chaldean Catholic Archdiocese of Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq), accessed December 10, 2018, https://chrissmith.house.gov/uploadedfiles/3_steve_rasche_testimony.pdf.

key motivational frames: loss of dignity and fear of permanent exile. As ADM official Athra Kado commented,

The camps are not great. They are bad for us. They make us seem like beggars. We want to go home. One day the donations will run out and unless we are home and given a chance to rebuild our lives we will be condemned to being beggars. I live 14 km from ISIS and I still prefer it (my home) to a camp.¹⁸

Another diagnostic frame is found in the testimony of ADM official Zia Yawoo. Mr. Yawoo linked the effects of the breakdown of the Iraqi state, specifically the failure of both the Iraqi army and the Kurdish Peshmerga to defend vulnerable second-order minorities, to the political dynamic that prevailed in the Nineveh Plain prior to August 2014. Embedded in his narrative are also prognostic frames—self-help/self-defense and self-determination—and another motivational frame—a desire to prevent a return to the pre-ISIS dynamic in the Nineveh Plain:

We have a right to protect ourselves. We have a right to rule ourselves. Why should someone from the south be put here to rule Qaraqosh or al-Qosh? If the situation returns to what it was, our people will vanish. Those who had force, Kurdish Peshmerga and the Iraqi army, no one tried to protect us. They didn't even warn our people, who were without arms, that ISIS was coming. So we can't agree to the situation that was before.¹⁹

Athra Kado echoed Zia Yawoo's sentiments. He noted how a lack of assistance from Iraq's larger forces triggered a realization (motivational frame) that the ADM had to finally take action on its own (prognostic frame) if it wanted to reclaim Christians' lost lands and secure a long-term presence in the Nineveh Plain (prognostic frame): "We saw

¹⁸ ADM official Athra Kado, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, July 2017.

¹⁹ ADM official Zia Yawoo, interview by author, Ankawa, Iraq, October 2016.

that nobody was doing anything for us. We know that we don't have another chance if we don't fight for ourselves. No one is protecting us. We want to make a change.”²⁰

Though the desire was there, the reality of the situation was that the ADM's self-defense initiative was stalled and its future seemed very much in doubt. The initial cohort of volunteers was either in Ankawa, Dohuk, Baghdad, or another country.²¹ Christians' immediate concern lay in safety and the general welfare family and friends. Resources were in short supply. Christians had little more than the clothes on their backs.

The one thing the ADM did have working in its favor, even if it was somewhat unbeknownst to party officials at this time, was that many displaced Christians also retained a set similar set of grievances against the KRG and the Iraqi central government for failing to protect them (diagnostic frame). This did not mean that many shared the ADM's political agenda, such as the formation of a province and desire to end the Kurds' de-facto rule in the Nineveh Plain (prognostic frame). But what many displaced Christians did share with ADM officials beyond simply blaming Iraq's larger forces for their predicament was fear and uncertainty over their future in the Nineveh Plain (motivational frames), and the desire to reclaim homelands via self-help (prognostic frame).

For example, Benham Abush, the previously mentioned retired Iraqi army general who would go on to serve as the NPU's first commanding officer, hails from Qaraqosh. He was one of the city's last residents to leave when ISIS approached. General Abush discussed at length how the cruel manner in which Christians were uprooted from their

²⁰ ADM official Athra Kado quoted in Josh Sigel, “We Love This Land: Iraqi Christian Men Fight to Keep ISIS Away from Homes,” Daily Signal, February 18, 2015, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://dailysignal.com/2015/02/18/iraqi-christian-men-take-arms-fight-isis/>.

²¹ ADM official Athra Kado, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, July 2017; ADM official M. Toma, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, July 2017.

homelands and uncertainty over the future, which, as noted earlier, he blamed squarely on the Iraqi army and Kurdish Peshmerga, ultimately served as a call-to-arms (motivational frame):

To me, personally, I couldn't hold my tears from this tragic view that 55,000 people should leave their homes and they weren't even prepared. Some of them have cars and some of them not. It was a very sad view and it affected me as a person. And when we reached here all that we were thinking about was whether to leave our land and history or to hold on to it. For me, I was one of the people who wanted to hold onto my land and my home.²²

In fall 2014 General Abush became a policy entrepreneur, helping to broker (brokerage) connections between himself and other like-minded "grassroots" Christians with the goal of reclaiming lost homelands (diffusion). General Abush then reached out to numerous Christian political parties (brokerage) about forming a self-defense force. Only the ADM shared an interest (diffusion).²³

ADM official Fouad Gorges, in another example of a motivational frame, elaborated on the importance of grassroots support in reigniting the self-defense force initiative by way of shared experience (attribution of similarity). His testimony below also reveals the way the ADM managed to partially subsume the desires of displaced "grassroots" Christians to return to their homelands into the party's pre-ISIS political grievances (diagnostic frames) and long-term goals (prognostic frames):

Since 2003-2014 we had a problem, that our lands are not developed or taken care of, not from the KRG or central government. Both these governments haven't accepted for our lands to be developed. The central government announced they can't help in developing or constructing these lands because they weren't under their control! We suffered for many years. So in 2014 when ISIS invaded, (the) Peshmerga gave their word to the people they would protect them and they should not worry because they were there. The truth was in a few minutes the Peshmerga left the lands... Our people left, of course, and they went to Erbil; but all of them felt betrayed. There wasn't any trust left. So the people thought they have to

²² NPU Commanding Officer Abush, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, October 2016.

²³ NPU Commanding Officer Abush, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, October 2016.

protect themselves. They demanded us to do something. They wanted to volunteer even if it meant only carrying a gun. But they were not organized. We are Zowaa (ADM). So we figured we had to help and make a change. This was a public demand. So, we took volunteers. That is how we (NPU) was founded.²⁴

Soon a name was chosen, the Nineveh Plains Protection Units (NPU). The NPU describes itself as a “security force comprised of brave Assyrian Chaldean Syriac (Christian) men native to the Nineveh Plain region in Iraq.” Its stated aim (prognostic frame) is to “liberate the Nineveh Plain and successfully return the Assyrian Chaldean Syriac people to their indigenous lands and homes.”²⁵

The ADM frames the primary issue facing Iraq’s Christians not of being an ethno-sectarian minority or battling Islamists. The more significant threat is what the resumption of the KRG-Baghdad struggle over the Nineveh Plain means for Christians (diagnostic frame). For example, ADM official Kaldo Oghanna argued, “The Nineveh Plain lies between Kurdistan and Sunni people. Sunnis and Kurds are struggling against each other. The area is full of oil and very rich. After ISIS is beaten, there will be another battle.”²⁶ Whatever sense of trust that once existed between Christians and Iraq’s larger political forces, especially towards the Kurds in terms of providing intergroup physical security, is gone. ADM official Gia Zevarra commented on this dynamic, constructing a prognostic frame that centered on how the ADM created the NPU to give Christians a chance to remain in their homelands *after* the Islamic State.

We face a difficult situation. The KRG wants to annex the (Nineveh) Plain. Baghdad wants the land too. And now because of Daesh (ISIS) there is no more trust between our people and the central government or the Kurds. And I feel another round of extremism is going to come after Daesh. The NPU is here to

²⁴ ADM official Fouad Masoud Gorges, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, July 2017.

²⁵ NPU, “About,” Facebook, no date, accessed December 10, 2018, https://www.facebook.com/pg/NinevehPU/about/?ref=page_internal.

²⁶ ADM official Kaldo Oghana quoted in Damon, “The Christian Militia.”

help give trust so the people, the displaced people, return. People are leaving every day from our home.²⁷

ADM official M. Toma discussed this same dynamic in more detail. The diagnostic frame he constructed centered on how ISIS exploited the political dynamic that prevailed in the Nineveh Plain between 2003 and 2014. Two security and administrative arrangements in the Nineveh Plain unwilling to cooperate with each other froze resource distribution and development projects. This produced a power vacuum ISIS exploited. M. Toma's solution, the prognostic component to his narrative, was self-help/self-defense and ultimately self-determination. Embedded between the diagnostic and prognostic frames was the call-to-arms/motivational frame: a desire to not return to the administrative and security status quo that prevailed in Nineveh before ISIS invaded:

The security (of Nineveh Plain) belonged to Kurds and the management (legal jurisdiction/administration) belonged to Baghdad. That's why when ISIS invaded the forces there weren't able to protect our people, our culture, and our lands... (T)hey ran and withdrew...they didn't even shoot once. That's why we thought we needed a defense force—so the situation will never be the same as August 7—all these files (the security and administration) will belong to us from now on.²⁸

The importance of the breakdown in intergroup trust on the ADM's decision to create the NPU cannot be understated. Shortly after ISIS seized the Nineveh Plain, the Nineveh Center for Research and Development (NCRD), an Iraq-based NGO researching minority rights, conducted a survey among displaced Yazidis and Christians. Results indicated that 56 percent desired to return home if under international protection. The remaining 42 percent favored migrating outside Iraq.²⁹ ADM officials and NPU members realized that providing security was essential to convincing people to return (prognostic

²⁷ ADM official Gevara Zia, phone interview by author, September 2017.

²⁸ ADM official M. Toma, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, July 2017.

²⁹ Nineveh Center for Research and Development, "Caught Between Two Choices: International Protection or Migration," Nineveh Center for Research and Development, September 2014, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://english.ankawa.com/?p=12997>. Author is also in possession of pdf copy.

framing): “The main goal of this force (is) to bring back the trust for people in themselves,” announced General Abush. “That one day if they decided to go back they can be relieved that there is a force that will protect them and defend them.”³⁰

Of crucial importance is recognizing how ADM officials and many NPU members now located themselves in the country’s national fabric. When the Iraqi state was first formed, the Assyrian refugees from the Hakkari had no desire to be incorporated into it. Denied repatriation and then millet status in northern Iraq, many Assyrians began to actively seek incorporation into the state and its national fabric. Over the next several decades Nestorians and other Syriac Christians continued to take up the Assyrian appellation. Many of these individuals, including those in today’s ADM, could claim indigenous status to what is today northern Iraq. Indigenous status buttressed the claim on the Iraqi state. Indeed, the Assyrian ethno-territorial identity hardened, encompassing the Hakkari, Hasakah in Syria, Urmia in Iran, and northern Iraq. Its focal point, however, crystalized around ruins of Nineveh near Mosul.

The claim to indigenous status has thus become the vehicle for the Assyrians in Iraq as well as their Christian co-religionists native to the Nineveh Plain to make their claim on the Iraqi state for political equality (boundary activation): “I think that Assyrians are the origin of Iraq and not the opposite. Iraq without the Assyrians is nothing,” said General Abush, adding, “We created and gave meaning to the word Iraq.”³¹ Referencing what he wanted for his people Athra Kado stated, “(I want Iraq to be) democratic, peaceful and to treat the ancestors of this land as its first citizens—for the

³⁰ NPU Commanding Officer Abush, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, October 2016.

³¹ NPU Commanding Officer Abush, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, October 2016.

authorities in Iraq to give rights to Assyrians as the original people of this land.”³² Said NPU Deputy Commander Colonel Jawat Habib Abboush: “This is our country, we had a civilization here for a thousand years and we are still citizens of this country. We cannot be marginalized.”³³

Central to understanding this evolution in claim-making and the way indigenous status has become a vehicle for rights is the totality of Assyrian ethno-nationalist identity narrative. For centuries the group has steadily watched the community fracture along ethno-denominational lines and its presence within the former borders of the neo-Assyrian empire dwindle. The primary factors in this process have been invading empires, genocidal campaigns, Western missionary encroachment and colonial machinations, the imposition of new borders, and, more recently, Arabs, Kurds, and ISIS. The Nineveh Plain is not just the last stronghold of Iraq’s Christians. It is framed as the last bastion of Assyria. In the words of Athra Kado, “It (the Nineveh Plain) is my land and I want to stay in it. Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Iraqi-Kurdistan, Syria were all my land. Nineveh Plain is all my people have left and now Baghdad and KRG want it. The KRG and Baghdad fighting over the Nineveh Plain is what let ISIS in.”³⁴

The cumulative effect of intragroup cleavages, a dwindling presence in an ever-shrinking homeland, and manipulation by external forces has been a community-wide loss of self-confidence. Iraq’s Assyrians have continuously relied on larger forces to secure their rights only to see those hopes dashed. The ADM’s creation of the Nineveh

³² ADM official Athra Kado quoted in Ramsen Shamon, “Q and A with Athra Kado,” *Ramsen Shamon Blog*, September 10, 2016, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://ramsenshamon.com/personal-blog/2016/9/10/qa-with-athra-kado>.

³³ ADM official Jawat Habib Abboush quoted in Balint Szlanko “Christian Militias Fighting ISIS Hope for U.S. Support,” *Military Times*, June 17, 2016, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2016/06/16/christian-militias-fighting-isis-in-iraq-hope-for-u-s-support/>.

³⁴ ADM official Athra Kado, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, October 2016.

Plains Protection Units is framed as a source of pride, an important step towards helping the group regain confidence and reverse its historical narrative. This, in itself, can be seen as a re-negotiated motivational frame. Said Athra Kado:

I love our people, but there is a problem in our heads. We have one problem. Yes, we work hard at our jobs, but we work for other people. We make furniture or we are engineers for others, here and in Europe and Australia and U.S. and France. We do not work for ourselves. We don't do enough for our people. We have to get the teachers and the engineers to come here and work for us so we can strengthen (ourselves) and exist.... The NPU is here because we have to defend Assyria and the people and our ethnicity.³⁵

Indigenous status is not just the basis for rights. It is also how self-defense is legitimized (motivational frame) and, by extension, how Christians will secure their place in their homelands going forward (prognostic frame). As Kaldo Oghanna stated, "This is our right as human beings and as indigenous people: to protect our people and ourselves. It is not logical for people south and north (of here) to secure this area."³⁶ Athra Kado agreed the homeland could only be secured in the long-term was through self-defense (prognostic frame): "If there are no military units from our people, to protect our own people, I don't think there will be any Christians here in less than ten years."³⁷ ADM officials maintained that Assyrians and other Christians, despite their dwindling numbers and lack of military capacity, were certainly not helpless. M. Toma again framed the need for self-defense around security threats (diagnostic frame) and a drive for political and military equality in Iraq (prognostic frames).

When ISIS was here it was imposed on us to do the protection, not for a strange or unfamiliar people to defend us. We are not disabled that we won't be able to protect our lands and ourselves. That's why we started a military force, or, as I

³⁵ ADM official Athra Kado, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, July 2017.

³⁶ ADM official Kaldo Oghana quoted in Josh Siegel, "Iraqi Christian Men."

³⁷ ADM official Athra Kado quoted in Damon, "The Christian Militia."

can say an organized army, because the others, Kurds and Arabs, each have their own forces and we wanted to have one.³⁸

Emotions and indigenous status claims only go so far in terms of mobilization. A measure of cohesion was required to sustaining collective action and achieving group rights after ISIS was evicted. Second-order minority status ruled out independent action in anything other than the short-term. At some point the ADM would have to align with either the central government or the KRG. There was no telling how either government would react to a second-order minority political party's drive to constitute an armed force in some of Iraq's most strategic territory.

Barriers to Mobilization: Intra-Christian Cleavages and Logistical and Legal Concerns

Christian Disunity

The first challenge facing the ADM was overcoming intragroup cleavages. Long-term collective action demanded cohesion. Denominational affiliations remained more powerful than political allegiances; especially secular nationalist ones built around an ethnic Assyrian identity most of the Christian second-order minority did not accept.

The majority of Iraq's displaced Christians were located in the KRG. Church officials' main goal was to keep Christians safe and in Iraq. They were not going to risk exposing the community to greater violence or antagonize the Kurdish officials whose protection they depended on. Chaldean Patriarch Louis Sako therefore rejected ethno-sectarian defense forces like the NPU: "The forces of the state should take charge of this

³⁸ ADM official M. Toma, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, July 2017.

defense,” he argued in 2014, framing the creation of ethno-sectarian armed groups as something that would “destroy Iraq.”³⁹

The ADM was not the only Christian second-order minority political party mobilizing. The Assyrian Patriotic Party developed Dwekh Nawsha (self-sacrificers). APP Chairman Emmanuel Khoshaba described Dwekh Nawsha’s beginnings. His frames mirrored those constructed by ADM officials. He blamed Iraq’s larger forces for the predicament the Christian second-order minority was now in. The solution to displacement and reclaiming lost lands was self-help while the call-to-arms was the triggering effects that uncertainty over the future and an inability to rely on Iraq’s larger forces solicited:

We can’t trust the government. We can forgive but not forget. The problem for us now is not the liberation of Mosul, but what is next... When I saw what was happening to our families and our community, and I talked to some of our friends in parliament, we made a decision.... We went on August 11 to go to the front line and fight for our people. We wanted to give them a message to not lose hope and to stay and go fight for your land. We also wanted to give a message to the world and our neighbors here in Iraq that we are not poor and helpless and need people to fight for us.⁴⁰

Cooperation between the two forces was out of the question, a condition stemming from the Assyrian Patriotic Party’s tilt towards Erbil and its willingness, at times, to work with the KRG.⁴¹ There were also allegations regarding the APP’s use of foreign fighters.⁴² The ADM could not risk operating in any sort of quasi-legal capacity

³⁹ Chaldean Catholic Patriarchate of Babylon quoted in Edward Pentin, “Patriarch Sako: Christian Militias Would Escalate Iraq Crisis,” National Catholic Register, August 25, 2014, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/patriarch-sako-christian-militias-would-escalate-iraq-crisis>.

⁴⁰ APP Chairman Emmanuel Khoshaba, interview by author, Ankawa, Iraq, October 2016.

⁴¹ Peter Henderson, “Iraq’s Christian Paramilitaries Split in IS fight,” Al-Monitor, October 30, 2014, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/10/iraq-christian-paramilitary-forces-nineveh.html>.

⁴² Reports about foreign fighters in Dwekh Nawsha’s ranks have circulated since its inception. It became more widely reported in 2015. See Adam Lucente, “Iraqi Christian Militia Draws Foreign Fighters,” Al-

that would potentially make it an enemy of either Baghdad, Erbil, or both. Such moves would all but end any hope of securing rights after ISIS.

This also meant that the ADM could not reconstitute its IKF-aligned Ba'th-era forces that were deployed primarily in Dohuk. An ADM official commented that if they were brought into Nineveh Kurdish officials might have interpreted the move as an illegal territorial encroachment. This would also have likely undermined the group's legal right to self-determination in the Nineveh Plain.⁴³

This same ADM official noted that calling up the Ba'th-era forces risked alienating thousands of Christians in the Nineveh Plain that did not accept an ethnic Assyrian identity let alone the ADM's political program.⁴⁴ Displacement and fears of permanent exile meant that it was not the time to even appear to be making a move to assert supremacy within the Iraqi Christian political hierarchy. This too could have undermined the ADM's attempt to realize self-determination. Christians could shape the Nineveh Plain administrative programs in their favor only if they retained a demographic majority. As noted earlier, a pre-requisite to self-determination then was facilitating the return of displaced Christians of all ethno-denominational affiliations and political leanings.

The ADM needed a mobilization strategy that appealed to all segments of the Nineveh Plains Christian second-order minority and not just ADM supporters. The strategy also had to fit into the national effort to fight ISIS. The ADM had to be seen as

Monitor, July 24, 2015, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/07/iraq-militia-christian-volunteers-ypg-assyrian.html>.

⁴³ Unnamed ADM official #1, interview by author, Ankawa, Iraq, October 2016.

⁴⁴ Unnamed ADM official #1, interview by author, Ankawa, Iraq, October 2016.

Iraqi patriots. The self-defense initiative, in other words, had to come purely from the people of the Nineveh Plain.⁴⁵

The choice of the name “Nineveh Plains Protection Units” served a strategic purpose. The Nineveh Plain housed Christians of all ethno-denominational identities and political loyalties. The common experience of losing their lands and its residual effects was the one thing that could possibly produce cohesion (attribution of similarity) and act as a bridge to Arabs and Kurds (attribution of similarity). The Islamic State seized lands from all of Iraq’s ethno-sectarian groups.

The overarching theme of all interviews and surveys conducted with ADM officials and NPU soldiers was reclaiming lands lost (prognostic/motivational frames). For example, one soldier from Qaraqosh wrote, “(I have a) desire to free and protect our lands and to protect the ancient Syriac (sic) culture.”⁴⁶ Another from al-Qosh indicated, “(I want to) take our rights back and the rights of our lands—the lands that were taken from us by ISIS.”⁴⁷

ADM officials admitted that the first batch of recruits did suffer a small amount of attrition. Some individuals grew frustrated with the lack of permanent salary arrangements.⁴⁸ This should not be mistaken as the ADM offering financial inducements. The ADM’s first announcement made no promises of a salary. Those who joined in the hopes of payment were likely doing so because they were displaced and desperate. In addition, I could find no evidence among NPU soldiers, within ADM statements, or in

⁴⁵ Unnamed ADM official #1, interview by author, Ankawa, Iraq, October 2016.

⁴⁶ NPU soldier survey #8, administered by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, October 2016.

⁴⁷ NPU soldier survey #14, administered by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, October 2016.

⁴⁸ ADM official Athra Kado, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, July 2017.

discussions with numerous individuals in Iraq that the party ever used financial incentives to recruit.

Joining the force did not require ADM membership. The NPU was marketed as a grassroots movement. This was an important shift from the ADM's Ba'th-era forces, which were composed entirely of party members.⁴⁹ Athra Kado discussed how the ADM downplayed the ethnic Assyrian issue among recruits who put forth their sectarian/denominational identity: "Some (recruits) come here because they are Christian and want to protect their lands. (The) NPU does not force 'Assyrian' on recruits, but they talk about it in mess halls and while lying around. Some end up accepting the Assyrian identity. Some hold on to 'Christian' only. But all are closer to Assyrian identity after camp (training)."⁵⁰

The binding principle of the NPU is therefore 1) an indigenous-based attachment to the Nineveh Plain, including the right, need and responsibility to liberate and defend it, and 2) Christianity. Both elements captured the common threads among all Christians' ethno-denominational identities and the claim they make to the country's past, present, and future.

The entire collective action framing process comes together, including evidence that mobilization was for reasons that extended beyond mitigating immediate security threats, in elements of ADM's official announcement of the NPU issue in late-November 2014:

As ISIS advanced its terrible march, unopposed by Iraqi and Kurdish forces, over 150,000 of our Chaldean Syriac Assyrian people were forced out of the region around Mosul as well as the wider Nineveh Plain.... We were forced to either seek refuge in towns and cities of the Kurdistan region or, reluctantly, leave the country altogether....

⁴⁹ ADM official Zia Yawoo, Facebook message to author, March 17, 2017.

⁵⁰ ADM official Athra Kado, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, October 2016.

Therefore to deal with these ongoing calamities, it is absolutely necessary to rise up and stand steadfast against ISIS's vicious agenda to uproot our nation from its ancestral lands and to empty Iraq of its indigenous people..... Today....we are announcing the formation and training of local forces under the name of Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU). The NPU is comprised of the brave young men from the Nineveh plain who like their fathers, mothers, sisters and brothers, have had their lives stolen by ISIS. Following rigorous training, the mission of the NPU will be first to protect the remaining Chaldean Syriac Assyrian lands from further attacks by ISIS... Participation in the NPU....should not be limited by political party, ethnic group or religious affiliation..... We must stress that we are ready to fully coordinate and cooperate with all the military forces present in the Nineveh Plain who are engaged in the liberation of these areas with the objective of returning displaced families to their homes, restoring their lives and restarting the process of self-determination and a true national partnership.⁵¹

The ADM was therefore particularly attuned to Iraq's pre-Islamic ancient Mesopotamian heritage. This echoed earlier efforts by the Ba'th regime to instill a pre-Christian/pre-Islamic ancient Mesopotamian identity among citizens.⁵² Many Assyrians rejected the Ba'th's efforts to co-opt their identity without directly recognizing them first as a distinct nation. Ironically, the ADM was now using a similar tactic. It was playing up a territorial-based identity all groups in Iraq could claim (boundary formation/activation) in order to establish cohesion within the NPU's ranks and to assert a standing within the country comparable to the Arab and Kurdish majorities. The emblems and symbols associated with ADM and NPU reveal a strong pre-Islamic and pre-Christian undercurrent. Rather than crosses, the central element is the Disc (Sun) of Shamash. A solar deity, Shamash was the Babylonian and Assyrian god of justice.⁵³

⁵¹ Nineveh Plains Protection Units (NPU) "Announcement of the NPU," Facebook, November 25, 2014, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/NPU.NinevehplainProtectionUnits/>.

⁵² See Amatazia Baram, *Culture and Ideology in the Formation of Ba'athist Iraq, 1968-1989* (Oxford: St. Anthony's Press, 1991).

⁵³ See Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, *Gods, Demons, and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary* (London: British Museum Press, 1992), 168. The Disc of Shamash was also incorporated into the Iraqi Coat of Arms (1959-1965).



Image 1: ADM Flag Image 2: (de-facto) Assyrian national flag Image 3: NPU Logo⁵⁴

Appealing to homeland claims and a common Christian identity for mobilization and cohesion purposes did not mean the ADM was abandoning its Assyrian nationalist values and political goals. The ADM is a political party grounded by a firm belief in the core *Assyrianness* of all Iraqi Christians. The homeland was no longer fungible. The ADM’s main political-territorial goal remained fixed on a Nineveh Plain province for minorities attached to and endorsed by Baghdad. The party’s ethno-nationalist sentiments, its desire for self-determination, and its pro-Baghdad leanings are reflected in the NPU’s mission statement:

- The NPU shall participate in the liberation of Nineveh so as to secure towns and villages historically populated by Chaldeans, Syriacs, and other Assyrian Christians.
- Second, the NPU shall ensure the long-term safety of these Assyrian lands for resettlement and repatriation of Assyrians to the Nineveh Plain.
- Third, the NPU strengthens our political claim to normalize control and jurisdiction of the Nineveh Plain in the favor of independent Assyrians who wish to maximize their autonomy. Our long-term goal is the creation of a new Nineveh province separate of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and equal to other provinces under the Government of Iraq. We believe that only through a separate Nineveh Plain province independent of the KRG may Assyrians realize their potential as free and equal citizens of the Government of Iraq.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ ADM copyright permission on file with Virginia Tech grad school.

⁵⁵ “Mission Statement of Nineveh Plains Protection Units,” Nineveh Plains Defense Fund, accessed December 10, 2018, [https://ninevehplainedefensefund.org/about-npu/#PrettyPhoto\[2\]/0/](https://ninevehplainedefensefund.org/about-npu/#PrettyPhoto[2]/0/).

By the end of 2014 the Assyrian Democratic Movement had registered at least 2000 recruits.⁵⁶ Being displaced, many retained few possessions. The ADM needed money for salaries, a place to train, weapons, and food and shelter.⁵⁷ Even if it could acquire these resources independently, a second-order minority group's self-defense force composed of a few hundred soldiers stood no chance against Iraq's dueling centers of power. It was also no match for the Islamic State.

Legal Approval and Logistical Concerns: Second-order Minority Status and the Necessity of an Alliance

ADM members could make all the homeland claims they wanted, including references about not letting the Kurds or the Shia-dominated central government resume their struggle for the Nineveh Plain. But at the end of the day such rhetoric meant little. The ADM and NPU were still a small component of the Christian second-order minority. The major Iraqi players in the struggle to liberate the country were the central government and the KRG. An alliance with Baghdad or Erbil was a precondition for mobilization. Neither government, each with its own designs for the Nineveh Plain, was about to make the ADM's efforts to mobilize easy.

Al-Qosh remained the only part of the Nineveh Plain not occupied by ISIS. Kurds controlled the town and, with U.S. assistance, held the front line against the Islamic State. The ADM was insistent upon only fighting for Christian lands. As much as the ADM may have hated the idea, any request to establish a base or secure legal approval and funding rested first on an appeal to the Kurdish first-order minority.

⁵⁶ ADM official Athra Kado, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, July 2017.

⁵⁷ Assyrian National Broadcasting (AX Documentaries), "Our Dignity, Our Land: The NPU Story," Published online April 29, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3kGHWXy2M4g>; NPU Commanding Officer Abush, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, October 2016.

Kurdish officials agreed to help, but only if the force was first integrated into the Peshmerga. ADM officials and General Abush refused. They did not believe the Kurds would let them remain in the Nineveh Plain after ISIS. This should not be that surprising considering the ADM's main goal was a province attached to Baghdad. The Assyrian Democratic Movement then asked American consulate officials in Erbil to pressure the KRG into providing training space. In early 2015 Kurdish leaders acquiesced to U.S. pressure, granting the ADM permission to use an old military facility in Chamchamal (near Kirkuk).⁵⁸ The facility was decrepit; the training lease was only for a few weeks. ADM officials claimed that Kurdish officials promised to supply food rations and uniforms. But days before training began the Kurds allegedly withdrew support. General Abush described these events and how the ADM attempted to overcome the barriers imposed by the Kurdish first-order minority:

We were all IDPs so this place was better than nothing. So we went to Chamchamal and the (Ministry of Peshmerga) approval was only for twenty-one days, and it included clothes and food at first but two days before the training started the Kurds decided to give us nothing. So we were forced to find a way to pay for the clothes and the food. We gave 5000 Iraqi Dinars for each soldier, and that was for the food. Then we bought clothes (uniforms) for everyone, and the money was from abroad (diaspora), 90 percent of it.⁵⁹

For three weeks just over 330 recruits underwent basic training administered by Christian veterans of the Iraqi army and American security contractors.⁶⁰ But when training concluded the ADM still did not have a permanent military facility and long-term financial support. Recruits needed weapons, food and supplies, sleeping quarters,

⁵⁸ Assyrian National Broadcasting, "Our Dignity, Our Land;" NPU Commanding Officer Abush, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, October 2016; ADM official Athra Kado, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, October 2016.

⁵⁹ NPU Commanding Officer Abush, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, October 2016.

⁶⁰ NPU Commanding Officer Abush, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, October 2016; Assyrian National Broadcasting, "Our Dignity, Our Land." The U.S. government did not approve the American contractors. When the ADM learned of this it ended the relationship.

uniforms, salaries, and urban combat training.⁶¹ ADM officials then tried to fold their effort into the American campaign to combat ISIS.

Washington sought to supplement Iraq's security forces by "reawakening" Anbar's Sunni tribes.⁶² ADM officials and leaders of the Turkmen second-order minority supported the plan. It legitimized self-defense and provided the political cover needed to prevent a return to de-facto Kurdish occupation.⁶³ These reasons, of course, were not part of the U.S.'s strategic plan, especially the thwarting of the KRG's territorial claims. They are instead best seen as the ADM masking its goals within Washington's, a practice that is emblematic of how second-order minority groups often reach for power. The Shia Arabs controlling the central government were opposed to the U.S. plan. They were more content to entrust the country's defense to the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), Iranian-backed Shia militias operating primarily outside central government control.⁶⁴

One thing the Iraqi central government could not forgo, though, was American airpower. U.S. officials pressured Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to rein in the

⁶¹ NPU Commanding Officer Abush, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, October 2016; ADM official Athra Kado, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, October 2016; Assyrian National Broadcasting, "Our Dignity, Our Land."

⁶² Frederic Wehrey and Ariel I. Ahram, "Taming the Militias: Building National Guards in Fractured Arab States," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2015, 8, accessed December 10, 2018, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/fractured_national_guards.pdf. See also David Siddhartha Patel, "ISIS in Iraq: What We Get Wrong and Why 2015 Is Not 2007 Redux," Brandeis University Crown Center for Middle East Studies Briefing no. 87, January 2015, accessed December 10, 2018, www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/MEB87.pdf.

⁶³ See Matt Cetti-Roberts, "Inside the Christian Militias Defending the Nineveh Plains," *War is Boring* (blog), March 6, 2015, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://medium.com/war-is-boring/inside-the-christian-militias-defending-the-nineveh-plains-fe4a10babeed>; Dalshad Abdullah, "Iraqi Turkmen Demand Formation of Own Military Force," *Asharq al-Awsat*, December 12, 2014, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://english.aawsat.com/d-abdullah/news-middle-east/iraqi-turkmen-demand-formation-of-own-military-force>.

⁶⁴ See Ariel I. Ahram and Fredric Wehry, "Harnessing Militia Power: Lessons of the Iraqi National Guard," *Lawfare* (blog), entry posted May 27, 2015, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2015/05/27/harnessing-militia-power-lessons-of-the-iraqi-national-guard/>; Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future," Carnegie Middle East Center, April 28, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://carnegie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810>.

PMF and begin empowering local security forces under its umbrella.⁶⁵ ADM officials negotiated with Baghdad for months about securing a role for the NPU in this endeavor. The lack of power second-order minorities possess was again on full display. The central government demanded that the NPU first retain its own military base. The ADM wanted that base to be in the Nineveh Plain. This forced officials to seek building permits from Erbil. The Kurds continued to demand that the ADM first integrate the force into the Peshmerga. The central government refused to intervene unless the ADM deployed the force to southern Iraq.⁶⁶ General Abush refused to fight for anything but “Christian lands.”⁶⁷ ADM official M. Toma described how Iraq’s larger political forces tried to use the NPU as a political tool (diagnostic frames): “Every part (the KRG and Baghdad) wanted us for their side.... They wanted to take us to their side to show the world that we were one component. But of course we weren’t like a ‘trump card’ for anyone...”⁶⁸

Meanwhile, Kurdish leaders authorized their Christian second-order minority political proxies to field self-defense forces. The KDP-backed Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council created the Nineveh Plain Guard Forces (NPGF). The Bet-Nahrain Democratic Party, another party now supported by the KDP, fielded the Nineveh Plain Forces (NPF).⁶⁹ Sectarian political parties in Baghdad also entered the competition. The Badr Organization, a Shia political party, created the Babylon Brigades. The Babylon Brigades is a pseudo-Christian force. A Christian leads it but the Shabak and Shia Arabs make up most of its rank and file.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Ahram and Wehry, “Harnessing.”

⁶⁶ Assyrian National Broadcasting, “Our Dignity, Our Land.”

⁶⁷ NPU Commanding Officer Abush, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, October 2016.”

⁶⁸ ADM official M. Toma, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, July 2017.

⁶⁹ Hanna and Barber, *Erasing Assyrians*, 18.

⁷⁰ Hanna and Barber, *Erasing Assyrians*, 18.

ADM officials again requested assistance from the U.S. Consulate in Erbil. American officials pressured the KRG to grant the ADM's requests. In November 2015 the ADM began constructing a military facility near al-Qosh. Diaspora members, wealthy Iraqi-Christians, Western donors, and nonprofits such as the Assyrian Church of the East Relief Organization donated funds. The central government also contributed money.⁷¹

Over the course of three months ADM members and NPU recruits constructed sleeping barracks, a mess hall, a command post, media center, a garage/workshop for storing equipment and building makeshift artillery, and a shooting range. Bunkers and foxholes provided defenses on the east and west. The base's northern perimeter was protected by a mountain range. A large metal gate staffed by several armed soldiers and protected by earthen mounds guarded the lone entry point on the base's southern perimeter. In February 2016 construction finished.⁷² The following month Baghdad approved the Nineveh Plains Protection Units as part of the Popular Mobilization Forces. Militarily the NPU was slated to operate under Operation Nineveh Liberation Command.⁷³

Still, the central government only agreed to fund 300 soldiers at a pay rate less than that of other PMF.⁷⁴ The ADM now had registered thousands of recruits.⁷⁵ General

⁷¹ NPU Commanding Officer NPU Commanding Officer Abush, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, October 2016. See also NPU Commanding Officer Abush speaking in Assyrian National Broadcasting, "Our Dignity, Our Land."

⁷² Details obtained by author on visits to the camp in October 2016 and July 2017. See also Assyrian National Broadcasting, "Our Dignity, Our Land."

⁷³ See Ground Forces Command, Cooperation Force Deployment (to the NPU), Nineveh Liberation Operation Command, A/13/16/32, March 22, 2016, copy accessed December 10, 2018, [https://ninevehplaindefensefund.org/about-npu/#PrettyPhoto\[2\]/0/](https://ninevehplaindefensefund.org/about-npu/#PrettyPhoto[2]/0/); Ground Forces Command, Cooperation Force Deployment (to the PMF), Nineveh Liberation Operation Command, A/13/16/32, March 22, 2016, copy accessed December 10, 2018, [https://ninevehplaindefensefund.org/about-npu/#PrettyPhoto\[2\]/1/](https://ninevehplaindefensefund.org/about-npu/#PrettyPhoto[2]/1/).

⁷⁴ NPU Commanding Officer Abush, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, October 2016; ADM official Athra Kado, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, July 2017.

⁷⁵ Assyrian National Broadcasting, "Our Dignity, Our Land."

Abush speculated about why the approved troop number was so small: “Three truths about this: the central government thinks this number is enough; they only can support and provide for this number; and from the first place, they never wanted us to form a force.”⁷⁶ I suggest that of General Abush’s three criticisms towards Baghdad the last one is most accurate. The Iraqi government did not need the assistance of a second-order minority group to retake swaths of territory controlled by ISIS. It had both U.S. and Iranian support, respectively. Baghdad’s decision to approve a force of only 300 soldiers was likely driven more by symbolic concerns than tangible military value. It appeared U.S. officials worried about Iranian influence, presented Iraq as a secular country fighting radical Islamic elements, buttressed national unity, and helped the government deflect criticism for its failure to protect Christians and other second-order minorities when ISIS invaded.⁷⁷

In May 2016 U.S. military advisors began training NPU soldiers. That same month the NPU helped liberate Telksuf.⁷⁸ In mid-2016 Baghdad approved an additional 200 soldiers. The number was later increased to 1000.⁷⁹ This seems like a sizeable force. However, the Shia PMF numbered well into the tens of thousands. More importantly, each major force participating in Iraq’s liberation retained a certain degree of veto power over others’ actions. The Christian second-order minority was not able to prevent Kurdish officials from blocking the order to mobilize the 1000 new NPU soldiers.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ NPU Commanding Officer Abush, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, October 2016.

⁷⁷ Erica Gaston, “Local Forces, Local Control,” Global Public Policy Institute, April 20, 2018, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.gppi.net/publications/local-forces-local-control/>.

⁷⁸ ADM official M. Toma, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, July 2017. See also “Video Purportedly Shows Battle in Which Navy SEAL was Killed,” Fox News, May 5, 2016, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2016/05/05/video-purportedly-shows-battle-in-which-navy-seal-was-killed.html>.

⁷⁹ Total: 1,500.

⁸⁰ Hanna and Barber, *Erasing Assyrians*, 20.

Negotiating a Place after ISIS: The ADM and NPU in a Divided Nineveh Plain and Facing the Kurdish First-order Minority's Push for Independence

In October 2016 Iraqi security forces and the Kurdish Peshmerga began operations to liberate the Nineveh Plain. Three months later ISIS was dislodged. The Nineveh Plain remained divided. The Peshmerga controlled the northern corridor, refusing to give up any liberated territory. Erbil's Christian proxies were deployed in numerous towns. The Nineveh Plain Guard Forces took up positions in Bashiqa, Telskuf, and al-Qosh, not far from the NPU's training base. The Nineveh Plain Forces were posted near Batnaya.

Iraqi security forces dominated the Nineveh Plain's southern corridor, including most of Hamdaniya district. The NPU helped liberate and hold many of Hamdaniya's Christian towns. The force was rewarded with the security mandate over Karamlesh, Nimrud, Bartella, and Qaraqosh.⁸¹ This represented an important symbolic and military victory. Part of the ADM's territorial claim had been secured. A Christian force allied with Baghdad now stood at the scene of the Peshmerga's "betrayal."

In March 2017 the ADM joined with six other Christian political parties in presenting a list of demands to the central government and the KRG (attribution of similarity/boundary formation/boundary activation). The March Agreement⁸² was another attempt to forge Christian political unity by agreeing to a common set of goals and, with international assistance, an attempt to place the Nineveh Plain above the KRG-central government struggle (diagnostic and prognostic frames). Signatories included several

⁸¹ See Hanna and Barber, *Erasing Assyrians*, Map of Security Forces' Deployments as of September 2017, located on fourth page into report (unnumbered). Author confirmed these deployments were accurate with ADM officials in Iraq.

⁸² Author's term.

parties enjoying Kurdish patronage, most notably the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council.⁸³ The demands included:

1. The creation of a Plain province and all the rights that go with it, per the central government's January 2014 decision;
2. A period of (United Nations) international monitoring, including security;
3. The application of a neutral status to the Nineveh Plain above the KRG-central government feud that guaranteed the area's residents may defend themselves and determine the province's future relationship with Baghdad and Erbil;
4. Reconstruction and resettlement assistance from Baghdad, including an appeal to international donors;
5. The Iraqi-state redressing, legally speaking, ISIS's genocidal campaign and other incidents of violence on the community since 2003;
6. Legislative, educational, personal status, religious, and other antidiscrimination reforms;
7. A statement on the rejection by the Chaldean-Assyrian-Syriac people of the de-facto policies imposed on minorities that do not reflect their political visions and any policy that foments internal divisions.
8. Clauses towards the KRG that address land encroachments and self-determination wherever Chaldeans-Assyrians-Syriacs constitute a majority.⁸⁴

The March Agreement and the internationalization of the Christian second-order minority's predicament in Nineveh did little to sway Baghdad or Erbil. Nor did it bring about the Christian political unity it intended to.

In April 2017, Erbil announced preparations were under way for the long-awaited Kurdish independence referendum. Kurdish leaders announced that voting would take place in all areas under Kurdish control, including Kirkuk and the northern Nineveh

⁸³ Signatories included the two major political parties with a presence in northern Iraq, the The Assyrian Democratic Movement and its rival, the KDP supported Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council. The remaining signatories were relatively small parties by comparison: the Chaldean Democratic Forum, Assyrian Patriotic Party, ChaldoAshur Organization, Chaldean National Council, and the Syriac Assembly Movement.

⁸⁴ Author is in possession of document (copy). A version in English is available at the ADM-Illinois Facebook page. See post dated March 7, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/ADMIllinois/>.

Plain.⁸⁵ KRG President Masoud Barzani appeared to try to court the region's second-order minorities away from Baghdad and into the Kurdish statehood project:

A new constitution must be written to guarantee the rights of all components. And I assure all components of the presence of representation in the project to write the constitution of the independent Kurdistan, and we need a national anthem, and changes in the flag of Kurdistan, to contain symbols of the components and to be expressed for everyone.⁸⁶

Barzani's rhetoric did not match events on the ground. Kurdish officials used their de-facto ruling status in areas of the Nineveh Plain and influence among local politicians to remove anti-referendum Christian mayors in al-Qosh and Telkaif. They were replaced with pro-KDP Christians. Protests erupted in both locales. Several prominent residents of al-Qosh were threatened with arrest. The most notable of these individuals was Athra Kado, the aforementioned head of the local ADM office.⁸⁷

In early September ADM Secretary General Yonadam Kanna issued a statement demanding the Nineveh Plain's exclusion from the referendum (boundary activation): "We will not accept any sort of referendum to be held in the Nineveh Plain along with any other 'disputed areas' belonging to minority communities."⁸⁸ To be sure, the Nineveh Plain was only disputed to Arabs and Kurds. The Assyrian Patriotic Party and the Sons of Mesopotamia also voiced opposition (boundary activation).⁸⁹ The KDP-supported

⁸⁵ See "Kurdish Official: Kurdistan Aims to Include Nearly All Disputed Areas in Referendum, July 2017, NRT, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.nrttv.com/en/Details.aspx?Jimare=15087>.

⁸⁶ Masoud Barzani quoted in "Barzani Talks About the New Flag and Anthem....And Reassures the Components of the Region," NRT, August 22, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.nrttv.com/AR/Detail.aspx?Jimare=56032>.

⁸⁷ See Hanna and Barber, *Erasing Assyrians*, 29-34. For copy of an individual notice delivered to protestors see Appendix 4 in same source.

⁸⁸ Yonadam Kanna quoted in "Al-Qosh, Christian Village on Faultline of Iraq and Kurdistan," The Holy Land Christian Ecumenical Foundation," September 30, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://hcef.org/790808423-alcqosh-christian-village-faultline-iraq-kurdistan/>.

⁸⁹ Hanna and Barber, *Erasing Assyrians*, 40.

Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council, a signatory to the March Agreement, expressed support (boundary deactivation).⁹⁰

On September 12 the Iraqi parliament voted to reject the Kurdistan referendum on independence. It also authorized Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to take whatever means necessary to uphold Iraq's unity.⁹¹ The decision did not deter Erbil. On September 15 the Kurdish parliament met to legally enforce the upcoming referendum. It was the first parliamentary session in over two years.⁹² Assyrian Democratic Movement MPs boycotted the session and made the following statement, in effect a clear us/them distinction (boundary activation):

We have demanded from day one, when the referendum date was scheduled in the KRI (Kurdistan Region), that there should be political assurances guaranteeing the rights of our Chaldean Syriac Assyrian nation in the region. The policies in the KRI for the past twenty-five years have not served the interests of our people. There are several unresolved issues and no real intention to solve them. Twenty-five years have passed without resolving issues related to theft of our land and our villages and no justice for our leaders killed in political assassinations. We have never experienced a true political partnership in the Kurdistan Region; rather we have only been exploited as part of an attempt to portray a positive image of the KRG. We reject that.⁹³

On the day before the election the KRG Supreme Council for the Referendum issued a document containing various provisions guaranteeing rights for the region's

⁹⁰ CSAPC official Halan Hormuz quoted in Azad Jamkari, "Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council: Christians Demand Inclusion of Nineveh Plain in Kurdistan Referendum," Rudaw, July 14, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.rudaw.net/arabic/kurdistan/140720171>.

⁹¹ Mina Aldroubi, "Iraqi Parliament Rejects Kurdistan Independence Referendum," The National-International Edition, September 12, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/iraqi-parliament-rejects-kurdistan-independence-referendum-1.627743>.

⁹² Nehal Mostafa, "Kurdistan's Parliament Convenes for First Time in Two Years, Approves Referendum," Iraqi News, September 15, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.iraqinews.com/features/kurdistans-parliament-convenes-first-time-two-years-approves-referendum/>.

⁹³ Official ADM Facebook Live video, September 15, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/zowaa.org/videos/745708455628346/>; For English translation (text), see Hanna and Barber, *Erasing Assyrians*, 40-41.

second-order minorities.⁹⁴ For example, Kurdistan was recognized as an ethnically, culturally, and religiously diverse society. Self-determination was guaranteed where groups claimed cultural/historical roots. Political representation would be upheld for second-order minorities in all government institutions, including diplomatic posts, the Peshmerga, and the Constitutional Re-Drafting Committee. Syriac was declared one of Kurdistan's official languages. Second-order minorities retained the right to abide by personal status laws.⁹⁵ The ADM rejected the document on the grounds that it did not adequately address its concerns. The main area of contention continued to be Erbil's refusal to exclude the Nineveh Plain from the referendum.⁹⁶

The ADM's protests were essentially ignored. Erbil already had the support from several Christian parties it needed to distract the international community, including the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council and the Bet-Nahrain Democratic Party.⁹⁷ The Chaldean Patriarch then blamed Christian political parties and their "militias" for the complete lack of rights Christians have in Iraq:

We Christians are not able to assert our rights either before the central agencies or before the regional bodies, in particular because political factions and militias who call themselves Christians are actually far removed from the concerns of local Christian communities. If a new armed conflict were to erupt in the region, it

⁹⁴ Statement by the Supreme Council for the Referendum, Office of the Kurdistan Region Presidency, September 24, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.presidency.krd/arabic/articledisplay.aspx?id=kpY+pCLPyQY=#>.

⁹⁵ See "The Supreme Council for the Referendum Issues a Document that Describes the Region after the Separation," NRT, September 24, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.nrtv.com/AR/Detail.aspx?Jimare=58781>.

⁹⁶ Official Statement of the Assyrian Democratic Movement on the Supreme Council for the Referendum Minority Rights Document, September 24, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.ankawa.com/forum/index.php?topic=854474.0>.

⁹⁷ See CSAPC official Halan Hormuz quoted in Azad Jamkari, "Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council," Mewan Dolamari, "Christians Lobby for Kurdish Independence," Kurdistan 24, January 6, 2016, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.kurdistan24.net/en/interview/acfebd7b-1bc6-4a03-8df6-747acc455deb>.

would certainly involve a further reduction of the Christian presence in these areas.⁹⁸

The Kurdistan independence referendum was held on September 25. Voting took place in areas of the Nineveh Plain under Kurdish control. 92 percent of voters across the region favored independence.⁹⁹ Reports of low turnout in areas not favoring independence, allegations of ballot stuffing, and threats against minorities in disputed areas quickly emerged, including in the Nineveh Plain.¹⁰⁰

The KRG's decision to hold the vote was a strategic miscalculation. Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and numerous foreign governments rejected the results, including the United States, Turkey, and Iran.¹⁰¹ Federal authorities moved to reassert control over disputed areas, strategic oil fields, and border points. In Kirkuk, the “Kurdish Jerusalem,” the alliance between the KDP and PUK broke down. The PUK agreed to withdraw its forces in coordination with Baghdad while the KDP refused. The

⁹⁸ Statement of the Chaldean Catholic Patriarchate of Babylon, September 15, 2007, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://saint-adday.com/>. See also Lefevre Hugues, “Referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan: Patriarch Sako Fears New War,” September 15, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.famillechretienne.fr/politique-societe/monde/referendum-au-kurdistan-irakien-le-patriarche-sako-redoute-une-nouvelle-guerre-224523>.

⁹⁹ Primary Results of Kurdistan Independence Referendum, Independent High Elections and Referendum Commission, September 27, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, http://www.khec.krd/pdf/173082892017_english%202.pdf.

¹⁰⁰ See Christine van den Toorn, “Internal Divides Behind the Kurdistan Referendum,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 11, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/73359>; Dina al-Shibeeb, “Assyrian Behind ‘Voter Fraud’ Report Warns of ‘Romanticized Image’ of Kurdistan,” Al Arabiya, October 8, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2017/10/08/Assyrian-behind-voter-fraud-report-warns-of-romanticized-image-of-Kurdistan-.html>.

¹⁰¹ See Ahmed Rasheed and Raya Jalabi, “Baghdad Piles Pressure on Iraqi Kurds to Reverse Overwhelming Independence Vote,” September 26, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-kurds-referendum/baghdad-piles-pressure-on-iraqi-kurds-to-reverse-overwhelming-independence-vote-idUSKCN1C1127>; Statement of the U.S. Department of State on Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government's Referendum, September 29, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/09/274522.htm>; Maher Chmaytelli and Ece Toksabay, “Turkey Raises Oil Threat after Iraqi Kurds Back Independence,” Reuters, September 28, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-mideast-crisis-kurds-referendum/turkey-raises-oil-threat-after-iraqi-kurds-back-independence-idUKKCN1C31TR?il=0>; Ted Regencia, “Erdogan, Rouhani United in Opposition to Kurdish State,” Al-Jazeera, October 4, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/erdogan-rouhani-united-opposition-kurdish-state-171004124507138.html>.

fracture enabled Iraqi forces to reassert control over the city, which had been under Kurdish control since 2014. KRG President Barzani and the ruling KDP then backpedaled on their right to self-determination, offering to suspend the referendum's results. By late October President Barzani had agreed to not extend his term in office.¹⁰²

The ADM and Second-Order Minority Status in the post-ISIS/post-Kurdistan Referendum Nineveh Plain

ADM officials were under no illusions about what their second-order minority status meant in the post-ISIS Nineveh Plain. An armed force was deemed necessary (prognostic frame). The party is currently constructing a second military facility in Hamdaniya district under the Iraqi army's supervision. I surmise this decision was influenced by the fact that the Peshmerga and one of its Christian proxies currently surround the NPU's training base in al-Qosh.

Baghdad may have been a willing partner for a time, but ADM officials firmly believed the central government could not necessarily be trusted as a permanent ally (diagnostic frame). Such uncertainty was likely behind the ADM's drive for international assistance (prognostic frame):

The NPU will help us become empowered and help us stay. But we cannot do it on our own. We have little influence now. This is an existential crisis. We are almost, all of us, gone from Iraq. We need the international community to help

¹⁰² See John Hannah, "The United States Must Prevent Disaster in Kurdistan," *Foreign Policy*, October 2, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/02/the-united-states-must-prevent-disaster-in-kurdistan/>; Stefanie Dekker, "Kurdish Leader Masoud Barzani Will Not Extend Term," *Al Jazeera*, October 29, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/kurdish-leader-masoud-barzani-hand-power-171029095618781.html>. Loveday Morris and Mustafa Salim, "Iraqis Seize Military Base, Oil Field from Kurdish Forces near Contested Kirkuk," *Washington Post*, October 16, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/iraqis-seize-military-base-oil-field-from-kurdish-forces-near-contested-kirkuk/2017/10/16/35853dac-b201-11e7-9b93-b97043e57a22_story.html?utm_term=.80b15564c3e4.

protect us and empower us so we can stay. But the NPU has to remain. All these forces like the NPU, local forces, must remain but be integrated into the armed forces.¹⁰³

Do not mistake the drive for international assistance as a retreat from a Nineveh Plain province plan. Self-rule remains the ADM's main political goal. The party still sees the Iraqi central government as the lesser of two evils in this endeavor. An appeal to international community, in the ADM's eyes, is to provide the Christian second-order minority with the "breathing room" that neither Baghdad nor the KRG seems willing to. A period of international monitoring and protection would enable displaced persons to return and rebuild before being forced to make a political decision on the proposed province's future relationship with Iraq's dueling centers of power.

Athra Kado provided some practical reasons why Baghdad is preferable. His answer also revealed complex feelings for both centers of power and the need to let the Nineveh Plain's residents "catch their breath." His testimony typifies the essence of being a Christian second-order minority in northern Iraq—forced to pick sides between Arab and Kurd when no option is good:

People should not have to choose between KRG and Baghdad now. Give us breathing room first. (It is) not logical to be part of a part (within KRG) because distribution of money won't happen for two reasons. First, the KRG disputes budget (federal). Second, the KRG needs all the money it can get to build their state. Not saying Baghdad is better, but it is just that it would be easier with them. There are no Kurds or Arabs in the Nineveh Plain. Two sides that are not there are fighting over it. This is why, since 2003, we (ADM) got nothing from anyone.¹⁰⁴

Christian unity in Iraq remains elusive. Unity is by no means a guarantee Christians will achieve equality in Iraq. Disunity, however, especially in the face of an existential threat, only reinforces the Christian second-order minority's political

¹⁰³ ADM official Gevara Zia, phone interview by author, September 2017.

¹⁰⁴ ADM official Athra Kado, interview by author, al-Qosh, Iraq, October 2016.

marginalization by providing Iraq's larger political forces the pressure points that make exploitation easy.

Concluding Remarks

Journalists, NGOs, pundits, and Western politicians were quick to frame ISIS's invasion as the last days of Christianity in Iraq.¹⁰⁵ ISIS did engage in genocide against Christians and other second-order minorities. But the ADM did not create the Nineveh Plains Protection Units to engage in revenge-seeking violence. It created the force to achieve a specific goal: liberating the homeland. This meant more than expelling the Islamic State. The ADM created the NPU for what would happen *after* ISIS.

When ADM members spoke of a "last stand," "last chance," or "wanting to make a change," they were not necessarily pointing to the Islamic State's genocidal rampage. ISIS represented the penultimate chapter in the story of northern Iraq's Christian second-order minority. ADM members were instead referencing what the resumption of the central government-KRG struggle over the Nineveh Plain would potentially mean for them. More specifically, illegal territorial encroachments, increased political marginalization, and a fear of permanent exile were the more severe long-term threats to retaining their homelands and achieving self-determination.

ADM officials' use of a territorial-based identity via indigenous status functioned to connect contemporary Christians to an ancient Mesopotamian past. Combined with a shared Christian faith, this strategy enabled the ethnic Assyrian cleavage within the Christian community to be downplayed and perhaps even superseded. It also acted as

¹⁰⁵ For one of many examples, see Moni Basu, "In Biblical Lands of Iraq, Christianity in Peril after ISIS," CNN, November 21, 2016, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/11/20/middleeast/iraq-christianity-peril/index.html>.

bridge to the country's other ethnic groups, who had suffered similarly under ISIS. The ADM therefore framed the place of Christians in Iraq, whether one advanced an Assyrian ethno-nationalist identity or not, just like the country's other ethno-sectarian groups, as a distinct yet inseparable part of the national fabric.

The ADM did not abandon its core belief in the Assyrianness of all Christians in Iraq. And unlike previous chapters of the Assyrian story in Iraq, this time homelands were not fungible. The ADM did not deviate from its goal of self-determination in the Nineveh Plain. What the ADM did, however, was "mask" their political and territorial claim on the Iraqi state within the Christian second-order minority's predicament in northern Iraq. This is not meant to cast doubt on the ADM's concern for its Christian brethren in any way. On the contrary, it just means that the group retained goals that extended beyond reclaiming lost lands.

The inability to mobilize independently reflects the inherent need of second-order minorities to pick sides. The decision to ally with the central government over the KRG was based on trust, freedom of movement, and long-term power and security concerns. ADM officials did not believe the KRG would provide them logistical support, let them fight in the Nineveh Plain, and allow them to remain there after ISIS. This was not just about the KRG's actions in the summer 2014. These sentiments also stemmed from KRG's marginalization of pro-Baghdad Christians since 2003. Balancing against the KRG and ISIS should therefore not be seen as anything other than picking between the lesser of two evils.

The NPU would not exist in its current form without U.S. support. This makes it clear that, at least in this instance, the appearance of weight of an external patron was a

critical mechanism shaping a second-order minority group's mobilization to protect historic homelands.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This study examined how a segment of the Christian second-order minority in northern Iraq, the Assyrian Democratic Movement in Iraq, responded to the invasion of ISIS and the breakdown of the Iraqi state. It analyzed the ADM's creation of a self-defense force and how the party negotiated the KRG's drive for independence. The ADM created the Nineveh Plains Protection Units to battle the Islamic State. Equally as important, the NPU was also created to make sure Christians retained a place in their historic homelands after ISIS was evicted.

The use of the name "Nineveh Plains Protection Units" held strategic importance. A territorial-based identity undergirded by indigenous status claims linked contemporary Christians to an ancient Mesopotamian past. Combined with a shared Christian faith, it functioned to override ethno-denominational cleavages and their political manifestations. A territorial-based identity also acted as a bridge to Iraq's other ethno-sectarian groups, enabling Christians to assert their place within the national fabric.

Second-order minority status meant that the ADM had to eventually align with either the Iraqi central government or the KRG. Kurdish territorial encroachments, the Peshmerga's retreat from the Nineveh Plain as ISIS approached, and Erbil's insistence to incorporate the NPU into the Peshmerga helped drive the ADM towards Baghdad. Mobilization, including Baghdad's assistance to the ADM, was in many ways contingent upon the influence of the U.S. The central government's unenthusiastic support of the ADM was perhaps most evident in September 2017. Baghdad failed to support the ADM

in its attempt to have the Nineveh Plain excluded from the Kurdistan referendum on independence.

Restatement of Main Argument

In this project I argued that historical experiences and the identities the result from them, especially when bound up in territorial control, harden over time and shape actions when security threats arise. But second-order minority status means that the influence of identities and preferences on actions has limits. Security and power concerns, which are in part the product of historical intergroup relations, drive alliance decisions. Second-order minorities are more likely to balance against threats than bandwagon with them.¹

My argument about the influence of identities and preferences on political behavior is an instrumentalist one.² Political entrepreneurs manipulate ethno-territorial identities— notions of a historic homeland, including its size, shape, and basis for such claims—for goals that extend beyond countering immediate security threats. This includes moderating intragroup cleavages and establishing cohesion, marginalizing domestic challengers, and securing self-determination.

¹ See Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

² See Christia, *Alliance Formation*; V.P. Gagnon, Jr., *The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s* (Ithaca: Ithaca University Press, 2004); Nelson Kasfir, “Explaining Ethnic Political Participation,” *World Politics* 31, no. 3 (April 1979): 365-388; Chaim Kaufmann, “Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Civil Wars,” *International Security* 20, no. 4 (Spring 1996): 136-175; David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild, “Containing Fear: The Origins and Management of Ethnic Conflict,” *International Security* 21, no. 2 (Fall 1996): 54-56; Kathleen Newland, “Ethnic Conflict and Refugees,” *Survival* 35, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 81-101; Roger D. Peterson, *Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear Hatred and Resentment in Twentieth Century Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 34-35; Barry Posen, “The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict,” *Survival* 35, no. 1 (Spring 1993): 27-47.

Political Entrepreneurs, Political Identities, and Mobilization

The foundation of mobilization is the construction, re-negotiation, and deployment of a collective political identity that resonates with recruits. Political entrepreneurs assemble political identities from boundaries, shared stories about those boundaries, social relations across boundaries, and social relations within boundaries.³

In this case, boundaries were the us/them distinction between residents of the Nineveh Plain and “outsiders.” More specifically, the “us” was the Nineveh Plain’s indigenous Christian population. The “them” was ISIS, Kurds, Arabs, other Muslims, and even Christians not native to the Nineveh Plain. Shared stories were historical narratives, claims of land tenure/ incumbency/indigenous status, the common experience of political marginalization and displacement, and the fear of permanent exile. All were linked to/blamed ISIS, the KRG, and the Iraqi central government in varying capacities. Social relations across boundaries characterized intergroup relations with Iraq’s larger forces prior to, during, and after the invasion of ISIS. In some cases narratives extended to invading empires and Western missionary encroachment and colonial machinations. Social relations within boundaries describe not only what bound Christians in the Nineveh Plain together—sectarian/denominational identities, residency, stories and experiences, and networks, but also what drove them apart: the ethnic Assyrian debate and its political manifestations.

³ Charles Tilly, *The Politics of Collective Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 32.

Though the conflict with ISIS heightened the salience of religious/sectarian identities, ADM officials avoided framing the conflict along such lines. Doing so would have only emboldened the Islamic State and potentially reified ethno-sectarian cleavages inside Iraq. Nor did the ADM deploy an Assyrian-based identity or call up its Ba'th-era forces from Dohuk. Most Christians in Iraq distanced themselves from the Assyrian appellation. Bringing "outsiders" into the Nineveh Plain would have likely placed the ADM directly in the crosshairs of Baghdad and Erbil, especially the latter. Both tactics would have undercut the ADM's efforts to realize self-determination. Such a goal could only be realized with the support of local populations, the majority of which were displaced and reluctant to return.

What could establish cohesion among the area's Christians populations was a territorial-based identity that linked contemporary Christians to an ancient Mesopotamian past by way of indigenous status and the fear of permanent exile. Combined with a shared Christian faith, this tactic helped ease ethno-denominational cleavages and their political manifestations without rejecting them and their salience to individuals and sub-groups. Again, these were boundaries, stories, and within group and cross-group social relations that all displaced Christians in the Nineveh Plain could presumably relate to.

Embedded in the construction of this political identity were the ADM's claims on the state and methods for securing them. Far from simply liberating lost lands, the ADM's long-term goal was self-determination in the Nineveh Plain. The party's grievances with Iraq's larger forces extended beyond what took place in the Nineveh Plain when ISIS invaded. More salient were 1) the Kurds' territorial-political marginalization of the area's pro-Baghdad Christians since the fall of the Ba'th regime

and 2) the effects of the struggle between Erbil and Baghdad over Nineveh. ISIS merely served as a catalyst, the veritable “last straw” that triggered a realization among ADM members and other Christians that homelands and political rights could only be secured through self-help/self-defense.

Second-order minority status made it difficult to mobilize independently. The fact that most Christians were displaced and lacking resources made it all but impossible. A crucial mechanism in the ADM’s mobilization was therefore the appearance and weight of an external patron: the U.S. The NPU would not exist in its current form unless the U.S. had pressured both the KRG and Iraqi central government to permit it. The effects of this mechanism—the appearance/reappearance of an external patron—on other second-order minority group’s mobilization attempts in Iraq warrants additional exploration.

Second-order Minorities: Balance or Bandwagon

Existing literature on alliance formation contends that groups, here second-order minorities, can either balance against threats or bandwagon with them.⁴ My analysis reveals that the Assyrian Democratic Movement balanced against the KRG and ISIS in the Nineveh Plain. More testing of additional second-order minority groups is needed before more generalizable conclusions are drawn.

In fact, my analysis reveals that alliance decisions are not entirely the product of the security dilemma and long-term power and security concerns. They are in part the result of intergroup histories. Indeed, balancing/bandwagoning may be a false

⁴ See Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979).

distinction. There is a subjective interpretation to power, security, and threats that is critical to mobilization and alliance formation.⁵ At the core of these processes are the constituent mechanisms that political entrepreneurs assemble into a collective political identity: boundaries, shared stories about boundaries, social relations across boundaries, and social relations within boundaries. It is within these mechanisms and the political identities they give rise to that a movement finds its threats, goals, and methods for securing them,⁶ including alliance decisions/partners.

When ISIS invaded, ADM officials had the choice between aligning with either Baghdad or Erbil. No option was good. Kurdish officials agreed to help the ADM but on the condition that the group be integrated into the Peshmerga. ADM officials did not believe that the Kurds would allow the NPU to remain in the area after it was liberated. This was a view shaped by boundaries, shared stories about boundaries, and social relations across and within boundaries: A legacy of mistrust between the two groups, especially Kurdish territorial encroachments and the marginalization of pro-Baghdad Christians in the post-Ba’th period. The Kurds nighttime retreat from the Nineveh Plain and the very real threat of genocide seemed only to be a catalyst, the “straw that broke the camel’s back.”

Similarly, boundaries, shared stories, and social relations across and within boundaries in regards to Baghdad meant the central government was also not blameless. The central government did little to rollback Kurdish territorial encroachments and protect Christians. The Iraqi army’s collapse at Mosul was also a significant cause of

⁵ See Anastasia Shesterinina, “Collective Threat Framing and Mobilization in Civil War,” *American Political Science Review* 110, no. 3 (August 2016): 411-427.

⁶ Shesterinina, “Collective Threat Framing,” 417.

intergroup distrust. The central government attempted, but ultimately failed, to link legal approval and military assistance to an agreement from ADM leaders to deploy the force to southern Iraq. Despite this, the ADM continued to see Baghdad as the lesser of two evils. It was the central government, not the KRG, which agreed to create a Nineveh Plain province. And it was the Kurds, not Baghdad, which had “Kurdified” areas of Nineveh in the post-Ba’ath period, including marginalizing pro-Baghdad Christians. There was no guarantee that Baghdad would follow through on the Nineveh Plain province plan, but the ADM at least had legal precedent on its side.

Baghdad saw little military benefit to assisting the ADM. The Iraqi central government’s agreement to diversify the PMF and approve the ADM was done more for symbolic purposes than it was to achieve any military benefit. Baghdad was only a willing partner for a brief period. The ADM was forced to navigate the Nineveh Plain’s position in the Kurdistan referendum on independence alone.

U.S. influence proved to be a critical mechanism in the alliance formation process. Washington essentially acted as an alliance broker. Similar to the previous section, this warrants additional testing as to the impact of external actors on how second-order minority groups mobilize and make alliances during civil war.

Homelands: Fungible or Fixed

Leaders of stateless nations are prone to altering the size and scope of territories claimed as “homelands.” Alterations in territorial claims are believed to be primarily the result of domestic political competitions for power and not external factors, such as coordination on new real borders, adapting to ethnic geography, concessions to external patrons, changes in relative capacity vis-à-vis the state, and new information on a land’s

value.⁷ This may be true in times of peace, but my analysis reveals that within the security dilemma the interplay of these factors, including the sheer weight of physical security threats, is more complex.

If one takes the entirety of the Assyrian second-order minority's experience in Iraq then homeland claims were certainly fungible. In the pre-ISIS period changes in what areas constituted the homeland seemed to be driven more by external factors, including security anxieties, than domestic political competitions. Crucially, when ISIS invaded the size and scope of the territory claimed by the Assyrian Democratic Movement remained fixed. This too seemed to be driven by external factors, specifically displacement/fear of permanent exile, the January 2014 decision by the Iraqi central government to create a Nineveh Plain province, changing power vis-à-vis the state more generally, and an external patron in the U.S.

What *did* change was how ADM officials positioned the political manifestation of the homeland, the Nineveh Plain province, in relation to Baghdad and Erbil. Privately, ADM officials still see a province attached to Baghdad as the lesser of two evils. But after ISIS was evicted from the Nineveh Plain the ADM joined with numerous other Christian groups to call for an internationally protected safe-haven. Residents would be allowed to return and rebuild before deciding the area's future position in relation to Baghdad and Erbil. I suggest that the ADM's changing stance on the homeland's position between Baghdad and Erbil has to do with two interrelated factors, one external and one internal.

⁷ See Harris Mylonas and Nadav G. Shelef, "Which Land is Our Land? Domestic Politics and Change in the Territorial Claims of Stateless Nationalist Movements," *Security Studies* 23, no. 4 (2014): 754-786.

First, in 2003 the Iraqi Christian population was over one million. Today it rests just above 200,000.⁸ This is primarily the result of intergroup violence. The ADM needs Christians to return to the Nineveh Plain en masse to ensure they retain the majority status needed to exercise local autonomy. Second, the Iraqi Christian community is more divided than ever. In the May 2017 Iraqi parliamentary elections 67 Christian candidates spread across seven “Christian” lists competed for five seats.⁹ It is therefore not unreasonable to speculate that the ADM believes that the best way to rebuild its base of support is to lead reconstruction and repatriation efforts. Under these circumstances it makes sense to adopt a more conciliatory political agenda in the short-term. Nevertheless, additional research and testing is needed before a more definitive set of conclusions can be made.

Future Research Possibilities

Second-order Minority Group Mobilization and Territorial-Based Identities

The primary scholarly contribution of my work is a mechanistic account of the mobilization process via territorial-based identities as it occurred *directly within the security dilemma*. Future research on this topic should continue to concentrate on, when possible, how this process takes place within a similar security dynamic. This helps guard against memory bias.

⁸ See Helsinki Commission Hearing on Atrocities in Iraq and Syria: Relief for Survivors and Accountability for Perpetrators, 114th Cong. (September 22, 2016) (Written testimony of Stephen M. Rasche, Esq., Legal Counsel and Director of IDP Resettlement Programs, Chaldean Catholic Archdiocese of Erbil, Kurdistan Region of Iraq), accessed December 10, 2018, https://chrissmith.house.gov/uploadedfiles/3_steve_rasche_testimony.pdf.

⁹ For a thorough examination of the Christian slates, and where much of the information in this section is derived from, see Max Joseph, “What Does the Upcoming Iraqi Election Mean for Assyrians in 2018,” *Medium* (blog), entry posted May 10, 2018, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://medium.com/@DeadmanMax/what-does-the-upcoming-iraqi-election-mean-for-assyrians-in-2018-9e97ee3c0777>.

Second-order minority group mobilization should not simply be explored from the perspective of political entrepreneurs. It should also be examined from the perspectives of potential recruits. This includes those that end up joining a military organization and those that ultimately decide not to. A fuller picture of “frame alignment”¹⁰ between the “top” and “bottom,” including the mechanisms activated therein, can help provide a more accurate picture of the construction, deployment, and (re)negotiation of territorial-based political identities and the mobilization process in general. It can also shed light on individual, or, micro-level factors driving participation in armed combat.

Particularly promising would be a comparative analysis of domestic political rivals and their claims on the state, territorial and political. This would provide a more nuanced perspective on how internal and external factors shape the claim-making process. Such an analysis should not simply be confined to changes in the size and scope of the homeland. Instead, the basis for those claims—how individuals and groups derive attachments and entitlements to homelands—should also be examined. This would help reveal new within-group cleavages and provide another layer of critical analysis as to how political entrepreneurs attempt to mitigate those cleavages and enhance cohesion.

Second-Order Minorities and First-Order Minorities

The Assyrian Democratic Movement was not the only armed Christian actor battling the Islamic State and negotiating the Kurdistan referendum on independence. The KRG helped several of its Christian political proxies constitute militias. Many of these parties also supported the establishment of a “Christian autonomous zone,” but within the KRG.

¹⁰ See Anthony E. Ladd, “Feedlots of the Sea: Movement Frames and Activist Claims in the Protest over Salmon Farming in the Pacific Northwest,” *Humanity & Society* 35, no. 4 (November 2011): 343-375.

Of particular importance going forward then are the non-violent strategies separatists use to co-opt local minorities into proxy forces, such as financial inducements, reserved parliamentary seats, legal safeguards for cultural and administrative autonomy, cabinet postings, as well as attempts to sway civil society actors such as religious leaders. This type of research can help provide additional explanations on the strategies second-order minorities employ to reach for power. It can also shed more light on how and why separatists target some local minorities but co-opt others. Finally, it can add to insights derived from this work on how subjective preferences mix with security threats to shape alliance decisions.

Second-order Minorities in the Study of the Relationship between Security and Identity

My analysis of how the ADM navigated state breakdown reveals instances of identity hardening (boundary activation) and identity softening (boundary deactivation). Together, the two provide the backbone to my argument about civil war actors manipulating identities to secure political goals that extend beyond mitigating security threats.

Identity hardening is most evident in the ADM's successful deployment of an ethno-territorial identity claim—indigenous status/land rights—to recruit from northern Iraq's divided Christian population. Identity softening is revealed in the ADM's decision to not appeal to potential recruits on purely religious grounds or through an Assyrian ethno-nationalist agenda.

This leads me to suggest that future research on the relationship between security and identity, particularly among second-order minorities, should continue to focus on examining the particular instances during conflict when identities matter and when they do not. This includes an examination of cases when certain identities become more

salient than others and under what circumstances this phenomenon occurs. This type of research agenda can help scholars continue move beyond examinations of civil war that focus on primary combatants towards a more complicated dynamic in which multiple and overlapping identities and interest cleavages play out.

Focusing on second-order minorities can help provide important insights into these processes. Such groups must navigate a more complex security environment than primary combatants. For example, second-order minority groups are inherently crippled by a lack of military capabilities. This necessitates the need for an alliance with a stronger actor. Additionally, civil war alliances are inherently plagued by commitment problems. Finally, no group, minority or majority, is without internal struggles for power.

Going Forward: The ADM and Iraq’s Christians since the Kurdish Referendum on Independence

On October 25, 2017 U.S. Vice President Mike Pence, speaking in Washington, D.C. at the In Defense of Christians Conference, an American-based NGO that advocates for Middle Eastern Christians, blasted the United Nations for failing to properly assist minorities victimized by ISIS.¹¹ The vice president then announced the Trump administration’s intent to abandon America’s “religion blind” policy of funneling most humanitarian aid through the international organization, a practice that was originally designed to “de-politicize” foreign assistance by prioritizing those most in need. The U.S. would instead begin directly assisting persecuted groups or work through faith-based

¹¹ Remarks by Vice President Mike Pence at In Defense of Christians Solidarity Dinner, October 25, 2017, Washington, D.C., accessed December 10, 2018, transcript available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/10/25/remarks-vice-president-defense-christians-solidarity-dinner> (accessed November 25, 2017).

organizations.¹² Many believed Christians could henceforth be central to U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. Yet this message has yet to reach Baghdad, Erbil, Tehran, and perhaps even the Pentagon and the State Department.

In the period immediately following the Kurdish referendum Iraqi security forces reasserted control over the majority of the Nineveh Plain. The exception was al-Qosh, where the NPU's main training base was located. At the forefront of these efforts were several groups belonging to the PMF, including the Babylon Brigades.¹³ As noted in the previous chapter, the Babylon Brigades is a pseudo-Christian force created by the Badr Organization, which itself has ties to Iran. Far from providing security, the Babylon Brigades looted antiquities, clashed with the NPU, and generally stoked fear among local populations. The central government ordered the Babylon Brigades out of the Nineveh Plain. But anxieties over additional violence and increased Iranian influence remained high.¹⁴

In March 2018 Baghdad formally integrated the PMF into Iraq's security forces. The move was likely done to court Shia voters in the upcoming parliamentary elections.¹⁵ This did little to ease the fears of Nineveh's Christians. The Shabak have allegedly been among the first to buy up vacated or destroyed Christian properties. Many believe the

¹² Remarks by Vice President Mike Pence at In Defense of Christians Solidarity Dinner.

¹³ Yousif Kallian, "Iran's Inroads into Christian Iraq," *The American Interest*, December 21, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/12/21/irans-inroads-christian-iraq/>

¹⁴ Kallian, "Christian Iraq."

¹⁵ "Iraq's Shi'ite Militias Formally Inducted into Security Forces," *Reuters*, March 8, 2018, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-militias/iraqs-shiite-militias-formally-inducted-into-security-forces-idUSKCN1GK354>. For more information on the make-up of the PMF as of fall 2017 see Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "Hashd Brigade Numbers Index," *Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi* (blog), entry posted October 31, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/2017/10/hashd-brigade-numbers-index>.

Badr Organization facilitates this practice.¹⁶ Demographic makeover fits into Iran’s larger foreign policy goal of creating a “Shia Belt” from Tehran to Beirut.¹⁷

In May 2018 Iraq held its first post-ISIS parliamentary elections. The elections were unquestionably a major test for the country, particularly in terms of healing ethno-sectarian cleavages. For the ADM, it was a chance to see if its efforts to preserve a long-term Christian presence in the Nineveh Plain produced tangible political gains.

The Iraqi Christian community was as divided as ever.¹⁸ No fewer than 67 Christians announced their candidacy for five parliamentary seats. Seven different “Christian” lists formed: 1) the ADM’s Rafidain List, which now included members of the Assyrian Patriotic Party; 2) the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council; 3) the United Bet-Nahrain List; 4) the Syriac Assembly Movement; 5) the Babylon Movement (Babylon Brigade); 6) the Sons of Mesopotamia; and the 7) Chaldean Alliance.¹⁹

The ADM and its partners continued to support self-rule in the Nineveh Plain on the condition that local populations are given the opportunity to return and rebuild before shaping the area’s future.²⁰ The CSAPC favored Kurdish annexation. Perhaps most notably, the Chaldean Church formally stepped into the Christian political area and endorsed the Chaldean Alliance. Generally speaking, the Chaldean Alliance pushed a pro-KRG agenda. Its members also reaffirmed their position that the “Chaldean”

¹⁶ Kalian, “Christian Iraq.”

¹⁷ See Martin Chulov, “Amid Syrian Chaos, Iran’s Game Plan Emerges: A Path to the Mediterranean,” *Guardian*, October 8, 2016, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/08/iran-iraq-syria-isis-land-corridor>.

¹⁸ Mustafa Habib, “Iraqi Christian Politics Just as Divided + Messy as the Rest,” *Niqash*, March 15, 2018, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.niqash.org/en/articles/politics/5856/>.

¹⁹ For information on each Christian list and its political platform see Max Joseph, “Upcoming Iraqi Election.”

²⁰ See Al-Rafidain Coalition—144 Campaign and Political Platform, April 16, 2018, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.zowaa.org/en/al-rafidain-coalition-144-campaign-and-political-platform/#.W3hZNNKjVo>.

appellation denoted a distinct ethnic heritage rather than being simply the name of a church.

The elections were an unmitigated disaster for the Assyrian Democratic Movement. Secretary General Yonadam Kanna, who had represented the party in the Iraqi parliament since 2005, lost his seat in Baghdad. The one member of the Rafidain List to win a seat in parliament, in Dohuk, was a member of the Assyrian Patriotic Party. The Chaldean Syriac Assyrian Popular Council won Kirkuk's seat. Erbil's seat went to a member of the Chaldean Alliance. In a stunning development, the Babylon Movement won the reserved seats in Baghdad and Nineveh.²¹ The electoral victories of the Christian candidates of the Babylon Movement are largely believed to be the product of Shia Muslim votes from southern Iraq.²² The Assyrian Democratic Movement challenged the electoral results.²³ Numerous other groups also protested. In early July the central

²¹ See IHEC, <http://www.ihec.iq/en/>.

²² Abkar Shahid Ahmed, "A Mostly Non-Christian Militia Won 2 of Iraqi Christians' Parliamentary Seats. Now Christians Want Trump to Intervene," Huffington Post, May 23, 2018, accessed December 10, 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/iraq-parliament-christians-badr-organization_us_5b05dfd0e4b07c4ea104961f.

²³ See Statement by the Political Bureau of the Assyrian Democratic Movement on the Iraqi Elections 2018, May 19, 2018, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.zowaa.org/%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D9%83%D8%AA%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%83%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%82%D8%B1/#.W3MrQZnkjVq>; "Imad Juhanna: We Will Follow the Legal Means to Challenge the Results of the Elections Because of the Great Doubts in the Announced Votes and the Mechanism of Distribution of Seats in the Quota," Zowaa.org (ADM website), May 20, 2018, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.zowaa.org/%D8%B9%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D9%8A%D9%88%D8%AE%D9%86%D8%A7-%D8%B3%D9%86%D8%B3%D9%84%D9%83-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B7%D8%B1%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%B7%D8%B9/#.W3Mq2pNKjVq>.

government signaled its intent to hold a manual recount.²⁴ A few days later the warehouse storing the paper ballots went up in flames.²⁵

The new Iraqi government retains a tenuous grip on power.²⁶ The country remains far from secure. The Islamic State persists as a low-level insurgency that is unlikely to abate as long as the country's Sunni population remains alienated and Nineveh remains the site of regional and international political intrigues that prevent any one group from asserting control. Iranian-backed militias, some affiliated with the PMF and some not, continue to extend their foothold in the disputed territories. A fragile peace exists between the KRG and the Iraqi central government.

Christians and other second-order minorities in Nineveh remain caught between Iraq's dueling centers of power. Allegations of illegal land seizures continue.²⁷ Almost a year after the Trump administration pledged to directly assist Christians the program has been slow to get off the ground.²⁸ The majority of aid initiatives continue to originate from private entities, churches, and NGOs, such as Aid to the Church in Need.²⁹

²⁴ Ahmed Aboulenein, "Iraq to Hold Manual Recount of May Election Results," Reuters, June 6, 2018, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-election/iraq-to-hold-manual-recount-of-may-election-results-idUSKCN1J2228>.

²⁵ Ahmed Aboulenein, "Iraqi Ballot Box Storage Site Catches Fire in Baghdad," Reuters, June 10, 2018, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-election/iraqi-ballot-box-storage-site-catches-fire-in-baghdad-idUSKBN1J60G5>.

²⁶ Ghassan Adnan and Isabel Coles, "Iraq's New Prime Minister forms Government Five Months after Election," *Wall Street Journal*, October 25, 2018, accessed November 10, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iraqs-new-prime-minister-forms-government-five-months-after-election-1540424103>.

²⁷ See "The Iraq Report: Election Drama Continues as Christians Seek Return of Stolen Property," *The New Arab*, June 29, 2018, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2018/6/29/The-Iraq-Report-Election-drama-continues>.

²⁸ See George Russell, "Months After Pence Promise, Iraqi Christians say they are 'Worse-Off,'" Fox News, June 5, 2018, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2018/06/05/months-after-pence-promise-iraqi-christians-say-are-worse-off.html>.

²⁹ See Daniele Rocchi, "Iraq: ACN and Local Churches, 'A Marshall Plan' to Rebuild Villages Destroyed by ISIS," SIR, September 26, 2017, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://agensir.it/mondo/2017/09/26/iraq-acn-and-local-churches-a-marshall-plan-to-rebuild-christian-villages-destroyed-by-isis/>.

Policy Recommendations

The Trump administration's pledge to assist persecuted Christians is a noble step. But it is a policy that needs significant revisions. The U.S. cannot sacrifice its regional interests for a second-order minority that does not constitute a veritable "fifth column." This does not mean that the U.S. cannot protect Christians and, by extension, use them to help foster pluralism and democracy in Iraq.

The future of Iraq as a stable, pluralist, and democratic society hinges on mending intergroup cleavages and resolving territorial disputes. Both issues require the country to find a place for its second-order minorities. Empowered and externally supported second-order minorities in the country's resource rich northern corridor helps reduce their security anxieties. It also significantly lowers the prospects for conflict between Baghdad and Erbil while simultaneously thwarting Iranian interests.

The first thing the U.S. government must do to help Christians is to pullback on its commitment to prioritizing faith-based organizations. The U.S. should instead make a concerted effort to empower secular NGOs. Prioritizing faith-based groups would invariably involve engaging Iraq's churches. The power of Iraq's church leaders would only increase while secular voices would continue to go unheard. Though Iraq's churches are cooperating now,³⁰ such programs could also lead to inter-Church competitions for aid. In any event, the cleavages within the Christian community would deepen; Iraq's larger political forces would be provided with additional pressure points they could exploit to further their own interests.

³⁰ For example, the Nineveh Reconstruction Committee (NRC). The NRC is an inter-Church cooperative council in Iraq spearheading reconstruction efforts in the Nineveh Plain. See NRC, <https://www.nrciraq.org/>.

Second, the U.S. must pressure Iraq's Christian clergy to withdraw from the political scene. No one can doubt the sincerity of the clergy in terms of helping their respective flocks in Iraq amidst threats of annihilation. But a line needs to be drawn between the clergy's temporal and spiritual roles. The U.S. cannot simultaneously be pushing democracy and pluralism among Iraq's larger forces while working to reify the influence of Christian clergy. All this does is reinforce ethno-sectarian identities at the expense of civic ones. These are fissures Erbil and Baghdad would continue to seize on. However, given the role the clergy have played it is unreasonable to expect that they will not shape the community's political future.

Securing political rights in Iraq will require a joint effort by secular Christian politicians and religious leaders. U.S. efforts should concentrate on bringing these two groups together. A key aspect of this endeavor is local projects that require both sides to work together to help re-establish a measure of civil society free from Arab and Kurdish influence. For example, USAID and the officials from the State Department can work to form and fund "local coordinating committees" composed of youth activists and political and religious leaders. Such groups should concentrate on rebuilding and incentivizing return and reconstruction. Possible programs include building and enhancing secular education institutions, hosting intercultural events, organizing civic engagement courses, or establishing legal forums to help families obtain compensation from Erbil and Baghdad for lost lands and destroyed properties. Land seizures with no compensation are perhaps the most important fault line between minority and majority communities in Iraq. Cross-cultural programs can also be undertaken to help heal intergroup cleavages.

Examples include youth sports leagues or pen-pal programs that slowly bring Christians, Muslims, and other groups together in a controlled environment.

Many organizations that pursue such projects do exist. More are needed. Of those currently operating most are funded and undertaken entirely by religious organizations, secular diaspora groups, or NGOs.³¹ At some point the money is going to run out. The international community will eventually transition to the next disaster. Diaspora communities cannot be counted on as a source of endless funding. It is paramount that the U.S. commits funding and assists monitoring efforts.

Long-term solutions are a different matter. The issue of self-rule in the Nineveh Plain remains a contentious issue within Iraq's Christian community. Secular politicians continue to tout its advantages while the Christian clergy maintains that it will only lead to marginalization or additional violence. Both sides are probably right. Complicating matters is the Nineveh Plain's abundant resources and the competing territorial claims of Iraq's larger forces. Erbil and Baghdad have both dangled promises of administrative and cultural autonomy to sway second-order minorities to their side.

Christians and the region's other second-order minorities cannot be expected to remain in Iraq unless they feel safe and can derive the benefits of membership in the state to the same extent that the country's Arab and Kurdish majorities do. If the Trump administration is sincere about helping Christians and other targeted second-order minorities, and the international community desires a free, democratic, and pluralistic Iraq, then a province, including the cultural and administrative rights that go with it, perhaps none more important than local security, is the only way these groups can feel

³¹ For an example of existing secular groups see website of the Assyrian Aid Society in Iraq, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://assyrianaidiraq.org/>; For AAS branch in diaspora see website of Assyrian Aid Society of America, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.assyrianaid.org/>.

safe and secure. It will take time and effort to make a Nineveh Plain province for minorities a reality and ensure it can support and defend itself. Its establishment must be part of any solution to the disputed territories, which itself is a tall order. But without a serious effort to integrate second-order minorities and heal intergroup cleavages it is likely that the country's Muslim populations will revert to policies similar to or worse than those of al-Qaeda and ISIS. At that point it is only a matter of time until the U.S. is forced to undertake yet another large scale military operation in Iraq.

Concluding Remarks

Arabs and Kurds are still Iraq's major political brokers. The U.S. and Iran retain significant veto power. It would not be wrong to state that nothing happens in Iraq without the consent of Washington and Tehran. One point that the international community and most Iraqis agree on is that the country cannot revert to the political conditions that enabled the Islamic State's rise. Yet the September 2017 Kurdish referendum, the parliamentary elections of May 2018, and the political gridlock gripping the country, all of which are mapped onto ethno-sectarian cleavages, indicate that no one knows what exactly the right political formula is. Only time will tell what the future holds for the ADM and Iraq's Christians. One thing is for certain, without a serious commitment from the U.S. and the international community things stand to get worse.

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Appendix A: Sample Surveys/Interview Questions

Survey 1 (Displaced Persons)

Age: _____ Sex (circle one): _____ Male _____ Female _____

Religion/Ethnicity: (For example, Chaldean, Assyrian, Syriac, Iraqi-Christian, Chaldo-Assyrian, Christian, etc.)---

Place of origin (town/city/governorate): _____

Date of departure (Month/Year): _____

Date of arrival here (Month/Year): _____

Describe the reason(s) you left your place of origin: _____

Did you travel with anyone else? If yes, who and how many people? _____

How did you learn about your current place of stay? Did anyone help you find it? If so, who? _____

Is there a politician you currently favor? Is there a political party you favor? _____

What is your desired long-term solution to your current situation? (Circle one)

Stay in Kurdistan

Return to your place of origin

Migrate abroad

Other (please describe)

If you do not wish to return to your home, can you describe why? _____

Do you favor the creation of a Nineveh Plains Governorate for religious minorities?

If you do favor a Nineveh Plains Governorate, do you want it attached to Iraq or Kurdistan? Why?

Survey 2 (Political Group/Militia)³²

Age: Male/Female

Religion/Ethnicity:

Place of origin (town/province):

When did you join? (circle one)

Church guards NPU NGO local political
group

Other? (describe)

Why did you join this organization?

How did hear about this organization (circle one)?

Friends Family Facebook/Twitter TV Personal Recruiter
Other (please list _____)

Did you join alone or with friends?

Did you have any prior experience in this field/organization? If yes, where?

Did your family or friends encourage you to join? If so, who?

Describe what do you hope to accomplish:

³² Question format/phrasing modified only in relation to particular organization, such as Assyrian Democratic Movement, Chaldean Church, or Assyrian Patriotic Party.

Do you wish to return to your home one day? If no, where do you wish to live? Why?

ADM Background Information Questions (1979-2003)

1. Who were the "small" groups that came together to form the Assyrian Democratic Movement in 1979?
2. What were the ADM's initial political goals upon formation? (Do you have a copy of a pamphlet or booklet or document that lists them that you could provide?)
3. What was the ADM's role in anti-Saddam armed opposition? In particular, did the ADM ever "officially" join the opposition or did was it more of a de-facto alliance with the Kurds? Did the ADM ever actually fight alongside the KDP and other Kurdish groups?
4. What was the ADM doing during the Kurdish Civil War in the 1990s? Did the ADM pick a side between KDP and PUK?
5. I have heard the ADM's militia was a peacekeeping force at one point. Is this correct? If so, can you tell me how this came about? Did the U.S. ask the ADM to do this?
6. Did the ADM participate in the uprisings after the first Gulf War in 1991? If so, can you tell me where they fought and if it was alongside Kurds or in a more autonomist orientation?

Appendix B: ADM Land Dispute Claims


The Transgressions on Chaldean Syriac Assyrian villages in Dohuk Province:



#	District	Sub-district	Village	Type of Transgression	Size of Transgression	Sort of Property	Date of Transgression	Side of Transgression	Decisions and Judgments
1	Zakho	Rizgari	Fishkhabour	Agricultural lands	880 dunums	Ownership property		People from neighboring villages	
2	Zakho	Rizgari	Bajd Braf	Agricultural lands				People from neighboring villages	
3	Zakho	Rizgari	Derabon	Agricultural lands, Building residential Complex	3000 dunums 300 Houses		1997	Former regime, Currently people from neighboring villages	
				Agricultural lands	1000 dunums		1991		
4	Zakho	Rizgari	Qarawola	Agricultural lands	The whole village	Title Deed		People from neighboring villages	
5	Zakho	Darkar	Yousif Ava	Agricultural lands	The whole village		1991	People from neighboring villages	
6	Zakho	Darkar	Shwadin	Agricultural lands	The whole village		1991	Influential individuals from neighboring village	
7	Zakho	Darkar	Mallah Arab	Agricultural lands	the whole village		1991	People from neighboring villages	
8	Zakho	Darkar	Navkindal	Agricultural lands and Pastures	2600 dunums		1991	People from neighboring villages	
9	Zakho	Darkar	Bersive	Building of residential Complex	4500 dunums	Title Deed	1977	Former Regime	
				water stream of the village			1991	People from neighboring villages	
				Agricultural lands and pastures	2400 dunums	Title Deed	1978 /1991	Neighboring villages	
10	Zakho	Darkar	Hizawa	Agricultural lands + Transfer property to Municipality + Building residential complex	1450 dunums		1977	Municipality of Zakho	
11	Zakho	Darkar	Talkber	Transfer property to Municipality + agricultural lands	3000 dunums		1991	Municipality of Zakho	
12	Zakho	Batoufa	Levo	construction of residential complex + agricultural lands	420 dunums		1991	People from neighboring villages	
13	Zakho	Zakho Center	Shikaft Mart	Agricultural lands	The whole village		1991	Municipality of Zakho	
14	Zakho	Zakho Center	Mehamdike	Agricultural lands	The whole village		1991	Municipality of Zakho	
15	Zakho	Zakho Center	Bidaro	The lands of the village	The whole village	Ownership property	1991	People from neighboring villages	
16	Amadiyah	Sarsink					1984-1975-1970	Municipality of Sarsink + financial directorate of Sarsink	

				Construction of residential Complex+ Transgressions on Water	1350 dunums	Title Deed	1992	People from neighboring villages	
17	Amadiyah	Sarsink	Bebad	Agricultural lands + Buildings + Pastures + Water sources	12 dunums		1991	People from neighboring villages	
18	Amadiyah	Sarsink	Hamzik	Agricultural lands and residential building + Houses building + Mosque + Tourism complex + water sources	The whole village		1991	Influential individuals of neighboring villages	
19	Amadiyah	Sarsink	Benatha	Agricultural land + water sources + building military camp	110 dunums		1992	Regional Government + residents of nearby villages	
20	Amadiyah	Sarsink	Enishke	Agricultural lands + tourism complex	1250 dunums + complex building area		1976, 1992	Former Regime + the Ministry of Finance of Regional Government	
				Agricultural lands on south of the village	100 dunum		1992	Ministry of Finance	
				Agricultural lands south of the village			1992	Directorate of construction in regional government	
				Agricultural and residential areas on west of the village			1992	People from neighboring villages	
				Agricultural land through the way to Qadesh village		Lot No. 1, Section 19, Enishke	1992	People from neighboring villages	
				Agricultural lands			1992	People from neighboring villages	
				Pastures	850 dunums		2003	Financial Ministry in Regional Government	
				Agricultural lands and orchards + tourism complex	30 dunums		1989	People from neighboring villages	
				The cave of Enishke with its nearby lands	6 dunums		2005	Ministry of Tourism in Regional Government	
				Agricultural lands	10 dunums		1998	People from neighboring villages	
21	Amadiyah	Sarsink	Dohuki	The lands of the village	The whole village		1961	Neighboring villages	
22	Amadiyah	Sarsink	Dery + Meristek	Agricultural land + building residential complex (15 Houses) + Transfer property to Municipality (forest cultivation + cemetery for Muslims + Power station + distribution residential lands)	434 dunums		1984	The former regime, currently Amadiyah Municipality	KRG parliament's decision (4215) to remove the Transgressions on Nov. 1 st 1998, decision of directorate

									of agriculture & forestry, Apr. 15 th 1998
			Exploitation of village's underground water			1991	Municipality of Amadiyah		
23	Amadiyah	Sarsink	Bobawa	The lands of the village	The whole village	1978, 1991	Former Regime + Residents of nearby villages		
24	Amadiyah	Sarsink	Sardawao	Agricultural lands and orchards	Sector 44	1989, 1991	People from neighboring villages		
25	Amadiyah	Sarsink	Badarsh	Agricultural lands and orchards village		1977, 1991	People from neighboring villages		
26	Amadiyah	Sarsink	Baljeri	Agricultural lands + residential houses building		1992, 2013	People from neighboring villages		
27	Amadiyah	Kani Mase	Chaik	The lands within the village + Building + water	11 dunums	1992	People from neighboring villages		
28	Amadiyah	Kani Mase	Mergajya	Agricultural land	25 dunums	1985, 1992	People from neighboring villages		
29	Amadiyah	Kani Mase	Kani Mase	Residential houses building	5000 M ²	1992	People from neighboring villages		
				Transfer property to Municipality	30000 M ²	2003	Municipality of Kani Mase		
30	Amadiyah	Kani Mase	Lower Chagala	The lands of the village	10 dunums	1992	People from neighboring villages		
31	Amadiyah	Kani Mase	Hese	Agricultural land + building residential homes	60 dunums	1991	People from neighboring villages		
32	Amadiyah	Kani Mase	Tashish	Agricultural land + Building residential houses		1991	People from neighboring villages		
33	Amadiyah	Bamerni	Tin	Agricultural land + Building residential houses	50 dunums	1991	People from neighboring villages	Minute of Inspection of the Agricultural Committee 34 Sep. 5th 2005	
34	Amadiyah	Bamerni	Dehe	Water sources		1965/1988 /2004	Nearby village		
35	Amadiyah	Bamerni	Kani Bilaveh	Water sources + Building residential houses		1992	People from neighboring villages		
36	Amadiyah	Bamerni	Dawodiya	Agricultural lands and pastures		2004	People from neighboring villages		
37	Amadiyah	Bamerni	Aradin Nasara	Water sources		1991	People from neighboring villages		
				Lands and orchards of the village		1991	People from neighboring villages		

38	Amadiyah	Chamanki	Mezi	Agricultural lands and pastures	5255 dunums		1993	People from neighboring villages	
39	Amadiyah	Chamanki	Hizaneh	Agricultural lands	50 dunums		1963	People from neighboring villages	
40	Amadiyah	Chamanki	Cham Rabatkeh	Agricultural lands			1963	People from neighboring villages	
41	Amadiyah	Chamanki	Safar Zeri	The whole village	1000 dunums			People from neighboring villages	
42	Amadiyah	Amadiyah	Kowari	The land of agricultural sources + Building + building residential complex			1978	Former Regime + Amadiyah Municipality	
43	Aqrah	Dinarta	Gohana	The lands of the village	The whole village	Ownership property	1961	People from neighboring villages	
44	Aqrah	Dinarta	Cham Sineh	The lands of the village	The whole village	Ownership property	1964, 19905	People from neighboring villages	
45	Aqrah	Dinarta	Doriya	The lands of the village	The whole village	Ownership property	1961	People from neighboring villages	
46	Aqrah	Dinarta	Gerbish	The lands of the village	The whole village	Ownership property	1961	People from neighboring villages	
47	Aqrah	Dinarta	Kashkawa	Agricultural lands			1963, 1970s, 1993	People from neighboring villages	Decision of Kurdistan Front 16/900 on Dec. 8 th 1992
48	Bardarash	Rovia	Hazarjut	Agricultural lands + Quarries + residential houses	380 dunums	Ownership property	1992	People from neighboring villages	
49	Shikhan	Qasrok	Malabrwan	Agricultural lands				People from neighboring villages	
50	Dohuk	Mangish	Gondi Kosa	Agricultural land + water sources			1994	People from neighboring villages	
51	Dohuk	Dohuk	Mr. Toma Hormuz Isha	Residential lands	6 dunums	Right of disposing	1986	People from neighboring villages	
52	Dohuk	Dohuk	Mr. Shilmon Brikha	Residential land	440 M ²	Ownership property	1985	People from neighboring villages	
53	Dohuk	Dohuk	Babilo	Agricultural lands and pastures	417 dunums	Right of disposing	2006- 2011	Directorate of Tourism in Dohuk + People from neighboring villages	
54	Dohuk	Batofa	Shawden	The lands of the village		Right of disposing	1992	People from neighboring villages	

Total of transgression area = 54 Total of transgression causes = 67