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Article by **Maria Macuch**

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ASSYRIANS IN IRAN

i. The Assyrian community (Āšūrīān) in Iran

The term "Assyrian." Assyrians (Āšūrīs) is the term for the modern, East Syrian Christian communities in Iran. The ancient name "Assyrian," derived from that of the god Aššur, designated the Semitic population of north Mesopotamia and their capital city. Even before the final destruction of the Assyrian empire in 612 B.C., its population had become largely Aramaic-speaking; knowledge of its ancient language, Akkadian, had become restricted to the educated people and to scribes. This facilitated the rise of a confusion over the identity of "Assyrian." The term "Assyrian letters" used by Herodotus (4.87) meant to Ezra (465-24 B.C., scribe to Artaxerxes I) the Aramaic alphabet he used as a scribe; with it he transcribed the Pentateuch from the ancient Hebrew script, and he read these scriptures in this form before the Jewish congregation in 444 B.C. (Nehemiah 8). The Hebrew square-letter script was developed from this alphabet and is still called *kᵉṯāḇ aššūrī*, "Assyrian script" and until the last century, the language of the Aramaic portions of the Bible continued to be called "Chaldean."

Thus the confusion of the ancient Assyrians and Chaldeans with the Arameans is not recent. But it became further complicated when J. S. Assemanus (*Bibliotheca Orientalis* III/1-2, Rome, 1725-28, repr. Hildesheim and New York, 1975) and J. A. Assemanus (*De Catholicis seu Patriarchis Chaldaeorum et Nestorianorum Commentarius Historico-chronologicus*, Rome, 1775, repr. Gregg Intern. Publishers, 1969) used the improper name of Chaldeans for all Syriac-speaking Christians united with Rome. The term was applied, not only to those in Iraq (former Nestorians), but also to the Lebanese Maronites, in order to distinguish them from the Nestorians; the latter were heretical from the point of view of the Roman Catholic Church. The people seemed satisfied to call themselves *sūryāyē* or*sūrāyē* "Syrians" or Nestorians and Jacobites according to their main creeds. The use of the name Assyrians for the Nestorians and other related Christians (some converted to Protestantism or other denominations) is partly due to the influence of the Anglican mission, which probably wanted to create a counterpart to the term "Chaldean" introduced by the Catholics. But it also contributed to the national awakening of this *mellat suryētā* ("Syrian nation," as they called themselves in their press until the end of World War I). The Anglican mission was called "The Archbishop of Canterbury's Mission to Assyrian Christians." The name Assyrians was especially propagated by the Anglican missionary W. A. Wigram in his popular publications, above all in his booklet *The Assyrians and their Neighbours* (London, 1929). Forty years later, J. Joseph, a member of this ethnic group, author of *The Nestorians and Their Muslim Neighbours* (Princeton, 1961), whose title is certainly suggested by Wigram's booklet, returned to the original name of his people exposing the artificial nature of the names "Chaldeans" and "Assyrians" (pp. 6ff.). After World War I these people needed a name when they had to apply for their human rights before the League of Nations (Joseph, pp. 154ff.; Macuch, *Geschichte*, p. 260). Since by this time the name "Assyrians" had been officially introduced in the West, the eastern Syrians could only try to assert the term among themselves. In spite of the zeal of the "Assyrian" nationalists, it was not easy to bring it into general use; the Catholic part of this people still prefers the appellation Chaldean. But they succeeded to the extent that an Assyro-Chaldean union has been formed. Moreover, an Iranian Assyrian Catholic, Dr. Pēʾra Sarmas (see below), became the most zealous defender of the name "Assyrians."

The development of the modern concept of "Assyrians" among these people themselves began with Botta's excavation of the palace of Sargon II in Khorsabad (1843), followed by Layard's discovery of Nineveh. This research

opened the eyes, not only of the West, but also of the ethnically nameless Aramean population in these regions which had been satisfied to identify itself by religions denominations. Already in 1847, only two years after Layard's discovery, a Jacobite copyist and poet ʿAbd-al-Wāḥed of Mosul designated himself as "of Assyrian origin and of Syrian Jacobite religion" (Ms. Mingana N. 77, fol. 106; Macuch, p. 421). True, the Neo-Syriac press in Urmia, founded in the 1840s by the American Presbyterian Mission, seemed satisfied with the name "Syrians" or with the religious designation *ēdtā ʿāttīqtā d-madenḥā*, "the Ancient Church of the East." But the same press awakened the national self-consciousness of a people who, since the Mongol invasion, had fallen into illiteracy and lethargy. Soon after the arrival in Urmia of the first missionaries (especially Dr. Justin Perkins, who deserves the title of father of modern Syriac literature), the Assyrians found themselves in possession of schools, books and periodicals in their spoken language, a hospital and (from 1885 to the end of World War I) a university college, where educational science, theology, philosophy, and medicine were taught. *Za(h)rīrē d-ba(h)rā* (The rays of light), edited by the Presbyterian Mission from 1849 to the end of World War I, was the first periodical in Iran and enjoyed a longer life than any other Iranian periodical. In 1896 it was followed by *Qālā d-šrārā* (The voice of the truth), edited by the Catholic Lazarist mission; in 1904 by *Ūrmī ārtādoksētā* ("orthodox Urmia"), edited by the Russian Orthodox mission; and in 1906 by the periodical of the national movement,*Koḵḇā* (The star; see Macuch, pp. 136-211). These periodicals of Urmia (the spiritual center of the Iranian Assyrians) did their best to bring on a religious renaissance and to stir the interest of the people in its past—both in their Christian history and in archeological discoveries in the territory of Aššur and Babel. (See the detailed biography of Hormizd Rassam, Layard's Chaldean assistant, in *Zahrīrē d-bahrā* 61, 1910, p. 105; Macuch, p. 171 f.) In 1911 Frēdon Ātōrāyā, a Russian Assyrian of Iranian origin (the first of several Assyrian migrations to Russia had occurred in 1828; see Macuch, pp. 114, 181, 185) was publishing *Nāqōšā* (Stroke of the clock) in Tiflis. In an article "Who are the Syrians and how shall we raise our nation," he wrote: "The Syrians are the sons of Aššur. We are children of Assyrians with glorious history . . . " (reprinted in the Iranian Assyrian journal *Ātor* No. 140, 1972; Macuch, p. 383). The equation "Syrian" = "Assyrian" became established, although the name "Syrian" has not yet been abandoned, e.g., the mentioned editor chose "Ātorāyā" as his family name, and, similarly, Āšūrī and Āšūrīān have become preferred Assyrian family names in Iran. The equation found a philological advocate in the Chaldean scholar Tʾōmā Ōdo, bishop in Urmia, in his *Dictionnaire de la langue*

chaldéenne (Mosul, 1897, p. 9 n.) and *Ktāḇā d-qeryānē gūbyē* (*Morceaux choisis*, Urmia, 1906, pp. 168ff.; repr. P. Sarmas, *Tasītā* III, p. 67ff.). He argued that the appellation *Ātōrāyē* came into being through aphaeresis of the initial aleph and the change of pronunciation of the spirantized *ṯ* to *sÂ²*; the latter is normal in several Neo-Syriac dialects. This simple philological equation is doubtful (see. F. Rosenthal, *Die aramaistische Forschung*, Leiden, 1939, p. 3 n. 1; and J. Joseph, pp. 12f.). But it obtained a zealous advocate in Dr. P. Sarmas (Macuch, pp. 293ff.), the author of the Neo-Syriac "History of Assyrian literature," in his booklet *Aḫnān mānī (y)waḫ?* ("Who are we?" Tehran, 1967), he asserted: "It has been commonly accepted that the word "Syria" is derived from the ancient word "Assyria" (p. 70) . . . Only by calling ourselves by a uniform name, namely "Assyrians," shall we gain the sympathies of our government and the respect of our neighbors; (and) others will not point us out with a finger as "that nation which does not know its name"" (p. 146; extracts in Macuch and Panoussi, pp. 1-3).

Clearly, this small ethnic group divided into different confessions needed special arguments for accepting a standard name "Assyrians" after this term had already been accepted, for practical reasons, by their neighbors in the Near East and in Russia, Europe, and America. National zeal had to be reinforced and the whole history of the people to be assyrianized. (The name *sū/ōrāyē* of the earlier texts ought to be rendered in reprints with an initial aleph, though provided with a *linea occultans*, as *(ʾ)sōrāyē*, in order to bring it graphically closer to *ātōrāyē*.) Thus the history of the people is always made to begin with Sargon I, not only in general histories (e.g., by M. Š. Amīrā, I. Š. Dāwīd, etc.) but also in books such as "The Assyrians and the Two World Wars" (by Yaʿqūḇ bar Māleḵ Ismāʿèl). P. Sarmas' Neo-Syriac "History of Assyrian Literature" comprises Akkadian, Syriac, and Neo-Syriac literatures. An uninterrupted history from Akkad until the present time is professed by all modern Assyrian writers (in Iran especially by Benyāmīn Ārsānīs; see Macuch, pp. 279-81). The Arameans living in the territory of ancient Assyria (from Turkey, Lebanon, and Syria to Iraq and Iran) and even the Syrian Christians of Malabar (South India) continue to be taken as true Assyrians of the Christian period (see Y. Bè[t]-Solèmān, *Taš῾ītā d-Ātorāyē b-zaḇnā d-kriskṯyānūtā* [History of the Assyrians at the time of Christianity], New Britain, 1931; and the scholarly work of J. M. Fiey, *Assyrie chrétienne* I-III, Beirut, 1965-68). Those in the border regions (Turkey, Kurdistan, and Azarbaijan) are esteemed as true descendants of the Assyrian colonists (P. Sarmas, *Aḫnān mānī (y)waḫ* p. 70; Macuch and Panoussi, p. 2).

In order to animate people with interest in their ancient Assyrian history, recourse is often made in literature to personalities whose glory is mainly legendary. Sargon I already legendary in Neo-Assyrian times, is made the starting point of modern Assyrian history. The whole Near East is proved to bear the name of his land by a play *Mātā d-Šārōkīn* (= Šarru-kīn) "The Land of Sargon" published and presented by the Assyrian Youth Committee in Beirut in 1969. It describes the fight of the "Assyrian" Christians against Jengiz Khan. Semiramis, the legendary founder and queen of Babylon (in fact Sammuramat, mother of the Assyrian king Adad-nirari III), is a resource for modern "Assyrian" name-giving, as well as romantic historical presentations. Šamīrām is a popular modern Assyrian woman's name, also the name of the art and folklore associations of Assyrian youths in Tehran, founded by Lilē Tamrāz (*Ātor* 39, 1972; Macuch, p. 382) and in Beirut (*Ātor* 55, 1973; Macuch, p. 394). M. Š. Amīrā in his popular Neo-Syriac "History of Assyria" has Semiramis speak to her victorious armies returning from the conquest of Persia, Armenia, Egypt, and Abyssinia: "Beloved Assyrian youths, would that all of you could be as a single man that I might embrace him, press him to my breast, and kiss him on his mouth." Then she ordered the flag of the Assyrian army brought and kissed it instead, because each soldier shared in the victory of this flag (op. cit., p. 108; extract in Macuch and Panoussi, p. 5).

To magnify the small ethnic group, the concept of "Assyrians" is sometimes overextended to all Oriental Christians, even to Ethiopians. Māleḵ Qambar Wardā (Macuch, pp. 275f.) after having fought in Ethiopia in 1934-36 against Mussolini's army, was asked by an Assyrian friend why he did it; he reportedly answered: "Brotherly help. Ultimately, they also are Assyrians."

Assyrians in Iran from 1915. The 19th-century Iranian Assyrians, living under better conditions than their brothers in the Turkish empire, proved to be the best defenders of the Azarbaijan frontier. Fatḥ-ʿAlī Shah, after his victory over the Kurds and the Turks, married an Assyrian girl in Dīkāla and organized a regiment of a hundred Assyrian soldiers for defending Tehran (Y. Bè[t]-Solèmān, op. cit., p. 79). From the 1830s to the end of World War I, Urmia was the spiritual capital of the Assyrians by the influence of four Christian missions (see above), which also founded four printing-houses. In 1915-17 the missionary stations in Urmia were able to offer refuge to thousands of Assyrians from the Turkish territory of Hakkari who, under the leadership of their Nestorian patriarch, had to leave their homes to save themselves from the persecution of the Turkish government determined to exterminate all

Christians in the Turkish territory. In the early years of the Iranian constitution, the Assyrians had a deputy in the Iranian Parliament (*Zahrīrē d-bahrā*62, 1911, p. 1; Macuch, p. 176). The unfortunate events of the two world wars, however, forced a large number of the Assyrian population of the Urmia plain to migrate into other Iranian cities, especially Tehran, Hamadān, and Kermānšāh, to join relatives or friends there. Some found employment in Iranian administration or in the National Iranian Oil Company and founded new Assyrian communities in Ahvāz and Ābādān, where they established their churches, schools, and clubs. Because of their continual fluctuation it is difficult to give an exact number of Assyrians in different Iranian cities. In Tehran, where there may be about 50,000 Assyrians, they founded three churches and several cultural organizations, especially an Assyrian Youth Cultural Society with its own press publishing books and periodicals. They were supported by the Iranian Ministry of Culture. From 1963 to 1978 they had three successive deputies in the Majles (W. Ebrāhīmī, Dr. W. Bēt-Manṣūr, and H. Āšūrīān). There was also an Assyrian brigadier-general in the Iranian army, Filip Bēt-Qšaʿnā (see *Ātor* 42, 1972). An example of Iranian Assyrian political rhetoric is furnished by the writer Šmūʾēl Bēt-Kūlā: “In Isaiah 45:1-8 in the year 712 B.C. it was prophesized of Cyrus the Persian, who in 534 conquered Babyloŋ He freed himself from the Median yoke, became emperor of the Medes and Persians, conquered Babylon, and was a righteous ruler. For these 2,500 years we Assyrians have been faithful citizens of the heroic Persian empire” (“Ṣlōtā qā salāmātūtā d-malkān,” *Ātor* 29, 1971; cf. Macuch, p. 372).

The Nestorian patriarchate lost its political prerogatives after World War I but continued as a spiritual office—the leadership of Nestorian Assyrians throughout the world. Its hereditary status (succession passed to a late patriarch’s brother or nephew) ended with Mar Eshai Shimon XXIII (Macuch, pp. 336, 486); in 1976 the bishop of Tehran, Mar Denkha, was elected patriarch of “the ancient Church of the East.”

The modern Assyrian society in Iran and its social, political, and economic activities. Because of the fluctuation of the Assyrians after the first and second world wars in general and especially the Islamic Revolution in February, 1979, which may lead to further disintegration of religious minorities, it is extremely difficult to give an exact picture of the present state and activities of the Assyro-Chaldean community in Iran and to guess its future. Forced to leave their more or less compact settlements in Iranian Kurdistan and Azarbaijan,

they have been living in a diaspora, predominantly in the larger Iranian cities, only a limited number remaining in their original habitats. The statistics of the years 1950-51 and 1970-71 published by Hubert de Mauroy in his book *Les Assyro-Chaldéens dans l'Iran d'aujourd'hui* (Paris, 1978) show not only the distribution of the Assyro-Chaldeans in Iran but also the fluctuation and growth of this small nation during these twenty years (Table 27).

We see that the urban Assyrian population almost doubled, from a little above 10,000 in 1950-51 to almost 20.000 in 1970-71, a growth corresponding to the general increase of the population of Iran and to the increased moving of the rural population to the cities in the last decades. The statistics also show that, whereas (apart from Reżāʾīya, a representative Assyrian city in the past) the urban Assyrian population diminished in Iranian Azarbaijan and Kurdistan, it increased excessively in the capital Tehran and, to some extent, in the larger cities of Ḵūzestān, where formerly there were no Assyrians at all, which is directly related to the growing prosperity of these cities due especially to oil industry. The number of Iranian Assyrians still living in villages can be roughly estimated at 60,000. The approximate numbers above are of course no longer valid. The Assyrian population in Tehran seems to have increased by about a third towards the end of the 1980s. Statistical data for the other cities, are impossible to come by in the current situation.

The Assyrians of Iran are divided into two main churches: (1) the Ancient Church of the East (Nestorian) and (2) the Catholic Chaldean Church, as well as a minor Protestant Church and some smaller denominations which came into existence in the last two centuries. The main two Assyrian churches are called, artificially, "Assyro-Chaldean," as the members of the Catholic Church, in existence since 1552 through a division of the Ancient Church of the East and the subsequent union of the "Chaldeans" with Rome, are not ready to give up their traditional name "Chaldean." In fact, this church is now somewhat larger than the original Nestorian "Ancient Church of the East" which has only one diocese (Tehran), whereas the Chaldaean Catholic Church is divided into three dioceses: (1) Tehran, (2) Urmia-Salmās (Reżāʾīya), (3) Ahvāz. The bishop of the Nestorian Church in Tehran, Mar Ḫ^{e}nānyā Deṇḥā was elected patriarch of the Ancient Church of the East on 17 October 1976 in London, after the hereditary principle of the Nestorian patriarchate (passing to the brother or nephew of the patriarch) was given up after the assassination of the last patriarch of this hereditary chain (Macuch, p. 486).

Approximate statistics of churches are given in *Table 28*.

These confessional divisions, however, in no way lessen the social and cultural unity of the Assyro-Chaldean people.

The political status of the Iranian Assyrians is that of a religious minority. Already an electoral law from the Constitution of 1907 made room for an Assyrian deputy in the Majles, but the lack of unity among the Assyrians and the situation created by the two world wars prevented the Assyrians from availing themselves of this possibility. Under the reign of the Qajars only for three short legislative periods (November, 1970-June, 1908; November 1910-December, 1911 and 1915) were Assyrian deputies elected. There has been none between World War I and II. It was only under the government of M. Eqbāl in 1959 that the Assyrians were again represented in the Majles and the first Assyrian deputy, the teacher William Ebrāhīmī was elected for a normal legislative period of four years. For the following legislative period, 1963, there were two candidates, W. Ebrāhīmī and Georges Māleḵ Yōnān. Ebrāhīmī was reelected with 6,000 votes out of 8,000. In 1967 there were four candidates: Wilson Bēt-Manṣūr, G. M. Yōnān, W. Ebrāhīmī, and Bābā Laʿzār. Of 14,000 votes they got 6,000, 3,500, 2,000, and 500 respectively. In 1971, there was a certain agreement between the Assyrians to reelect Bēt-Manṣūr that he might eventually be designated as a senator and to make place for a new Assyrian deputy (see the propaganda-article of Rābī ʾĪšaʿyā d-Šammāša Dāwīd in Bēt-Manṣūr's newspaper *Ātor*, no. 31, German summary by Macuch, pp. 375f.). Bēt-Manṣūr (representing the *Īrān-e novīn* party) was reelected; the second candidate, Yōnān Māleḵ Manṣūr (of *Mardom* party) gave up his candidature. But the opposition against Bēt-Manṣūr started to grow in 1973 as he founded his National Liberation Party supporting Iran's anti-Iraqi policy in the question of Kurdish liberation fighting in northern Iraq in which many Iraqi Assyrians participated. Many Assyrians abroad criticized this policy and warned against it. As long as Iran supported the fighting Kurds, it was also possible to develop a help program for the Assyrian refugees from Iraq. But after the entente between Iran and Iraq, in 1975, Bēt-Manṣūr was forced to give up his public functions. The last Assyrian deputy in the Majles from 1976 until the Islamic Revolution in February 1979, was Homer Āšūrīān. He consecrated all his forces to modernization and material and technical development of villages in Iranian Azarbaijan; electricity and water supplies, as well as connecting roads, etc., for several villages were made or, at least, planned under his supervision.

The Assyrians in Iran were hardly in a position to complain about the Pahlavi

régime, which guaranteed them political and economical freedoms which the Assyrians enjoyed in no other country of the Near and Middle East; they expressed their gratitude to the shah and his government for the recognition of their human rights quite spontaneously, though a few oppositional Irano-Assyrian students in West Germany wrote a letter to two leaders of the Shiʿite opposition shortly before the beginning of the 1979 revolution in Iran (published by G. Yonan, op. cit., p. 89b), in which they requested respect for the human rights of their nation as well as of other national and religious minorities in their country.

The Assyrians founded charitable, folkloristic, and cultural institutions and even sport clubs in several cities. The first and most important "Assyrian Youth Cultural Society" (*Sīʿtā siprētā da-ʿlaymē ātorāye*, Tehran) was founded on 21 February 1950 and played a very important role through its publication of books and propagation of literature in modern-Syriac ("Assyrian"). There was also a theater group called Šāhdūst, founded in 1954, with its own choir. Its founder and director, Paṭros Ṯūmā Bağzāda, wrote forty-five "Assyrian" theater pieces. Another famous and important folkloristic music, dance, and theater group, Šamīrām, was founded in 1957 by Lilē Taymūrāzī. A further Assyrian cultural committee *Mutḇā* edited in the sixties a monthly information bulletin *Keṛḥā yaṛḥāyā*. This committee along with the "Assyrian Youth Cultural Society" is still considered one of the most important Assyrian cultural organizations. It publishes "Assyrian" books and in 1974 it founded a National Assyrian Library. In 1976 it was reorganized by new deputy, Homer Āšūrīān, and in 1977 it started to publish a new periodical *Šḇīlā* "The way." In August, 1969, the Assyrian Iranian Federation (after the model of the American Assyrian National Federation) was founded. This Federation stood under strong influence of the former deputy Bèt-Manṣūr whose newspaper *Ātor* was its organ until his political decline in 1975. In 1970 the Iranian government gave a piece of land of 10,214 m^2 to the Assyrian Youth Association in Tehran for cultural activities. A "Salon of Assyrian Youths" and a "Students' Association" were opened there. Similar cultural associations and clubs have been founded also in other Iranian cities, where Assyrians are living. Among the first ones was the Rotary Club in Ābādān, where many Assyrians were working in the Iranian Oil Company. It was founded in 1955 by Pēʾrā Sarmas. In Urmia and the surrounding villages, there were several churches and summer schools in which the "Assyrian" language and religion according to the Chaldean and Nestorian creeds were taught. In 1966 an Assyrian working team was organized which also founded an Assyrian library.

In July, 1970, the radio of Reżāʾīya began broadcasting an Assyrian program directed by Roza Dezāčī, Walwadīa Sargīs, and Šīmʿōn Bēt-Īšōʿ. The Assyrian youths in Reżāʾīya also founded a sports club *Koḵḇa d-Āšur* "The Assyrian star." In Tabrīz there is a youth organization led by Dr. James Hormozī.

The best educational and cultural possibilities were, of course, given in the capital where, in addition to the above-mentioned cultural societies, there were four Assyrian schools. Two of them belonged to the Chaldean Church under the supervision of the Metropolitan Mār (= Mgr.) Yōḥannān ʾĪšay. The Nestorian school*Šarq* "The east" had about 370 pupils and fifteen teachers and the national school*Šūšan* over 750 pupils and fourteen teachers in ca. 1975. Apart from the inter-confessional associations, there were cultural organizations attached to almost all Assyrian churches.

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For the numerous Assyrian periodicals, see Macuch, pp. 136-87, 195-201, 206-11, 310-22, 342-97.

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