

The Kurds of Iraq: Tragedy and Hope.

By Michael M. Gunter

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By *Francis Sarguis*

A most useful guide for the newcomer, this book will be a welcome addition to anyone interested in the region. By now many of the basic facts about the Kurds are familiar; this most readable account blends in some interesting new tidbits. Between 22 to 25 million Kurds inhabit an area the size of France stretching across 5 countries, but most notably Turkey, Iraq and Iran. Even though well over half of the Kurdish population locates in present-day Turkey, Gunter explains (p.3) why historically Iraq has been the most fertile ground for their revolt:

First, the Kurds in Iraq long constituted a greater proportion of the population than they did in any other country they inhabited. Accordingly, despite their smaller absolute numbers, they represented a larger critical mass in Iraq than elsewhere . . .

Second, as an artificial, new state, Iraq had less legitimacy as a political entity than Turkey and Iran . . . Indeed, since the creation of Iraq, it had been understood that they were to negotiate their future position, a right that the Kurds in other states did not have.

And third, Iraq was further divided by a Sunni-Shiite Muslim division not present in Turkey or Iran. This predicament further called into question its future.

Assyrians in the Middle East, and Assyrians in the diaspora perhaps even more, claim that Iraq is their traditional homeland. It is true that today Baghdad holds the largest Assyrian population enclave anywhere, but geographically the perceived Assyrian homeland is located from Mosul north. This is understandably the focus of this review (as it is the focus of the book itself). While for several decades this was mostly a metaphoric projection, recent socio-political developments have fueled expectations. To a large extent, Assyrian aspirations have been shaped by the hands-on role of a small but relatively effective political group known as the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM).

As seems always the case with such books, Gunter's study is about the Kurds and not the Assyrians. Therefore, it does not surprise that the quotation above fails to mention Assyrians at all. Hardly alone among writers who commit this omission, Gunter would no doubt argue that it is unreasonable to expect discussion of every last group in Iraq between the covers of a single, modest volume. Perhaps so, but that is hardly of comfort to a beleaguered and still unknown people. Most lamentable, we have yet to see the emergence of a penetrating study focused particularly on the heirs of this ancient civilization. It is obvious and realistic that such an undertaking will never take place unless it is done by an Assyrian proper, or by a devoted Assyriophile. A smart step in that direction was taken by Dr. Gabriele Yonan's 1989 study, *The Forgotten Holocaust* (see reprinted review in this issue of JAAS), which particularly

addresses the Assyrian massacres in Turkey. But that book appeared in German, hence it has enjoyed limited readership. Incredibly, it has taken nearly a decade for its translation to English (due out in the next few months). It can only be hoped that Dr. Yonan's work might inspire others to undertake similar efforts.

But whatever is written about this Middle East region, even if it focuses only on its majority population, is bound to relate to the area as a whole. Gunter's book, divided into short and breezy chapters, revisits the perfidy (mostly Western-originated) which has continued to frustrate Kurdish expectations. Their modern ordeal in many ways mirrors the "Assyrian tragedy". Their classic betrayal by the U.S. in 1975 (in collaboration with the Shah of Iran) shares familiar elements with prior deceptions inflicted on the Assyrians. But the Kurdish case goes beyond "broken promises". At the legal level, their claim was officially recognized by a serious and authoritative world body. Articles 62 and 64 of the Treaty of Sevres (1920) specifically provided for "*local autonomy for the predominantly Kurdish areas*", envisioning further that "*the Kurdish peoples . . . [might be granted] . . . independence from Turkey*" (p.2). Subsequently, the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) blithely consigned them to the bin of irrelevancy by simply failing to mention them at all!

Readers should find Gunter's presentation edifying, particularly as it relates to the past decade. His facts and figures shed useful light on the oft-told but adumbrated story of the May 19, 1992 elections in the "protected" zone of North Iraq. The prelude to the actual event unsurprisingly reveals a mix of backroom politics mixed in with a desire to impress both at home and abroad. The nominal vehicle for 'democratizing' this region was the Kurdish Front, a group of 8 political parties (7 of them Kurdish, plus the ADM). In reality, the run-up to the elections was little more than a minuet between the only two meaningful players, namely, Massoud Barzani and his KDP, and Jalal Talabani and his PUK. Insofar as any important decision is taken in this area, the election results unquestionably bear out that these are the only key players; all else is merely a footnote. Of Barzani and Talabani, at least in their peaceful entr'actes, it might aptly be said: *l'etat c'est nous*.

In the early pre-election stage the Turkomans were invited to participate, and were even guaranteed a number of Parliamentary seats (believed to be 10). The offer was declined: They did not want to be associated with a de facto "Kurdistan" which would imply support for partition of Iraq; and they were also concerned that their participation might exacerbate harassment of fellow Turkoman who reside in large numbers in the Kirkuk area (pp. 90-91).

For their part, the Christians (read Assyrians) were guaranteed 5 Parliamentary seats. As the only Christian member of the Kurdish Front, the ADM saw things differently than the Turkoman. The ADM enthusiastically participated in the elections (and its candidates garnered four of the 5 Christian seats). Until now, the ADM decision to participate and its aftermath remain a source of acrimonious Assyrian debate, particularly in the diaspora.

Including the 5 guaranteed Christian seats, the Parliament would consist of 105 members. This was based on the principle of "one member for every 30,000

population”. This formula was generously held in suspension when it came to the Christians. Not only were the Christians “awarded” more seats than their population could justify, but they were also exempted from the ground rule that a party must poll at least 7% of the general vote or its ballots will not count. Effectively, all minor parties were knocked out of the running, leaving only the KDP, the PUK, and the protected Christian element.

The general population of the electoral region was estimated to be 3,150,000, a figure given some credence when the interim government committee formed by opposition groups in Vienna (June 1992) allocated the Kurds 22 out of 87 seats (Fn. 13, Chapter 10).

Nearly one million votes were cast by the mostly Kurdish electorate. Of these, the Assyrian/Christian ballots amounted to a mere 7,818, with the lion’s share going to the ADM. The ADM’s enthusiasm over the returns was understandable (in *Aghona*, the official ADM organ in the US, a July 1992 headline blared “*Zowaa in Election Landslide*”). This was an unprecedented exercise in the popular franchise, even if the Christian vote did not amount to even one percent. In the ensuing years, the ADM has revealed itself to be a sober and realistic body. It has skillfully maneuvered to achieve certain objectives (especially in the matter of religious and educational rights), notwithstanding the negligible size of the Christian population. These accomplishments are derisively swept aside by some Assyrians who insist on the pursuit of tendentious claims, but who only pound the pulpit at long-distance, from across very vast oceans.

Since it was known all along that the population of the region did not strictly justify awarding the Assyrians/Christians five Parliamentary seats, the question arises why the Kurdish Front would be so accommodating. This is of course one of the many questions unaddressed by this book. In the run-up to the elections, ADM leaders skillfully argued that the Assyrian population in the voting zone was but a very small segment of the Assyrian population outside the zone, hence the seat allotment should take this anomaly into account. But surely a good part of the formulation must be attributed to the need for the Kurds to impress their Western audience. In addition to the importance of keeping the Western Allies interested in “Operation Poised Hammer”, it was known that a multitude of human rights delegations would be present to monitor the elections. The decision of the Kurdish Front to guarantee 5 seats to a minority whose size might otherwise justify no more than 2 seats was surely intended to signal concern for minority rights in a Kurdish-dominated population. Given the record of Kurdish pillage and devastation visited upon the Christians in the previous century, this was a gesture with ample historic justification.

The Parliamentary election was not the only issue on the agenda of May 19, 1992. There was also the matter of selecting what Gunter calls “the supreme leader”. On that score, neither of the two candidates could poll 51%, Barzani coming out with a mere 25,000 voting edge. Barzani beat out Talabani by a decisive margin in the Dohuk area., which is his stronghold. The Assyrians in the region are primarily located in the Dohuk area and, rightly or not, they were

thought to be more sympathetic to Talabani. No doubt there must be subtle consequences of this perception, but they are yet to be articulated.

The repeated slogan of Barzani and the KDP (and sporadically echoed by Talabani and the PUK) is “*Autonomy for Kurdistan, Democracy for Iraq*”. This abjuration of independence cannot be seen as very heartfelt. As the largest population in the world which does not have its own country, there is little doubt that the Kurds would insist on their own sovereignty if they felt it was anywhere in their reach. But they have no illusion about the role they have inherited as a pawn in Middle East politics. The established states in the Middle East, even while deadly antagonists, converge in their opposition to any Kurdish self-rule. They do not want to accept any precedent potentially infelicitous to their territorial integrity. As for the West, whose posture is determined primarily by Washington, the preferred policy seems to be one of designed paralysis. According to this approach, the Kurds are refused the kind of assistance which would enable them to establish an independent homeland; while at the same time they are supported (and protected) just enough to maintain a measure of independence from Baghdad.

For better or for worse, the fate of the Assyrians is inextricably bound to the fate of the Kurds, especially of course the Kurds of Iraq. In north Iraq, there have been some political developments of a positive nature, and these have redounded to the advantage of all inhabitants, not merely the Kurds. On the other hand, the severity of living conditions wrought by the embargoes of the U.N. and of Baghdad tests the perseverance of all parties in the region. Less significant in number, hence less apt to be heard in their demands, the Assyrians are quite mindful of their bloodied past, much of it suffered at the hands of Kurds. What has been taking place for the past several years can be seen as an experiment in Middle East democracy. But as concerns particularly Kurdish-Assyrian relations, it can also be seen as a healing process. The big question remains whether the cure will take. While circumstances have forced these two old antagonists to strive for a *modus vivendi*, it is sad to note that no “good outcome” appears in sight, either for the Kurds or for the Assyrians.