

# From Lingua Franca to Endangered Language *The Legal Aspects of the Preservation of Aramaic in Iraq*

Eden Naby  
Independent Scholar

Aramaic is the oldest, yet weakest, of the family of Semitic languages. Enormously influential on both the history of alphabet development and the history of writing throughout Asia, Aramaic is today preserved only in limited pockets of the Middle East in its spoken and written form. In the large diaspora, scattered in the Former Soviet Union, Australia, South America, Europe and the United States, it is disappearing. The largest and most compact community of Aramaic users is that of the indigenous Christians of Iraq – collectively referred to in recent legal Iraqi documents as the ChaldoAssyrians.<sup>1</sup>

Yet the final fate of Aramaic is not sealed. It hangs in the balance in the tumult and often-deadly politics of Iraq. In this paper I will concentrate on three legal documents, promulgated in Iraq over the past three years, which have the potential to affect the fate of the oldest living language of the Middle East, and the second oldest continuously written and spoken language of the world, after Chinese. The documents are the constitution of the Kurdish Regional Government, the Kurdish draft for the Iraqi constitution, and the Transitional Administrative Law.

Language chauvinism, the hallmark of emerging states, infected the Middle East for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and saw the destruction of Aramaic educational resources as well as the physical existence of the Aramaic-speaking communities. Enlightened public language policy, coupled with respect for the rights of non-conforming ethnic groups, and international pressure may be the determining factors in whether Aramaic will disappear in this century in all but the halls of seminaries and yeshivas.

## A Name for a Language

Aramaic, like historical and contemporary Arabic, is separated into several important dialects. These dialects for the most part, do not have continuous written documentation: some dialects still do not have a written form but have relied on a written standard far different from the spoken language. This written standard, among Christian Aramaic speakers, has been Classical Syriac, for which written materials have existed in an unbroken line throughout the Christian era.

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<sup>1</sup> This compound name arose from the first secular conference of the community, convened in Baghdad October 22-24, 2003. 70% of the Christians in Iraq belong to the Chaldean Catholic Church. The others are made up of members of the Church of the East, Syrian Orthodox, Syrian Catholic, and Protestant communities. Armenians amount to about 20,000, mainly descendents of WWI refugees from Iran and Turkey.

Originally brought to Mesopotamia by tribal groups that formed small political entities largely incorporated into the multi-ethnic and multi-racial Assyrian Empire, Aramaic quickly spread in spoken and written form to overshadow the Semitic Akkadian and Babylonian, both imperial languages written in cumbersome ideograms mainly inherited from the Sumerians. The alphabet revolution brought on by Aramaic and the mixing of Aramaic speakers with others throughout the vast expanses of the Assyrian Empire, led to the adoption not only of alphabetic Aramaic as the writing method for everyday commerce, but also elevated Aramaic into a language that long survived the demise of the Assyro-Babylonian political structure, the rise of Persian power, and the advent of Christianity. The gradual eclipse of Aramaic begins with the sweep of Islam which dictates that Arabic is the language spoken by God as transmitted in the Koran.

The divine linguistic authority granted to Arabic allowed it to supercede all languages in the path of its expansion from Africa to the hinterlands of western China. From the evidence of the tombstones in Semirechiya and Inner Mongolia, where Syriac Aramaic is inscribed in formulaic phrases, we can observe a shift to the Arabic alphabet as Turkic and other language groups convert to Islam.<sup>2</sup> Persian revived in Central Asia, and later in Iran, in part due to state authority (for secular purposes) but Aramaic did not because it has not been a state-sponsored language for the past two millennia. Instead Aramaic became confined to Christians, and some of their Jewish neighbors, before the latter immigrated to Israel from Iraq following the bombing of synagogues in 1948.<sup>3</sup> Now, Iraq's Christians are undergoing the same kinds of attacks. Without safeguards, Christians too will flee and thus will end the three millennia history of Aramaic in Mesopotamia.

At present, the use of Aramaic may be divided into four sectors:

1. The liturgical language of Christian church communities: These include Apostolic and Orthodox churches and their Uniate branches (Church of the East, dubbed "Nestorian," Chaldean Catholic Church, Syrian

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<sup>2</sup> The Mongols, chiefly non-Muslim, to this day retain the Aramaic alphabet, written up and down like Chinese, for their language in Inner Mongolia (PRC). Free of Moscow's control, this alphabet is being revived in the Mongolian republic.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of Jews by a Baghdad Assyrian, see Y.R. Ghanimah, *A NOSTALGIC TRIP INTO THE HISTORY OF THE JEWS OF IRAQ*, tr. by Reading Dallal (New York, University Press of America, 1998).

Orthodox Church, Syrian Catholic Church), and to some extent, the Lebanese Maronite Church. The form of Aramaic is Classical Syriac, a language whose grammar and literature that developed since the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE in Urhoi (Gr. Edessa, Turk. Urfa) and in Nisibin, both now located in Turkish Mesopotamia.<sup>4</sup> It is rarely spoken.<sup>5</sup> The numerically most significant congregations of these churches are located in Kerala, India, where the spoken language of the population is Malayalam.

2. The vernacular dialects of the modern Assyrians: these incorporate a good number of Akkadian words, especially for common household items such as traditional food processing and storage implements, and names of flora. The writing of vernacular Aramaic is of recent introduction, first among the eastern Assyrians, mainly those living in eastern Anatolia (upper Mesopotamia) and northwest Iran (around Urmi and Salamas), and in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, among Aramaic speakers in the west, mainly scattered in a diaspora set off by the World War I genocide of Christians (Assyrians, Greeks and Armenians living in what has become Turkey). The Protestant churches, promoted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by British, German and American missionaries, use the vernacular language, as does to a great extent, the Church of the East.

3. The Aramaic spoken by the small remnants of Mandeans (Sabeans) of Iraq and Iran; that is, the followers of John the Baptist. These communities have largely adapted to Arabic use except in their religious rites.

4. The Aramaic of three villages near Maalula, Syria, a community known for the unusual retention of spoken Aramaic among recent converts to Islam as well as those still practicing eastern Christianity. In cases of most converts to Islam, the new Muslims eschew Aramaic for a “Muslim” language such as Kurdish, Arabic, Turkish or Persian.

### **Iraq’s Aramaic Speakers**

In Iraq, as in the rest of the Middle East, Aramaic speakers have been under cultural and physical siege for the better part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Suppression of Aramaic speaking Christians, beginning one year after Iraqi independence in 1932, is marked by a massacre at Semele (a village in Nineveh province) that spread to other villages and targeted thousands of women and children. Throughout modern Iraq’s cultural history, it has faced the dilemma of how to exercise pride in its pre-Islamic civilization while undertaking an

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<sup>4</sup> An excellent literary history of Classical Syriac is available by Patriarch Ignatius Aphram I Barsoum: *THE HISTORY OF SYRIAC LITERATURE AND SCIENCES*, tr. by Matti Moosa (Pueblo, CO, Passeggiata Press, 2000)

<sup>5</sup> A notable attempt to reintroduce Classical Syriac to the tongue, outside high clergy circles of the Syriac Orthodox Church is the case of the head of the Syriac Studies Institute (New Jersey) to train his enfant daughter to converse in this language.

uncompromising effort to become an Arab state. Pressure mounted on Aramaic speakers to declare themselves Arab, an effort that increased violently under the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein. In 1977, Assyrians as an ethno-linguistic category were dropped from the Iraqi census. Only the religious category of “Christians” appeared thereafter although other ethno-linguistic groups – Arabs and Kurds – continued to be enumerated.<sup>6</sup>

Like in other Muslim dominant countries, as Christians, the Aramaic speakers were accorded the status of a protected religious minority entitled to conduct its religious affairs. In neighboring Iran, this protected religious right has been translated, even under Tehran’s theocracy, to mean the preservation of language used for religious worship. By extension, the Assyrian community has been free to continue heavily supervised private Assyrian schools, an expensive process, or to run after hours church schools for language instruction. By contrast, in Iraq, the community language, dubbed Syriac even in reference to the vernacular rather than the liturgical language, was taught in schools where enough students enrolled. The problem emerged with the recruitment of teachers (and students), both of whom increasingly felt pressure to self-identity as Arabs.

As conditions in northern Iraq, the homeland of most Assyrians of all church denominations, especially Chaldean and Church of the East, deteriorated due to the continued opposition movement, especially after the start of the Iran-Iraq war (1981-1988), many more families moved to Baghdad and Basra. Campaigns mounted by successive Baghdad regimes since 1960 had also driven people into refugee situations outside Iraq. Since then nearly 300 Assyrian villages have been razed, hundreds of churches blown up or bull-dozed, and by the time of the Gulf War (1991), fully half of the Christian Aramaic speakers of Iraq had fled the country. Today estimates of the population still in Iraq range from a low 3% to a high of 10%. However, no reliable figures exist for any segment of Iraq’s population whether ChaldoAssyrians, Turkmen, Arab, or Kurd.

### **Assyrians and Kurds**

Relations between the two main ethno-linguistic groups in northern Iraq, Assyrians and Kurds, are marked by a bitter history: Kurdish tribal chiefs in southeastern Turkey, northeastern Syria, and northwest Iran conducted regular raids against their Christian neighbors, raids that eventually turned into para-military assaults during WWI when Turkey conducted ethnic cleansing of its Christian population. Kurds were

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<sup>6</sup> Christians were offered the lucrative advantage of being the sole community permitted to sell alcohol, a privilege that turned into a liability when, as part of the insurgency in support of Islamic extremism, alcohol store owners, as well as beauticians and laundresses (mostly Christians) were bombed out of business or killed outright.

responsible for most of the atrocities committed against the Assyrians in particular, due to proximity and a long tradition of perceived Kurdish rights to pillage Assyrian Christians and carry away women and goods. In 1918, a Kurdish chieftain and his tribe assassinated the Patriarch of the Church of the East at the negotiation dinner. This act sparked wholesale panic in the countryside and the decimation of the Christian population. The confrontation between Kurds, as Muslims, and Assyrians as Christians was always an uneven contest since the Christians could not count on state support with the exception of occasional European aid. The Treaty of Sevres (1920), signed by the Ottomans, assured the protection of both Kurds and Assyrians. (Aprim, 9-3-02) But both groups lost when Turkey, under Ataturk, forced instead agreement to the Treaty of Lausanne (1923).

During the decades of Kurdish insurrections against Turkey, Iran and Iraq, the Assyrian populations became a pawn in the struggle. In northern Iraq, the area of ancient Assyria, Kurdish expansion has come at the expense of the Assyrian population. Just as the Arabs have insisted that Assyrians register as Arabs in order to gain employment, land titles, food rations and so forth, Kurds too have picked up the same tactics, especially after the creation of the northern no-fly zone after 1991. Although the Assyrian population of northern Iraq had been substantial, after the destruction of villages, the emigration into diaspora, and Kurdish intimidation policies, especially on the part of the Kurdish Democratic Party, the Aramaic speaking Christian population is much reduced. Kurds have raised impediments to acquisition of international aid for development, attempted to prevent the establishment of Aramaic language schools and exerted pressure on some church groups to prevent their children from attending the schools that have been established, in large part with financing from the Assyrian diaspora.<sup>7</sup>

It is in this context then, that we need to consider the significance of the three documents that relate to how both the powerful Kurdish elements in the Iraqi population regard the Aramaic speakers and how the central government plans to arrange for the preservation of this language. The actual viability of any of these legal documents under current volatile conditions is another matter.

### **Language Policy in Iraq**

Like most of the Middle East, and many other parts of the world, Iraq has contended with two opposing nationality concepts: the formation of a centralized state culture and the tensions with minority ethnic groups. Initially set up under an Arab royalty brought by the

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<sup>7</sup> The situation had grown so difficult that the US State Department, a very pro-Kurdish branch of the government due to its ten-year alliance with the KDP and the ePUK to oust Saddam Hussein, admonished the Kurds for preventing the establishment of an Assyrian high school. ????

British from the post WWI Arabian Peninsula, Iraq has been ruled by Sunni Arabs. For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century also, many, though not all, of Iraq's Kurds have been engaged in rebellion. Successive Iraqi basic law has recognized Kurdish nationality rights. In fact, Iraq has been far more conciliatory toward its Kurdish population than Turkey, where the Kurds, having largely replaced the Christians of Anatolia, may form 20% of Turkey's population. Their population in Iraq has risen substantially due to the continued fluidity of Kurdish movement across international borders.<sup>8</sup> Many Kurds swelling the population of northern Iraq are arriving from Iran and Turkey. (Aprim, 10-2-02) Kurds also have one of the highest birthrates of any groups within the Middle East.

Language policy in Iraq, on paper, therefore, has favored Arabs first, then the Kurds. In 1972, the new Baathist government, with an eye on stabilizing the country to consolidate its grip on power, invited the exiled Patriarch of the Church of the East to Iraq. The government issued a Presidential decree #251 (April 16, 1972) granting cultural rights for the "Syriac speaking" Christians of Iraq. However, none of the eight articles of that decree were honored for long. Soon after the Baath party secured its grip, it nationalized all Assyrian schools.

In the past few years, in the northern no-fly zone, with diaspora aid, and following the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime, the Aramaic community was able to establish small schools in several dozen villages. Under funded and restricted, these schools remain the sole means of propagating the Aramaic language on a regular basis.

This remains the situation at present, under the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) signed by members of the Interim Governing Council whose mandate ended on 28 June 2004. For Aramaic speakers, however, TAL offers gains not made in Iraq or anywhere in the Middle East since the formation of modern states in the region.

The provisions of TAL for the preservation of Aramaic and the ethno linguistic community in which it must exist, in order to survive, may be overshadowed by the intentions of Kurds who, prior to the US led Coalition that invaded Iraq in March 2003, had already drafted two important documents: the constitution for the Kurdish Regional Government and the draft constitution for Iraq. The Kurdish Regional Government constitution deals harshly with Aramaic speakers and the Kurdish draft for an all-Iraqi constitution ignores all of Iraq's ethnic, religious or linguistic groups except the Kurds and the Arabs. Given the high, but disproportionate, power exercised by

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<sup>8</sup> The dispute over unregistered Kurds in Syria centers around some 200,000 who have moved from Turkey over past two decades into parts of Syria formerly settled by Assyrians.

Kurds in the interim government in Baghdad, their decade old attempt to dislodge Aramaic speakers from northern Iraq while expanding Kurdish rule (Assyrian Academic Society, March 2004), and the simultaneous attack on Christians by Muslim extremist groups (including the largely Kurdish *Ansar ul-Islam* [Schanzer, 2004]), the beneficial effects of any constitutionally guaranteed language rights are questionable. Practically speaking, *if* the Aramaic speakers are driven out of Iraq, constitutional language rights will mean very little.

### Legal Provisions for Aramaic in Recent Documents

The comparative chart below presents the broad outline of three major documents. Two of them are Kurdish and drafted in Arbil (in all likelihood by politically connected and paid American consultants), and the third, TAL, was drafted and ratified in Baghdad on March 8, 2004, after much jostling between Kurds and Arab Shi'a. They diverge significantly on the five major categories of significance to the preservation of Aramaic. These five categories of importance to this particular endangered language are specific to Iraq and to other Muslim dominant areas: Status of Religion, Language Rights, Political Representation, Territoriality, and Physical Protection.

Chart comparing the provisions regarding the Status of Aramaic Speakers in Iraq

Aramaic Speaking Christians Rights	Kurdish Regional Gov't Const. (2002)	Kurd's Const. For Iraq (2002)	TAL (Transitional Administrative Law, 2004)
<i>Status of religion</i>			
a. Islam religion of the State	Yes, by inference <sup>iv</sup>	Yes	Yes, but nuanced
b. Rights of non-Muslims	Yes <sup>i</sup>	Not addressed	Yes
<i>Language Rights</i>			
a. Recognition of Aramaic language	Yes <sup>ii</sup>	No (only Kurdish and Arabic)	Yes (Syriac) <sup>vi</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Article 5 separates the Christians into "Chaldeans" and "Assyrians," a favored Baathist tactic to divide Aramaic speakers according to denominations, now borrowed by the Kurds. Not only is this an artificial division, but also it ignores Syrian Orthodox and Protestant communities of Aramaic speakers altogether. Article 60 recreates the medieval religious courts for non-Muslims.

<sup>ii</sup> Syriac is recognized but its speakers are specifically obligated to study Kurdish as well. Article 7

b. Aramaic language promotion	Ditto	No	Yes (ditto)
<b>Representation in government</b>	Non-specific <sup>iii</sup>	No	Yes <sup>vii</sup>
<b>Physical Protection</b>	Non-specific	No	No
<b>Territoriality</b>	No	No	Yes, indirectly <sup>viii</sup>

In Muslim dominant societies, where Christians have survived as *dhimmi*s, "People of the Book" who are tolerated with many restrictions on their liberties and opportunities, (Ye'or, 2002), equality can only be approached when public legal structure is unshackled from the Koran or the Shari'a (various schools of Islamic law). As the provisions of TAL were being debated, the difference between the right to worship and the right of religious conscience received much attention and the compromise achieved was generally acceptable to moderate Muslims and non-Muslims. The provisions for relative freedom from Shari'a however, form a key reason for the insurgency against the interim government in Baghdad. Both Kurdish constitutions, regional and all-Iraq, make Islam the religion of the state, thus ignoring the rights of the large number of non-Muslims in areas the Kurds propose to run.

In terms of language rights, the TAL comes closer to the norms set in non-Muslim areas for minority languages. In Afghanistan, another notoriously multi-ethnic state, an attempt was made following the Communist Revolution (1978) to institute a language policy similar to the outline of Soviet Nationality policy established during the 1920s.<sup>9</sup> The Afghan codes did not allow territoriality although this was understood de facto. The territoriality accorded under Soviet law, led to the relatively peaceful dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1990 when the fourteen major divisions (Soviet

<sup>iii</sup> "Fair" representation according to divisive formula. Article 26, ii, Article 49.

<sup>iv</sup> The KRG constitution is to conform to the Iraqi constitution and the Kurdish proposed Iraqi constitution makes Islam the State religion.

<sup>v</sup> Article 7 takes great pains to assure non-Muslims but falls short of declaring a secular state.

<sup>vi</sup> Article 9 both recognizes language and spells out publicly supported language schools

<sup>vii</sup> Article 30 C says "fair" representation for ChaldoAssyrians in the National Assembly (Dec. 31, 2004 but fair is defined by electoral commission to which no ChaldoAssyrians are selected.

<sup>viii</sup> Article 53 D alludes to administrative and cultural rights.

<sup>9</sup> Assyrians in the Soviet Union, all refugees from the Middle East to Tsarist Russia, numbered among the odd 100 languages groups recognized and supported by the Soviet system. See Eden Naby, "Les Assyriens d'Union Sovietique," CAHIERS DU MONDE RUSSE ET SOVIETIQUE (Winter, 1975).

Socialist Republics) exercised their constitutional right to secede and became internationally recognized states. Problem areas such as Chechnya, Abkhazia, Ossetia and Ingushetia have risen because although these locations had territoriality, they had no international boundaries, and no rights of secession, the primary legal differences in the status of the republics.

Under Kurdish proposals, also accepted almost verbatim from their draft of 2002 into the TAL in 2004, Kurds have territoriality and the right of secession, depending on interpretation. In terms of territoriality, TAL intimates this also for the Aramaic speakers by referring to an administrative unit for the ChaldoAssyrians. The administrative unit flies directly in the face of Kurdish demands for the expansion of their territory from the three provinces of Dohuk, Arbil and Sulaymaniya to include parts of Nineveh, Kirkuk and Diyala provinces, all areas with heavy concentrations of ChaldoAssyrian, Turkmen, Arab and Yezidi villages.<sup>10</sup>

The concept of territoriality connects directly to political representation and physical protection. Administration of the northern no-fly zone, termed the Kurdistan Regional Government by the Kurds, proves that Aramaic speakers do not enjoy political representation. Of the 105 members of the KRG legislature, only five come from this community.<sup>11</sup> Hardly proportionate to their population on the regional level, in large towns like Dohuk, where the Aramaic presence requires two schools, run in shifts to meet demand, not even token political representation is allowed for Christians on the municipal council. Without political representation, the ChaldoAssyrians do not succeed in expanding their schools, receiving adequate funding for supplies (even when there are adequate international funds for such improvements), and are shut out from all but the most basic KRG funding. Such discrimination drives Christians out of Kurdish controlled towns just as discriminatory development funding allocation and preventing the construction of schools, roads and clinics, among other policies, empties the countryside of its Christians.

Moreover, the physical protection of the Christians in the north, secured by the good-will of the Kurdish peshmerga (ethnic militia), means that Assyrian villages are surrounded by armed Kurdish guards who exercise control over entry and exit, trade, and security.

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<sup>10</sup> Long denigrated as “devil-worshippers,” the Yezidis are not Muslim, live in proximity to Aramaic speakers, and have been variously self-identify as Kurds or Assyrians. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they have offered protection of Christians when they have been threatened by Kurds. (See The Other Kurds)

<sup>11</sup> One of these was hand-picked by the Kurdish Democratic Party and he has been used as a means of threatening pro-Kurdish political conduct on other Aramaic speakers.

With the growth of Kurdish political strength after the fall of the Baathists has also come coercive tactics in terms of self-identity and language: the KRG is insisting that ChaldoAssyrian villages that fall outside the three provinces previously protected by US and British air power (Dohuk, Arbil and Sulaymaniya) to which Kurds aspire to expand their control (Nineveh, Kirkuk and Diyala), drop the teaching of Arabic in favor of Kurdish, a step that would shut them out of written and internet contact with co-ethnics in Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and the first generation global diaspora. Two other demands seriously threaten the Aramaic speaking community: insistence that adults join the Kurdish Democratic Party in order to be granted employment in the public sector (as did the Baathists), and that KDP representatives (and their families) be allowed to settle in Assyrian villages.

Perhaps most ominous for all of Iraq’s non-Muslims, and even in neighboring Iran, is the funding of new mosque structures in villages where there have been no mosques hitherto fore. Such funding appears to come from Muslim charities in the Arabian Peninsula.

### **The ChaldoAssyrian Administrative Unit**

If Aramaic is to survive, it can do so in a setting with a minimal number of users living in a relatively compact and secure environment, minimally made up of 100,000 speakers.(Nettle & Romaine, 2000) A population three to four times this size resides in large villages such as Bartella, Telkepe, Alqosh, and the like on the Nineveh plain located northeast of Mosul in Iraq. Nearby villages and towns, already incorporated into Kurdish controlled areas such as Dohuk and Arbil and their villages contain exclusively ChaldoAssyrian populations. Many Christian villages in this same region lie desolate for want of resettlement permission and funds but are rapidly being occupied by Kurds either entering the country from other parts of the Middle East or from within Iraq.

In view of the historical problems in maintaining their language and presence, and the multiple methods used to discourage non-Kurdish presence, if the Aramaic speakers are to survive in their indigenous homeland, they have concluded that they can only do so within a prescribed area dedicated to them.<sup>12</sup> Such a step requires a commitment on the part of Iraq to expand ethno-linguistic recognition to territoriality. The precedence for such elevation of status exists already in the demand, and granting, of territoriality to the Kurds. The level of territoriality needed for ChaldoAssyrians approaches that of the old territoriality concept of the Soviet Union (without the right of secession) that allows direct governance by Baghdad, rather than through a Kurdish regional government.

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<sup>12</sup> Final Declaration of the Chaldean Syriac Assyrian General Conference (23 October 2003) [www.zowaa.org/news2ADM.htm](http://www.zowaa.org/news2ADM.htm)

Territoriality offers some guarantees for equitable funding for schools and rural development, as well as security and local self-government. It also facilitates the task of refugee resettlement, freedom of religious practice, and the exercise of the rights of women and girls to refuse to veil without the fear of being killed or maimed. Without territoriality, the possibility of political representation remains an illusion. For example, although in the American appointed Interim Governing Council (April 2003 to June 2004) one of the twenty-five representatives was a Christian, of the thirty-four high officials of the Interim Government in Baghdad, only one member of the ChaldoAssyrian community is represented – the Minister for Emigration and Refugees. Christians have been kept out of the Election Commission (30 members), and on 23 July, the Kurdish Democratic Party blocked ChaldoAssyrian participation from cities of Arbil and Dohuk at the upcoming Iraqi National Conference. August first saw the attack on churches in Baghdad and Mosul, as well as on the Baghdad compound of the Assyrian Democratic Movement. Hopes for equal treatment have declined quickly, both as a community of Christians and the Aramaic speaking community of Iraq. As many as 40,000 ChaldoAssyrians have fled Iraq for Syria and Jordan within the past few months.<sup>13</sup> Attempts by diaspora family members to gain them entry into western countries will no doubt follow.

### The Future Iraqi Constitution and Language Preservation

The situation of Aramaic speakers in Iraq, as in the rest of the Middle East, is complicated by two factors: a) they are Christians living in an increasingly radicalized Muslim environment, b) they live mainly among Kurds many of whom either continue to victimize Christian Assyrians or regard them as an obstacle to the expansion of Kurdish rule. Moreover, when, out of fear or lack of opportunity, these Christians leave their small town and village homes on the Nineveh plain for Baghdad or Basra, they face pressure to Arabize both in terms of ethnicity and language.

The prescription for the survival of Aramaic appears to lie in the safety, security and territorial rights of its speakers. Kurdish opposition to such broad rights for ChaldoAssyrians, augmented by the relative inability of this community to be heard above US and international voices raised in strong sympathy for Kurds, threaten to force Aramaic speakers out of the

land to which they are indigenous. While the central government in Iraq may be embarking on a new path away from past linguistic chauvinism and heading toward an eventual post-nationalism future, the Kurds are only now starting out toward national chauvinism. The time lag in political maturity may well spell disaster for Aramaic speakers. Regard for three millennia of Aramaic contributions to world culture will not save the language from disappearing unless global action, from academic to political circles, is mobilized.

In TAL may be seen some tentative measures to assure language rights for Aramaic speakers. But the ability of Baghdad to enforce such rights, when faced with Kurdish opposition, remains in doubt. In some doubt too is the transfer of Aramaic language rights into the new Iraqi Constitution when ChaldoAssyrians are being prevented from participating in the political body that is tasked with electing the National Assembly responsible for drafting the new Constitution. Despite its best efforts, the Aramaic speaking diaspora cannot maintain the language without a base where literacy, popular cultural production, teachers, writers, poets and cultural activists may be nurtured. This base can only exist in Iraq. UNESCO, UNICEF, the European Union, and the international community as a whole must engage with the problems facing Aramaic if one of the oldest languages of the world is to move off the endangered list.

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<sup>13</sup> According to Iraqi Minister of Emigration and Refugees, Pascale Esho, as quoted in ASH-SHARQ AL-AWSAT (15 August 2004). Up to 20,000 of these left within the first two weeks following the church bombings. [http://news.yahoo.com/news?tmpl=story&u=/afp/20040815/wl\\_mideast\\_afp/iraq\\_christians\\_emigrate\\_0408152006650](http://news.yahoo.com/news?tmpl=story&u=/afp/20040815/wl_mideast_afp/iraq_christians_emigrate_0408152006650)>[http://news.yahoo.com/news?tmpl=story&u=/afp/20040815/wl\\_mideast\\_afp/iraq\\_christians\\_emigrate\\_0408152006650](http://news.yahoo.com/news?tmpl=story&u=/afp/20040815/wl_mideast_afp/iraq_christians_emigrate_0408152006650)

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