

*Assyrians in modern Iraq. Negotiating political and cultural space.* By Alda Benjamin. Pp. xxxii + 258 incl. 14 ills. Cambridge–New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022. £75. 978 1 108 83879 5  
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The book begins by introducing us to Tūmā Tūmas, who died in 1996 and who is remembered by a statue of him set up in his native Alqosh in 2011. Alqosh is near Nineveh, the last capital of the ancient Assyrian empire. Tūmas was proud that it was centre of the Chaldean-Assyrian language; he was a member of the Chaldean Catholic Church; his family was involved in the sufferings of his people', caring for survivors of one of the massacres which devastated the Syrian people, at Simele; he was an activist in the Communist party; and he was an Iraqi. These diverse identities all contributed to Tūmas's life and work and they point to the uncertainties and difficulties which face the Assyrians as they negotiate life in contemporary Iraq.

The Assyrian community has a long history, tracing its origin to the city state of Asur which existed around 2500 BCE and grew into the later empire with its capital at Nineveh which flourished until 600 BCE. Its heartland was northern Mesopotamia, where the descendants of this civilisation still live, in the area which now is found in several political entities – eastern Syria, south-eastern Turkey, western Iran and northern Iraq. Assyrians speak various dialects of Aramaic and refer to themselves as Suroyo or Suraya. The shorter form of 'Syria' was used by Greeks to refer to the western Levant but can be correctly used interchangeably with Assyria.

Assyrians have been Christian since the earliest days of the Church and there are now four main church communities. In the period of the ecumenical councils, the Assyrians of the East, living in the Persian empire, became the Apostolic Church of the East with a two-nature Christology and sent missions across Asia as far as China; while those of the west were part of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch with a one-nature Christology. Later, western missions led to further division with the Chaldean Church and the Syrian Catholic Church accepting the authority of Rome and following traditional Syriac liturgies. These divisions shaped the history and life of the communities, but now form only one out of several loyalties and identities which form the identity of modern Assyrians. There have been attempts at overcoming division and building understanding and also times of distrust. There was division when actions of members of the Church of the East, who had fought with the British army, were blamed for causing the massacres around the village of Simele in 1933 and which spread to other areas and other groups within the community, or when the largest of the churches, the Chaldean Church, claimed to be a separate nation, an event relegated in this book to a lengthy footnote (pp. 223–4).

The decline of the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century and the rise of nation states led to a series of massacres of Christian minorities. There were massacres carried out by Kurds in 1843–6; by Turks during the Sayfo massacres of 1910–15; and then around the village of Simele in 1933. This led to displacement of the Assyrian peoples, both through emigration to the West and within the region with new towns being set up with Christian majorities, such as Qamishli in eastern Syria where during World War Two 20,000 of its 23,000 inhabitants were Christian.

This troubled history is the background to the period described in this book. It sets the scene for the discussion of the role of the Assyrians in the state of Iraq in

the years between 1960 and 1990, a period when Iraqi society experienced change and disruption, with the monarchy being replaced by the republican government of Abd al-Karim Qasim in 1958 who was in turn toppled in 1963, and then the rule of the Ba'ath government, in due course led by Saddam Hussein.

In political life the Assyrians were active in the Iraqi Communist party. This had flourished in the oil fields of eastern Iraq around Kirkuk. Assyrians shared in its concern for social and economic rights, and its non-religious character which allowed for the aspirations of minorities. Assyrians were involved in the formation of the party, among them Yusuf Salman, seen as the builder of Iraqi Communism, who was secretary-general of the party from 1941 until his execution by the government in 1949. It was active in the republican government of Qasim period but suffered repression after his fall, and suspected Communists were brought to trial.

There was also armed uprising, especially by the Kurds in the period 1961–75. Assyrian groups took part in the campaigns. Many Assyrians joined the Kurds and were encouraged to do this by the Kurdish leader Mulla Mustafa Barzani. Their participation formed an overlooked part of the story of the struggle, with involvement from varied figures including the tribal leader, Hurmizd Malik Chikku, and the episcopal bishop of Nineveh, Māri Yahb'Alāhā.

Another strand of the Assyrian building of a place in modern Iraq was in the exploration of their language and culture. During a liberal period of the Ba'ath government, Law 251, passed in 1972, gave rights to speakers of Syriac to use their language in education and the media and to form cultural associations. The Assyrian Cultural Club published a journal, *Mordinna Atouraya* (the Literate Assyrian). Published in Assyrian and Aramaic, its articles provide a record of the concerns and aspirations of the Assyrian community through this period. However after 1970 this freedom was gradually removed as the Ba'ath party increased its power over the Kurds and the Communists.

Gender is a element in this book. The themes of the book are explored through personal stories and interviews, many with women. Josephine Warda was branch president of the Iraqi Women's League in Kirkuk who was accused and convicted of membership of the Communist party, although she denied this. The evidence presented at her trial shows how women were engaged in the movement. Another heroine was the peshmerga fighter Margaret George who joined the Kurdish uprising at the age of twenty in 1960. Her photos in military uniform reached as far as Europe and presented a romantic view of the Kurdish movement. Her leadership of men challenged traditional role models. She was later imprisoned and shot through the window of her cell with fifty bullets found in her body.

The story told in the book finishes before the invasion by the USA and UK in 2003, and the rise of the Islamic State which led to further emigration, killings and displacement. A short conclusion laments the 'sweeping away of the wonderful mosaic of Iraq's pluralistic society'. However the Assyrian community of Iraq remains and its loyalty to its Christian traditions and vibrant engagement in social and cultural affairs continues to enrich Iraqi society. This book is a witness to the courage of a persecuted minority and a long and rich cultural tradition.

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