

Assyrian Identity Politicization

A study concerning Assyrian identity politics in the context
of the conflict in Syria and Iraq 2012-2017

Abstract

This thesis is a single-case study of Assyrian identity politicization in the context of the conflict in Iraq and Syria from 2012 to 2017. The thesis investigates to what extent and in which manner that a politicization of Assyrian identity can be said to have occurred by reviewing empirical data concerning the events of the period and analyzing statements from three Assyrian militias. The Islamic State invasion of the Khabur River Valley in Syria and the Nineveh Plains in Iraq can be identified as watershed moments for Assyrian identity politicization in the context of the conflict. The theoretical framework consists of three criteria that are utilized to investigate the level of identity politicization that can be said to have occurred. These criteria are mainly based on a theory by Stuart Kaufman and augmented by theories by Raffaele Marchetti, Vamik Volkan and Daniel Bar-Tal. From the investigation, a complex picture of Assyrian identity politicization emerges, and while the result supports the assessment that an identity politicization has occurred to a large extent, in many other aspects a considerably more nuanced approach in using identity in political rhetoric by the Assyrian groups can be observed as well.

Keywords: Politicization, Mobilization, Islamic State (IS), Nineveh Plains, Khabur River Valley, Nineveh Plain Protection Units (NPU), Syriac Military Council (MFS), Khabour Guards

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1 Introduction

The Syrian and Iraqi conflicts and the rise of the Islamic State group are among the most central geopolitical issues of the day, with recent emigration and displacement bringing about demographic changes of historical significance. Assyrians have often been sidelined by the international community and by international funding efforts because of their minority status, comparatively low numbers and lack of a sovereign state. This recent conflict escalation and spreading of extremist ideology in the region has threatened to end a thousand-year-old Assyrian presence in the Middle East, so the issue is a highly relevant one for Peace and Conflict studies since it concerns a conflict characterized by deeply rooted perceptions regarding ethnoreligious identities and historical animosities.

Issues regarding modern Assyrian identity are interconnected to larger regional issues, both historical and contemporary, with the history of persecution of mainly Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire that culminated around the time of the First World War with the Armenian/Assyrian/Pontic Greek genocide, being a reoccurring feature in contemporary Assyrian identity expressions.

The research problem of this thesis concerns the politicization of Assyrian identity in relation to the rise of conflict in Syria and Iraq between 2012 and the end of 2017. The primary focus is to investigate to what extent and in which manner an Assyrian identity politicization has occurred by reviewing empirical data of relevant events and analyzing the characteristics of Assyrian identity expressions among Assyrian military and political groups during this period in the traditional Assyrian homeland.

The term “Assyrians” refer to the mainly Eastern Neo-Aramaic speaking group with their heartland located in present-day Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Iran and traditionally being adherents of various denominations of Syriac Christianity. Assyrians also

sometimes identify as Syriacs, Arameans, Chaldeans or amalgamations of these. However, I have chosen to use the term “Assyrian” since it is the most common term in Western academic literature and the most widely accepted catch-all term for the ethnoreligious group.

1.1 Research Question

The research question that this thesis aims to answer is: *To what extent has Assyrian identity been politicized in relation to the context of the conflict in Syria and Iraq between 2012 and the end of 2017?*

1.2 Purpose

In connection to the recent chain of events an increased number of Assyrian political and military groups have either been founded or have had their influence and presence in the area increased and have cooperated with different actors in differing constellations. The amount of academic research that concern the state of the Assyrian community in the Middle East in relation to the recent conflicts and Assyrian identity politicization is limited, so I hope to contribute to the academic writing concerning these issues. The thesis will explore the politicization of Assyrian identity by using a theoretical framework mainly based on the work of Stuart Kaufmann, as well as complementing it with the theories of Marchetti, Volkan and Bar-Tal.

While these theories focus on inter-ethnic conflict escalation, security dilemmas and civil society mobilization, my investigation will be geared towards investigating this specific ethnic group’s relationship with an array of actors, not only focusing on the relationship with other ethnoreligious groups but also groups whose political identities are more prominent while still sometimes mainly belonging to a certain ethnoreligious group, many of with whom Assyrians have a complicated past. Thus, the theoretical framework for this thesis aims to be more

open to both a wider range of actors and to a more ways of perceiving these external groups while much of the previous ethnic conflict literature is based on a more set inter-ethnic hostility.

2 Literature Review

Previous research concerning identity politicization is extensive. Emphasis is placed on the need for a common past among nations and ethnoreligious groups in order to function as continuous units, a “collective memory” that expresses itself through collective narratives which constructs a history, a context and an identity for the group. This collective memory is shaped selectively and subjectively from historical events in order to fill certain functions for the group, to function as glasses that filter the experiences of group members and affects their worldview and is used to legitimize identity politics (Bar-Tal 2014, pp. 1-2, 4-7, 10-11). Concerning the relationship between identity politicization and the fragmentation of state institutions in conflict situations and existential threats, it has been argued that when the state apparatus is starting to crumble the state loses more legitimacy with the people since the state apparatus is not filling its expected function. Through propagating that the group the state claims to represent is confronted by an existential threat, the state can get a certain elevated legitimacy despite its weakness. This is often done through a type of identity politicization where a historical adversary’s earlier atrocities against one’s own group are used to describe the adversary as immoral, irrational and inhuman and constituting an existential threat towards the own group (Legnér 2008, p. 512; Bar-Tal 2014, pp. 10-11).

Multicommunal societies are often described as far more likely to be plagued by protracted social conflicts, where historical hostility and experienced historical oppression by adversaries is “reactivated” in the collective memory of a group and connected to political questions with the external group being portrayed as an existential threat. Political leaders exploit these connections before the actual breakout of war and the buildup of this sort of victim mentality can be described as a so-called “virtual war” that starts before the first shots are even fired and sustains the conflict long after an eventual armistice (Volkan 2001, pp. 92-95; Kaldor 2012, pp. 41-42; Demmers 2017, p. 86). While this literature is extensive and the

theoretical terms and frameworks are similar to what this thesis utilizes, much of the research focuses on the dynamics of intractable ethnic conflicts and as mentioned earlier, often lacks an openness and flexibility to investigate identity politicization in more complex environments where unlikely constellations between ethnoreligious groups that have complicated historical ties are more the rule than the exception as well as investigating the role of identity politicization in relationships with actors whose identities are mostly based on political factors more than ethnic or religious ones.

Numerous academic works have been published concerning Assyrian identity in relation to the Assyrian genocide, the repression, massacres and Arabization attempts in Iraq and Syria as well as the general situation in the traditional Assyrian homeland and in the diaspora (Donabed 2010, p. 292). Writings about the militarization of the Syrian conflict in the 21st century have been published, such as Aldassouky's depiction of the militarization of Syria as a whole, the emerging of new militias and political parties and the challenge this poses for peacemaking efforts (Aldassouky 2018). However, research concerning Assyrians and Assyrian identity politicization in relation to the conflict escalation in the Middle East in the last decade is largely absent in academic writing. Coverage of the subject is confined to general description of events in the media and analysis is largely confined to online newspaper articles.

3 Theoretical Framework

In this thesis I will be using the theoretical concept of *Identity Politicization*. My theoretical framework will largely be based on the theory developed by Stuart Kaufman in his book “Modern Hatreds, The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War”, and in order to suit my research question and purpose better, augmented by theories by Raffaele Marchetti in his article “Civil society in conflicts: from escalation to militarization”, Vamik Volkan in his article “Transgenerational Transmissions and Chosen Traumas: An Aspect of Large-Group Identity” and Daniel Bar-Tal in his book “Shared Beliefs in a Society”. The terms “politicization” and “mobilization” of identity are used somewhat interchangeably in the research literature to describe the usage of identity for political purposes, while *mobilization* may be more clearly understood to be connected to uses of identity for purposes of armed conflict and the call for physical mobilization, I will mainly use the term *politicization* as I consider it to encompass both mobilization and the more general use of identity expressions in political rhetoric for uses of a more abstract nature fairly well. Kaufman also uses the term *conflict escalation* as a way to describe the politicization process that precedes armed conflict between ethnic groups, which is not a term that I will make significant use of. I will also mainly use the term *identity* rather than *ethnic* in order to cast a wider net as mentioned previously in the Purpose and the Literature Review sections.

An integral part of identity politicization is the usage of symbolism and mythology and three preconditions for this can be identified: (1) Mythology justifying hostility between or among identity groups (2) Fears of existential threats and group extinction as well as (3) Political opportunities for the mobilization of mythology and existential threat perceptions. These preconditions do not represent any ordered causal linkage for identity politicization but instead interact with each other in different ways and magnitudes in different cases, all while reinforcing each other in complex patterns. Escalatory situations are often exploited by political actors by

further drawing attention to the mythological components and the perception of existential threats in their rhetoric (Kaufmann 2001, p. 212).

Conflict escalation between identity groups can be described as a product of divided and conflict-ridden societies in turmoil where unstable political systems, increased violence, less structured institutional setting, chaos and the flight of large numbers of people is accompanied by increasing mobilization and a high degree of politicization within identity groups. Politics are of an existential nature in conflict situations which is often followed by securitizations that have cross-sectional effects which generate greater societal incentives to mobilize. Different understandings of the causes of conflict and adequate responses may in turn lead to the formation of parties that act to either fuel conflict, maintain the status quo, or to work for peace (Marchetti 2015).

3.1.1 Mechanisms of identity politicization

Institutional erosion and Political opportunities

Political opportunities needed for increased mobilization and politicization within identity groups and conflict escalation are relatively small, such as a slight easing of political repression. The politicization process that can be the result of this is often a parallel one among groups, but it may only require one group to mobilize and therefore set an escalation in motion on all sides as a type of security dilemma (Kaufman 2001, p. 212). The nature as well as the role and functions of societal actors are fundamentally shaped by the specific contexts of states, if the states are characterized as failed or failing, increasing amounts of the population is fleeing and if there are factors such as authoritarian rule, ethnic nationalism and underdevelopment then an increase in politicization may take place and local actors can become de facto security actors, filling the void left by the state by providing various services to the population (Marchetti 2015).

Conflict mythology and radicalization

Chauvinism rooted in ethnic mythology is a central factor of identity politicization. This is expressed through the unique worth of a people based on historical glory,

ideas of being a chosen group by God and the inherent right to rule to certain lands in so called *chosen glories* (Kaufman 2001, p. 207). In periods of great political change and in conflicts with those that by collective memory are regarded as *historical enemies*, *chosen traumas* are reactivated in a so-called time collapse that connect traumatic historical events to present-day threats through a so-called circular time perception (Volkan 2001, pp. 87-89). Central for conflict escalation that may lead to increased politicization and mobilization is the framework within which different actors operate. Groups articulate mutually incompatible positions and when the incompatibility is publicly affirmed the tension begin permeating unrelated sectors, organizations and activities. This is often manifested by the radicalization of political identities, the primordial, non-voluntary and exclusive definition of groups and the otherness of external groups (Marchetti 2015).

Existential threats

One of the most universal factors of identity politicization is the fear of group extinction, that the fundamental existence of the group is at stake, which is also often rooted in ethnic mythology. An example is the fear contained in Armenian ethnic mythology of a repetition of the 1915 genocide, which is a central concern in contemporary Armenian political rhetoric. The fear of the destruction of a state may go beyond any physical devastation, since it can be perceived as the destruction of an identity either through actual physical destruction, assimilation or marginalization of an identity group (Kaufmann 2001, p. 207). Faced with existential threats groups often articulate so-called security beliefs regarding what actions and conditions are deemed necessary for the achievement of security. These can be territorial, military, political, economic, etc. (Bar-Tal 2000, p. 89).

4 Research Design

This thesis is a qualitative single-case study, using content analysis and historical events research to investigate a mainly descriptive research question. It aims to characterize the politicization of Assyrian identity over a specific time period by reviewing empirical data and analyzing various statements of Assyrian military and political organizations.

Descriptive research questions involve describing the characteristics or modeling the behavior or workings of the object of research. A single case-study is an appropriate and common design for descriptive research questions since it can provide an in-depth understanding of the issues at hand (Halperin & Heath 2017, pp. 155-156). Content analysis is a method that generates data by the analysis of documents of various sorts. The benefits of content analysis include being able to access and “code” the preferences, beliefs and attitudes of otherwise hard-to-reach actors/subjects and increase the subject sample size beyond what is possible through first-hand means (Halperin & Heath 2017, p. 160). Historical events research looks at one case in a certain time period and reviews the impact and implication of certain events for a general theory (Halperin & Heath 2017, pp. 155).

While the research question mainly aims to be descriptive in nature, there is not always an absolute delimitation between descriptive and explanatory questions. Describing to what extent Assyrian identity politicization has occurred and in which manner goes beyond providing a straight-forward descriptive answer to the research question of this thesis. It is also innately theory testing by contributing to the advancement of the given field through framing itself within existing theory and research on the topic and therefore tests the strength of the theoretical framework within the empirical case and the connection between any underlying theoretical expectations inherent to the theory and the result of the investigation (Halperin & Heath 2017, pp. 114-117).

4.1 Material

The research question relates to a relatively recent phenomenon and because of there being an ongoing political, military and social upheaval in the region, there is a lack of reliable data such as opinion polls and in-depth international journalistic coverage. To compensate for this lack of material this thesis is utilizing a quite diverse collection of empirical material. In order to review events related to the conflict and emigration rates of Assyrians in Iraq and Syria I am mainly using journalistic articles as well as reports and papers from various NGO's that provide relevant empirical data. In order to analyze statements from Assyrian military and political groups I will mainly be using direct media outlets of these organizations as well as secondary journalistic sources. In order to corroborate the gathered data, I will triangulate as much of it as possible, which is especially useful when using secondary sources and content analysis in order to increase the reliability of the data (Halperin & Heath 2017, p. 161).

4.2 Delimitation

The research will be delimited in time by beginning at the start of Syrian government withdrawal from Northern Syria in 2012 and concluding at the end of significant IS presence in the Assyrian populated areas of the Nineveh Plains in Iraq and the Al-Hasakah Governorate in Syria which was largely accomplished by the end of 2017. However, some relevant historical data that precedes this time period will also be utilized. The research will largely be limited to investigating the largest, most influential Assyrian military organizations which are the *Syriac Military Council* and the *Khabour Guards* in Syria and the *Nineveh Plain Protection Units* in Iraq. Statements from these groups will be complemented by material from their affiliated political parties.

4.3 Operationalization

I will apply the theoretical framework described in “Mechanisms of identity politicization” to investigate to what extent a politicization of Assyrian identity can be said to have taken place, and in what manner it has occurred.

Regarding *Conflict mythology and Radicalization* and *Existential threats* this thesis will analyze statements of Assyrian organizations which content analysis provides the tools for by deciphering the clues given for perceptions and attitudes of various actors. It is a fitting method to combine with other methods in order to establish firmer causal links (Halperin & Heath 2017, pp. 160-161). This is what I aim to do by combining the aforementioned usage of content analysis together with using historical events research to review empirical data of the events related to the case to investigate *Institutional erosion and Political opportunities*.

- In relation to *Institutional erosion and Political opportunities*, I will mainly be looking at the state of affairs and events in the relevant areas of Syria and Iraq from 2012 until the end of 2017 and review if the lack of institutions, presence of ethnic nationalism, high emigration rates and easing of political repression are sufficient enough that they can be said to match the criteria for the theory. Some historical data preceding this period will also be utilized however. Questions I will be asking are:
 - To what extent has there been institutional erosion and collapse? Have factors such as authoritarian rule, ethnic nationalism and underdevelopment been present?
 - How large has Assyrian emigration from the region been?
 - Has there been political opportunity for identity politicization?
- In relation to *Conflict mythology and Radicalization*, I will analyze the statements of the different military groups and their political affiliates in order to evaluate how events have been characterized and how their own identity group as well as external actors have been portrayed. Questions I will be asking are:

- Does the language in the statements express chosen traumas or glories? Have any traumatic historical events been connected to present-day threats? Has a unique worth based on historical glory, chosen status by God and the inherent right to rule to certain lands been expressed?
- Whom (if any) are pointed out as historical enemies?
- Has identity been described in a primordial, non-voluntary and exclusive manner?
- In relation to *Existential threats*, I will analyze the language of the statements in order to pinpoint references to any perceived dangers of group extinction and in what manner these have been articulated, how Assyrian emigration and enlistment is portrayed in relation to the continuing existence of the group, as well as what is described as necessary for achieving security and peace. Questions I will be asking are:
 - Has the fundamental existence of the group been articulated as threatened? If so in what manner? Through annihilation, assimilation or marginalization?
 - How has emigration and enlistment been portrayed in relation to the continuing existence of the group?
 - Have security beliefs about certain actions and conditions necessary for the achievement of security been articulated?

5 Analysis

5.1 Overview of events in the Assyrian homeland 2012-2017

In the context of the Syrian Uprising beginning in 2011, the Syrian government withdrew from some mainly Kurdish and Assyrian populated areas in the Al-Hasakah Governate in Northern Syria beginning in July 2012. The power vacuum has largely been filled by the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD)-led de facto self-ruling region that has come to be called the “Democratic Federation of Northern Syria” (DFNS) which has eventually come to include Assyrian political and military groups, including the *Syriac Military Council* (MFS) that was founded in Northern Syria in January 2013. This entity has been described as holding a more nuanced position in relation to the Syrian government compared to the Syrian opposition. While opposing it in many aspects, the DFNS has not necessarily been against cooperation and coordination with the Assad regime when suitable to its own interests. This has allowed a continued presence of basic services and institutions after the government withdrawal (Sary 2016, pp. 9, 11; Hurriyet Daily News 2013).

In March 2015, Islamic State forces attacked the Assyrian villages close to the town of Tel Tamer along the Khabur River valley in Northern and kidnapped over two hundred Assyrians. The IS incursion caused widespread destruction and a mass flight of Assyrians from the region. The YPG (the military wing of the PYD), the MFS and the local Assyrian militia called the Khabour Guards recaptured the area two months later in May 2015 (US News 2015; Syrian Observatory for Human Rights 2015). In October 2015 the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was established

in Northern Syria as a coalition of militias in the DFNS which the MFS joined. Because of tensions with the YPG, the Khabour Guards first announced their decision to disarm rather than to bow under the pressure from the YPG, before later joining the SDF in 2017 after reaching an agreement where they were granted control of the Khabur River Valley in exchange for political cooperation. The MFS later took part in the campaign to capture the city of Raqqa from IS in 2016 and 2017 (Syriac Military Council 2015e; Zaman Al Wasl 2017; Rudaw 2016).

While there has been a continuous wave of emigration of Assyrians from Iraq since the 2003 War in Iraq, beginning in June 2014 when IS conquered the Iraqi city of Mosul and later in August 2014, most of the Assyrian populated area of the Nineveh Plains, a large wave of Assyrian emigration has taken place, estimated at 100,000-150,000 persons, leaving the city of Mosul and most of the Nineveh Plains without any Assyrian population (Open Doors 2017, pp. 8). In November 2014 the Nineveh Plain Protection Units were formed in Iraq as the military wing of the Assyrian Democratic Movement, an Iraqi Assyrian political party (Alateia 2014). The NPU later took part in the Mosul Campaign alongside the Iraqi Army (by which the NPU has become officially sanctioned) as well as the Kurdish Peshmerga from October 2016 and all Assyrian towns had been recaptured from IS by January 2017, with the city of Mosul itself being totally cleared in late July 2017 (Jordan Times 2017; Christian Today 2016; BBC News 2017).

5.2 Institutional erosion and Political opportunities

5.2.1 Institutional erosion and collapse

The Syrian government had practiced authoritarian policies of an Arab nationalist nature through resettlement programs, withdrawal of citizenship as well as banning the public and educational use of the Kurdish and Neo-Aramaic languages in the region. The northeastern region of Syria was also largely underdeveloped industrially and had been designated as the “bread-basket of Syria”, largely seen to

originate in attempting to prevent possible succession threats. This laid the groundwork for politicization of ethnoreligious groups in the region with a mistrust of government services and institutions being present in the region before the civil war as well as underground and expatriate political organizations opposing the government such as the Kurdish Democratic Union Party and the Assyrian Syriac Union Party (Sary 2016, pp. 6-7).

While the Syrian Government withdrew from large parts of Northern Syria in 2014, including from Assyrian-populated areas, the contrast between the main opposition forces fighting the government and those of the DFNS meant that institutional collapse in the region was not extensive in the main population centers. Despite some minor clashes between the YPG and the government, the situation largely stabilized away from the frontlines with IS and rebel groups, with the regime retaining control in some areas and government institutions and services continuing to function albeit at a reduced level (Sary 2016, pp. 9, 11). While the partial withdrawal of the Syrian government has manifested itself in the creation of new groups taking responsibility for security and policing, because of government institutions partially remaining in place, the transfer of power and institutional change has not been complete, and this complex situation can be said to have manifested itself through a lack of high level tensions between groups in the region at that stage. The situation escalated in 2015 with the IS incursion into the Khabur River Valley however, with both Assyrian mobilization taking place with the emergence of the Khabour Guards and the growth and increasing military activity of the MFS and later resulting in tensions between Kurdish and Assyrian groups in that region, first being resolved in 2017.

In Iraq the situation had been unstable for most parts of the country since the 2003 Iraq war and the widespread violence, rate of inflation, loss of employment opportunities and lack of educational opportunities had already created significant Assyrian emigration abroad as an accumulative result of these factors over time (Open Doors 2017, p. 5). While identity politicization had also occurred as a result of these factors with increased demands for self-determination in Assyrian majority areas, the level of actual physical mobilization was still largely limited into local, loosely organized militia groups. The events of 2014 however, with Assyrians and

their traditional heartland being directly targeted with military force on a larger scale by IS, was a tipping point that left Iraqi Assyrians with a significant loss of basic services and livelihood, with many ending up as refugees. This manifested itself very clearly in markedly increased political activity and the creation and growth of militia groups as the trust of the Iraqi Government and Kurdish forces for defending Assyrians can be said to have eroded considerably.

5.2.2 Assyrian emigration

In Iraq, as mentioned earlier, the emigration had been gradual since the 2003 war with over half of the more than million-strong Assyrian population having left the country by 2014 and many moving from conflict-ridden mixed cities to the traditional Assyrian heartland in the north of the country. During the cataclysmic events of 2014 and the IS incursion into the Nineveh Plains, the Assyrian population was very quickly more or less totally uprooted from the region, with more than 100,000-150,000 fleeing and largely becoming a refugee population until 2017 when the area was retaken from IS. This resulted in large scale emigration to Western countries and also significant politicization and mobilization among those who remained, with the NPU emerging as a military force after these events (Open Doors 2017, p. 8).

While a similar situation took place in the Khabur River Valley in Northern Syria after the IS incursion in 2015 with tens of thousands of Assyrians fleeing from the region and with the Khabour Guards emerging around this time and the MFS taking a larger part in military campaigns after this, the main Assyrian population centers in Qamishli, Al-Malikiyah, Al-Hasakah and Al-Qahtaniyah close to the Turkish border were not overrun by IS forces and emigration was more gradual. Still it is estimated that over half of the Assyrian population of Northern Syria has left when comparing with pre-Syrian Civil War figures (Open Doors 2017, p. 4).

5.2.3 Political opportunity

The escalating conflict in Syria at large and need for government soldiers in other areas of the country, created a significant opportunity for politicization within various identity groups in Northern Syria. The Syrian Government withdrawal from large areas in Northern Syria beginning in 2012 resulted in a power vacuum that became a tipping point for identity politicization including physical mobilization in the region and can be considered to satisfy the criteria set by the theory, which requires far less of an opportunity for politicization than what the chaotic situation that ensued in Syria in 2012 provided. The politicization was not merely an Assyrian phenomenon, but as mentioned earlier in the theoretical framework, usually happens in a parallel process among multiple ethnic groups, with the power vacuum in Northern Syria largely filled by the Kurdish YPG militia, with the Assyrian forces eventually joining with them in the SDF.

The political opportunity for politicization in Iraq was characterized by a situation both more complex and direr, with higher numbers of Assyrians fleeing abroad, as well as being internally displaced, mostly to Baghdad and Iraqi Kurdistan. The NPU was mainly founded by refugees in Baghdad, where the situation was very chaotic as the country and the capital struggled to maintain its unity under immense economic and military pressure from internally displaced refugees, deprivation of sources of income, constant suicide attacks and defeats in battle (Alateia 2014).

In conclusion, the empirical data shows a clear correlation between milestone events and politicized statements as well as the emergence of militias: the Government withdrawal from Northern Syria with the founding of the MFS, the IS incursion into the Khabur River Valley and the emergence of the Khabour Guards and the IS invasion of the Nineveh Plains and the founding and of the NPU.

5.3 Conflict mythology and Radicalization

5.3.1 Chosen traumas and glories

Within the various statements by the three Assyrian organizations and their affiliates, there are several references in which an inherent connection between the Assyrian people to certain lands is made as well as a fundamental right to these lands by describing Assyrians as an indigenous people and the lands as the Assyrian historical, blessed and ancestral homeland (Syriac International News Agency 2014a; Ankawa News 2014; Nineveh Plain Protection Units 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). One illustrative example is a statement in November 2014 by the NPU that depicted the uprooting of Assyrians from the Nineveh Plains as an emptying of the region of its indigenous people and as an “irreplaceable loss for the culture and civilization of Iraq and the world” as well as also expressing it as “absolutely necessary to rise up and stand steadfast against ISIS’s vicious agenda to uproot our nation from its ancestral lands” and an ambition for Assyrian self-determination (Ankawa News 2014).

However, the statements also frequently emphasize a preference for, and a positive attitude towards co-existence and cooperation with other ethnoreligious groups. The “Bethnahrin National Council” (MUB) affiliated to the MFS even expressed a goal in 2014 of a Kurdish-Assyrian political alliance and co-rule of the region, and the conflicts between groups that were mentioned were mainly portrayed as ideological rather than identity-based and that the situation was “a historic opportunity for peoples in the region to come together”. The NPU also stated in 2014 that they opened the door for members of other political, ethnic and religious creeds to partake in military action side by side with Assyrians (Syriac International News Agency 2014b; Ankawa News 2014).

In a statement by the MFS in February 2015 regarding the recent IS incursion in the Khabur River Valley in February, it mentioned IS enforcement of a *Jiziyah* tax

against Non-Muslims justified on religious grounds, removing crosses from churches, large scale attacks using heavy weaponry on villages, executions of MFS and Khabour Guards fighters who “received the honor of martyrdom”, as “part of the murder, deportation and extermination policies” facing Assyrians in their homeland, “from the city of Mosul and Nineveh Plains for more than a hundred years”, an attempt to uproot Assyrians and end their historic presence in the Middle East “in addition to what other minorities are facing”, mentioning Yezidis, Shabaks and Kurds. Emphasizing the MFS’s continuing “struggle, resistance and defense of our people and the rest of the people in the region till the end”, that this was a “sacred duty”, “swearing to sacrifice all that we have”, that “this is the way our martyrs took and so will we, for the liberation of our territory and people to defend its existence, rights, dignity and land.” (Syriac Military Council 2015b; 2015c; 2015d; Syriac International News Agency 2015b). These statements clearly connect and draws a parallel to the historical persecution of Assyrians in the Assyrian genocide as well as following pogroms in the 20th century with present-day persecution by IS.

Many statements describing fallen soldiers as “martyrs” are found in the statements along with the phrases “Martyrs never die” and “Mercy and glory for the souls of all the Martyrs” (Nineveh Plain Protection Units 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2017a, 2017c, 2017d; Syriac Military Council 2015a, 2015b, 2015c; Syriac International News Agency 2015b, 2017a, 2017b, Al Masdar News 2015; Bethnahrin Women Protection Forces 2017). One statement by the MFS in 2017 also asks for the support of God in the upcoming battles (Syriac International News Agency 2017a) However in total, beyond the one statement describing the fight against IS as “sacred”, few references to God are present in most of the statements, much less any articulated chosen status for Assyrians given by God. References to martyrdom are largely done without any additional religious context or references. Allied fighters from different ethnoreligious creeds are characterized as martyrs as well in these statements, so I would argue that in this context it can largely be described as a semantic description somewhat equivalent to “hero”, since it is frequently used by staunchly secular forces in the region in many occasions to describe the fallen.

Far more common than references to religious factors is the utilization and emphasis of secular concepts, that the victory against IS is a victory for humanity, dignity, human rights, freedom and democracy against terrorism and evil (Syriac Military Council 2015b, 2016a, 2016b, 2017a; Rudaw 2016; Syriac International News Agency 2014a, 2017a). While there are instances in the statements where a historical right to certain lands and the unique worth of Assyrians as an indigenous people is articulated, few instances of straight-forward chauvinism through self-glorification and exclusive rights to rule certain lands can be found in these statements. What is expressed is largely a call for minority rights and an end to marginalization through self-determination and building of institutions, largely within the existing political structures of Iraq and Syria.

5.3.2 Historical enemies

In the various statements, the IS attacks against Assyrians and Assyrian-populated areas have frequently been connected with the persecution and destruction faced by Assyrians and other Christian groups in the Assyrian Genocide in 1915 at the hands of the Ottoman Empire. The word genocide is also frequently used to describe the events of 2014 in Iraq and 2015 in Syria (Syriac Military Council 2015b, 2015c, 2015d, 2016a, 2016b; Rudaw 2016; Syriac International News Agency 2015b, 2017a; Ankawa News 2014; Nineveh Plain Protection Units 2017e). Also, in a statement in December 2014, the Syriac Military Council expressed solidarity with attacks against Yazidis in Iraq at the hands of IS, drawing parallels between these attacks and the Assyrian Genocide, stating that they come from the same “exclusionary mentality” that is facing the region today (Syriac Military Council 2014).

However, while historically, many local Kurdish militiamen took part in the Assyrian genocide in 1915 acting on orders of the Ottoman Empire, the statements from both the NPU and the MFS regarding Kurdish military and political groups, has not shown many signs of linking them to historical persecution in this manner. The statements that criticize Kurdish groups have generally been far milder, which may be attributed to a belief in a need for pragmatism, for cooperation and

functional day-to-day co-existence given the proximity of these groups as well as the overwhelming numbers of both the Kurdish population and the military forces in the region.

In January 2017 the Nineveh Plain Protection Units released a statement that mentioned alleged recent harassment from Iraqi Kurdish police forces (Asayish) preventing NPU soldiers from returning to the Nineveh Plain at Kurdish checkpoints, lightly criticizing the Asayish, calling their actions “counterproductive”, and appealing to the Kurdish Regional Government to facilitate the needs of the NPU and alleviate the needs of displaced people and their “fellow NPU soldiers” (Nineveh Plain Protection Units 2017b). The NPU was founded in Baghdad by Assyrian refugees from the Nineveh plains, only later becoming officially sanctioned by the Iraqi government and in its earlier stages displayed a stronger willingness to openly criticize both the Iraqi government as well as Iraqi Kurdish forces quite strongly (Ankawa News 2014). However, regarding the Iraqi Army-Peshmerga clashes in October 2017 after the Iraqi Kurdish independence referendum the NPU stated that “the region and its people must not again become a zone of conflict” urging “all parties involved to engage in peaceful dialogue” and for their people to “maintain neutrality” (Nineveh Plain Protection Units 2017e). This again shows strong signs of a positive attitude towards and desire for cooperation with all sides.

The Syrian MUB however has been slightly stronger in its criticism, and has in a statement in 2014 characterized Iraqi Kurdistan as having a “historical and moral responsibility” towards Assyrians, therefore needing to end “the blockade imposed on the Al Hasakah province” and to stop “digging trenches along the common border” which was said to reflect their opposition to the “brotherhood among peoples”. The statement also criticized Turkey claiming that it “cannot be a democratic country” if it “continues to deny the Assyrian Genocide” and if it “continues the policy of marginalization and injustice” against Assyrians, urging countries to exert pressure on Turkey by recognizing the Assyrian genocide and including the rights of Assyrians legally in the Turkish Constitution, and calling on Turkey to lift the siege imposed on the de facto self-ruling region in Northern Syria and also to cease supporting armed groups inside Syria (Syriac International News

Agency 2014a). While it is likely that MUB and MFS also desires cooperation with Iraqi Kurdistan, as Syrian groups they have far less to lose by more openly criticizing Iraqi Kurdish groups compared to the Iraqi NPU, especially given that there is a significant rivalry among the political ruling groups of Iraqi Kurdistan and the Syrian Kurdish PYD. Turkey and the PYD are also very much at odds, so the statement may be interpreted to display a belief on the part of the MFS and its affiliates that joining the opposition against the Iraqi Kurds and Turkey may please the PYD, given the political landscape of Northern Syria.

While not been widespread, there have been some instances of escalation between different Kurdish and Assyrian groups. The MFS, Khabour Guards and YPG had all fought together during the IS invasion of the Khabur River Valley. However, after the IS forces had been defeated in the area, some tensions grew between the Khabour Guards and the YPG and in June 2015 the Khabour Guards released a statement announcing that they would lay down their arms after the assassination of one of their leaders, alleged coercion by the YPG to join ranks with the MFS and the looting and destruction of Assyrian homes and crops (Al Masdar News 2015).

In conclusion, only the Islamic State is clearly connected to historical enemies such as the Ottoman Empire during the Assyrian Genocide, while there are only slight hints at any such connections with other actors in official statements. This can most likely be attributed to various political preferences and beliefs, primarily the desire for inter-group cooperation.

5.3.3 Primordial, non-voluntary and exclusive identity

Some statements contain language which can be said to describe a more primordial Assyrian identity. The Nineveh Plain Protection Units published short texts about some of their fighters in July 2016 exemplifying one as having a “patriotic soul”, belonging to Beth Naharin/Mesopotamia and having a single goal: liberation and maintaining an Assyrian presence in the homeland, to instill “patriotic and national” ideas in the minds of the nation’s sons and daughters, and having a so-called “Mesopotamian face”. Another fighter’s words were also featured: That leaving the Nineveh Plains for Ankawa in Iraqi Kurdistan having been a grave mistake, that to

fight for the NPU represented being a defender of Assyrian “dignity, identity and lands”, that “we have nothing more to lose, we either die with courage, or live as cowards, and then the history will curse us”, that “we will be those who choose our destiny from now on” (Nineveh Plain Protection Units 2016a, 2016b). These statements, while being the words of individual fighters, was published by the NPU in an official setting. They describe a duty to teach patriotic ideals to the next generation of Assyrians, as well as describing those Assyrians that do not join the fight as cowards that history will curse.

However, other statements have espoused both a willingness of inter-group cooperation as well as cosmopolitanist values, while having some emphasis on a Christian identity and mainly calling on Western Christians for support. In October 2017, the Syriac Military Council and its all-female branch, the Bethnahrin Women Protection Forces, released a statement regarding the victory in the Battle for Raqqa, describing the “unique alliance of the peoples of our region” that had taken part in the battle, that it had consisted of “Syriac-Assyrians, Kurds and Arabs standing together in our common fight for freedom”, “not only against ISIS” but fighting for “human dignity and democracy”, describing the Assyrian people as an “essential component of the [DFNS]”. It continued with stating that “we as [the] Syriac Military Council (MFS) represented all Christians of Syria when we entered Raqqa”, “For all Christians of Syria that have been hurt and killed by ISIS we wanted to bring justice to the capital of ISIS”, and “commemorate our martyrs that fell for freedom.”, that it had been a “victory of humanity over darkness” and ending with asking “all Christians in the West to stand with us” (Syriac International News Agency 2017a; Bethnahrin Women Protection Forces 2017; Syriac Military Council 2017a; 2017b). The language used in these statements treads a fine line, on the one hand espousing cosmopolitanist values, and on the other hand situating the group primarily alongside traditionally Christian countries which could be attributed to a perception of shared values and a belief that these countries would be naturally inclined to be sympathetic towards the Assyrian cause as fellow Christians and therefore the most likely to offer assistance to the group. The statements are using a largely neutral and non-divisive language, and describing itself as the group representing the Christian minority of Syria in the battle of Raqqa may also be attributed to a self-image as a champion of a persecuted minority as well as a desire to portray the group as a legitimate actor to the international

community, valuing fundamental human rights. The relatively neutral language and lack of straight-forward expression of an exclusive Assyrian identity may also, given the theoretical connection between radicalization and the lack of belief in a possible mutually beneficial relationship, be attributed to a preference and belief in the mutual benefit of cooperation between groups.

5.4 Existential threats

5.4.1 Annihilation, assimilation and marginalization

In November 2014 the NPU released a statement, criticizing both the Iraqi and the Iraqi Kurdish forces for fleeing in the face of the IS advance into the Nineveh Plains and Sinjar and how this led to a “ethnic cleansing and genocide” against the Assyrian people, and to emigration overseas or other areas of Iraq. These events and the “the ongoing homelessness and destitution of the Assyrian people” were described as “perhaps the worst catastrophes faced by our people in living memory” and that “the inexplicable delay of the liberation of our occupied lands and the continued suffering of our nation is causing many to lose hope, and worse, a sense of self and the identity of our communities” and that the IS agenda was “to uproot our nation from its ancestral lands and to empty Iraq of its indigenous people.” And that the loss of the Assyrian people from Iraq would not only constitute a massive humanitarian catastrophe but would also be an irreplaceable loss for the culture and civilization of Iraq and the world” (Ankawa News 2014). In this statement the flight of Assyrians from their traditional homeland is described as both a direct threat to continued Assyrian existence through genocide at the hands of IS as well as meaning an increased marginalization as a rootless refugee population and very clearly being tied to a threat against the Assyrian identity itself. The portrayal of the Assyrian people as themselves being carriers of ancient heritage and culture and the fear of an end of Assyrian physical permanence in the homeland may be attributed

to a more long-term fear of the extinction of the Assyrian identity through assimilation and loss of culture as refugees in foreign countries.

Regarding the Khabur River Valley invasion by IS in February 2015 the MFS described the events in various statements as “crimes against humanity”, calling upon the international community and “all democratic forces” to “stand up against these violations and crimes” as they did not only threaten the Assyrian presence in the region but was also a threat to “democracy and universal values of civilization and its entire inheritance” (Syriac Military Council 2015b, 2015c, 2015d; Syriac International News Agency 2015b). This statement can be interpreted as referring to an actual threat of physical destruction of the Assyrian people and continued presence in the region, but also more subtly refers to the “inheritance” of “civilization” as being threatened in line with the aforementioned statement by the NPU connecting the threats facing Assyrians with a threat against the entire world by an attack against democratic values and the loss of ancient heritage.

5.4.2 Enlistment and emigration

As mentioned earlier, the MFS released a number of statements in 2015 describing the MFS’s fight against IS in the Khabur River Valley as a “sacred duty” calling upon Assyrians both in the homeland and in the diaspora to support them and volunteer to “defend our land and our people” (Syriac Military Council 2015b, 2015c, 2015d; Syriac International News Agency 2015b). The earlier mentioned NPU publication in 2016 that quotes the words of an NPU fighter, characterized the Assyrian exodus from the Nineveh Plains as a grave mistake and that to fight for the NPU represented being a defender of Assyrian dignity, identity and lands, there being nothing more to lose, and that the choice was between either dying with courage, or living as cowards, and the latter path was connected with being cursed by history (Nineveh Plain Protection Units 2016a, 2016b). The Syriac Military Council stated in May 2016 that “the fight against terrorism is the fight for the existence of our Syriac-Assyrian people and we cannot rest until this fight is won” (Syriac Military Council 2016a, 2016b; Rudaw 2016). These statements clearly describe taking up arms as the sole legitimate action for Assyrians able to do so

given the situation and provide little room for any legitimacy of non-enlistment, emigration or the future of the Assyrian people as a diaspora group. Given the widespread destruction already having taken place in the region, the sentiment reflected in these statements may well represent a perception of the Assyrian population of the region being directly under a threat of collapse and physical destruction coupled with a desire for the increased Assyrian emigration from the region to cease considering in what large numbers it had already taken place.

5.4.3 Necessary actions and conditions for security

There have been numerous statements by the Assyrian organizations emphasizing the need for military mobilization among Assyrians, the need for political reform in the region as well as establishing joint security structures with other forces in the region.

A number of statements have been released by the organizations that express various views on necessary components for security and peace in the region. In 2014 a statement by the MUB emphasized that both the Syrian government and the Syrian opposition must come to realize that “the era of dictatorship is over”, that “there can be no peace in Syria without the acknowledgement that all people living in Syria must be regarded as equal and without establishing democracy and true citizenship” and the need to pressure the federal government of Iraq to “meet the demand of legal autonomy” for Assyrians. The MUB emphasized that Assyrians in the Middle East “must not lose sight of the fact that we are in a great need to organize ourselves as a people and should be aware that at this time realizing these aspirations depends on the unity behind the political leadership and the struggle to defend and promote the Assyrian identity” (Syriac International News Agency 2014a). In 2014 the NPU stated that “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. That the NPU aimed to become part of other official security forces already present in the area, ensuring security through Assyrian participation in the protection of Assyrian areas (Ankawa News 2014). In 2015 the MFS stated that there was a need to combine efforts and enable joint work among all “liberal” military forces and all the ethnoreligious groups, in order to “build a new future” for the region (Syriac Military Council 2015a). Another statement in

February 2015 regarding the IS incursion in the Khabur River Valley relayed that the group was working together with the Kurdish YPG and the Khabour Guards, calling on Assyrians “not to follow the tendentious propaganda which aims to break our moral” and the need to “stand together in solidarity in order to beat these barbaric attacks that threaten us” (Syriac Military Council 2015b, 2015c, 2015d; Syriac International News Agency 2015b). And as mentioned earlier, in 2016 the NPU featured the words of a fighter that articulated a choice between dying with courage or living as cowards, and that “we will be those who choose our destiny from now on” (Nineveh Plain Protection Units 2016b). These statements combine calling for unity among Assyrians, reform of the various political structures in the region, Assyrian self-determination, enlistment and organized defense together with military and political cooperation with political and military groups from other ethnoreligious groups, in order to deal with the threat posed by IS. The NPU statements are more steadfast in proclaiming a perceived need as well as a preference for Assyrian self-rule and self-determination, which may both reflect an actual difference between the groups in political ideology as well as a more significant perception of political marginalization among the NPU.

6 Conclusion

The question that this thesis aimed to answer was: *To what extent has Assyrian identity been politicized in relation to the context of the conflict in Syria and Iraq between 2012 and the end of 2017?* Below the results of the investigation that utilized the three different mechanisms of politicization for the analysis have been summarized.

Institutional Erosion and Political Opportunities

The groundwork had already been laid for politicization in Northern Syria before the Syrian civil war because of existing exclusionary and discriminatory policies. The Syrian government withdrawal was not complete in 2014 however, with many basic institutions and services remaining in place. In Iraq the situation had been unstable for most parts of the country since the 2003 Iraq war which laid the groundwork for Assyrian politicization. The events of 2014 proved a tipping point leaving Iraqi Assyrians with a significant loss of basic services and livelihood, many ending up as refugees. This manifested itself in markedly increased Assyrian identity politicization including military mobilization. The empirical data shows a significant amount of Assyrian emigration having taken place between 2012 and 2017 and a clear correlation between milestone events such as battles, refugee crises and withdrawal of armies with an increase in rhetoric of identity politicization and the emergence of militias.

Conflict mythology and Radicalization

While there are instances in the various statements where a historical connection to certain lands and the unique worth of Assyrians as an indigenous people is articulated, few instances of straight-forward chauvinism through self-glorification at the expense of other groups and exclusive rights to rule certain lands can be found. What is expressed can mostly be described as a call for minority rights and an end to marginalization through self-determination, largely within the existing

political structures of Iraq and Syria as well as a positive attitude towards co-existence and cooperation with other ethnoreligious groups. Only the Islamic State is clearly connected to historical enemies such as the Ottoman Empire during the Assyrian Genocide, while there are only slight hints at any such connections with other actors. Some of the language in the statements can be said to describe a more primordial Assyrian identity and a primary identification with other Christians but there is also language that espouses both a desire for local inter-group cooperation between different ethnoreligious groups and that expresses cosmopolitanist values.

Existential threats

The flight of Assyrians from their traditional homeland is often characterized as a direct threat to the Assyrian people through the prospect of further marginalization and assimilation as a rootless refugee population or as a diaspora group and is characterized as a threat against the Assyrian identity itself. Taking up arms is described as the only legitimate action for Assyrians given the dire situation and gives little room for the legitimacy of non-enlistment or emigration and may reflect a fear of collapse and physical annihilation at the hands of IS forces. Regarding security beliefs, there has been an emphasis on the need for military mobilization among Assyrians, political reform in the region as well as for Assyrian militias to join already established security structures in the region. The necessary actions for security and peace are described as a combination of unity, self-determination, organized defense as well as cooperation with other political and ethnoreligious groups.

In conclusion, a complex picture has emerged concerning Assyrian identity politicization in Syria and Iraq. Numerous factors for politicization of Assyrian identity can be said to have been fulfilled: There has been significant political opportunity for politicization, Assyrian emigration from the region has been extensive, there has been a depiction of chosen traumas, a historical enemy and an existential threat with regards to the Islamic State, as well as an existential threat regarding identity in the loss of connection to the homeland and marginalization as a result of emigration with a widespread call for enlistment. However there has been several unfulfilled factors: An uneven institutional erosion and collapse with many previous government institutions remaining in place, a limited amount of

articulation of chosen glories, chauvinism or a primordial identity and more frequently a call for inter-group cooperation and cosmopolitanist values. So while in many aspects Assyrian identity has been highly politicized, in many other aspects a far more nuanced approach in using identity in political rhetoric can be observed.

6.1 Concluding discussion

While the amount of material that has been used for the analysis in this thesis is quite extensive, a broader investigation that paints an even more complete picture may be provided through including additional smaller Assyrian political and military groups. As stated in the Research Design, the empirical material available is limited in scope since there has been restrictions on journalistic coverage in many parts of Syria and Iraq because of the conflict. Researchers with fluency in Arabic, Kurdish and the Eastern Neo-Aramaic languages hold a clear advantage in this field of research as well, since much of the relevant source material is only available in these languages.

An interesting premise for future academic research concerning modern Assyrian identity that came to mind during the later stages of the writing process of this thesis, is to more deeply review the relationship between political ideology and ethnoreligious identity for contemporary Assyrian military and political groups, which has been a recurring feature in the statements of the Assyrian groups and would be an interesting point of view for future research within the field.

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