

A [Zinda](#) Interview with Ashur Giwargis, Save Assyria Front

The following is an interview conducted by Zinda Magazine's Afram Baryacoub on January 7th, 2007 with Mr Ashur Gewargis, a member of the newly established Save Assyria Front. Mr Gewargis, who lives in Lebanon, was the official spokesperson of the Assyrian Expanded Conference which was held in Stockholm, Sweden between 15-17 December 2006, when the Save Assyria Front was founded based on the final declaration of this conference: [Click Here.](#)

Zinda: We have witnessed many Assyrian conferences during the years. After the conference is over, almost nothing happens. Why should we believe that this one is different?



Mr. Ashur Giwargis presiding over the Assyrian Expanded Conference held last December in Sweden.

AG: This conference will be different because the invitations were very clear and the goals are specified and defined very clearly in the invitations. The first point is to work for the acknowledgment of the Assyrian people as the indigenous people of Iraq. The second point is to work for the recognition of the Assyrian identity as an inclusive identity for all the Assyrian sections without making any sectarian or denominational differences. The third point is to work for establishing the Assyrian region under the name of Ashur (Assyria) region equally with other groups in Iraq. This is a sign that the conference is serious. Other conferences have failed for two main reasons: The first reason: The obscurity in the names and the obscurity about the identity. They were calling people just to talk about what is our name and what are our rights. Fortunately we (SAF – Save Assyria Front) know what are our rights and our name. That is why our

discussions have been going smoothly. The second reason is that the political result of all other conferences was a follow up committee. A follow up committee is doomed to fail. But a front, a political front, will create stronger ties between the political bodies who are working for the same goals. Everybody in the front will be obliged to work according to the final declaration of the conference.

Did you invite all Assyrian organizations?

AG: Yes we have invited all Assyrian organizations, regardless which names they use to work under and regardless their ideologies, they are all Assyrians and they must be invited to every Assyrian conference.

Did you invite the Chaldean parties ?

AG: Yes, we invited the Chaldean National Congress as an Assyrian party working under the Chaldean name.

You were asked about ADM and ADO and BNDP in one of your lectures in Stockholm, and you said they didn't attend, can you tell us why?

AG: ADM and ADO didn't attend for unknown reasons, and they didn't send any answer to our invitation, and the BNDP didn't attend but they sent their good luck wishing for the conference without mentioning the reason of their absence, I can't say why they didn't attend and you can address your question to them.

You are a newly-founded front; you lack funds, a professional lobby group, militia in Iraq or other essential components for waging a national struggle. How do you want to convince the average Assyrian that he or she should support you?

AG: If we had a militia and money and such things then we would not need the support of the Assyrian people. Having militia is not our main goal, the struggle of the SAF will be political, but the support and the funds of the front depend on the Assyrian people today. We are not counting on non Assyrians. Whoever believes in the goals of the front should support the front, but unfortunately the political fashion in today's Assyrian society is such that we support this or that party because it is big or strong. And this is very wrong, because the people should support the rightful rather than the strong. As for the work here in Sweden, we have held many lectures about the conference and we have established many supporting committees from independent Assyrians belonging to all our churches in many Swedish cities as a start, and they are expanding day by day, the same will be done in other countries where Assyrians live.

Can you mention one practical activity the Save Assyria Front (SAF) will make in the near future for the Assyrian people, besides holding meetings or issuing declarations?

AG: As you know we are still in the beginning. We are trying to promote the front and make other groups join us. The first step is to promote the front, to make people understand what we are working for and make them understand that we are not against any other Assyrian political body. We are not established in order to face other Assyrian bodies and we also hope that Assyrian parties

will not put obstacles in our way. The second step will be contacting non Assyrians all over the world. Other steps will be in action and people will know them in the right time

So you will work to expand the front and to make it known, but you have not mentioned one practical thing the SAF will do for the Assyrian people in the nearest future.

AG: We think it is enough to start by proposing an Assyrian cause, something that our people haven't had for decades and this is one of the main reasons why the final declaration of the conference was like a surprise, it was the first courageous stand by organizations from Iraq and abroad at once because we never used to propose what is useful.

How will you deal with the fact that the SAF does not represent the majority of Assyrians?

AG: This is something very normal. We know that we do not represent the majority of Assyrians but at least we represent the Assyrian cause, the rightful aims, this is what we represent. Our work will not be only with Assyrians and we are not interested in elections or which party is representing the majority or the minority. All we are interested in is to get decisions, international and Iraqi decisions regarding the Assyrian situation. The international community does not look to how many people are agreeing with this or that party, they look at who is rightful and who is not, this is what we are depending on, we are thinking first of all to deal with the international opinion.

There are people among our nation who prefer to identify themselves as Syriacs or Chaldeans. And some of these groups don't accept to be identified as Assyrians. How are you going to handle this issue?

AG: If I was to agree on any compound name I would ask myself: what are the goals or the national aspirations of those who are refusing the Assyrian identity as theirs? For example, what are the goals of the Assyrians who are claiming that they are a Chaldean nation? They didn't show any case in Iraq, they didn't ask for anything and the same regarding the Suryoye in Iraq. So how would we compromise with them about our/their identity to accomplish some goals while they are not agreeing with us on these goals? That's why the project with the compound names has failed until now and even the goals of that project. So the identity have failed in Iraq and the goals have failed because we have wasted time with some people who are not interested in anything that is Assyrian, neither goals or identity. And here I am not talking about the Suryoye or the Chaldeans; I am talking about a few politicians from these both churches who are trying to deceive the simple Assyrians of those churches.

But how will you make those Syriacs and Chaldeans agree to be represented by the national name of "Assyrians"?

AG: We will not try to convince any Assyrian about the Assyrian name, and we will not discuss the Assyrian identity with Any Assyrian, but we will keep spreading awareness as much as possible. Some organizations, be it in Syria or in Iraq have compromised with the simple minded Assyrians by saying: Ok, we are Assyrian-Suryoye or we are Chaldo-Assyrians, and that Assyrian "and" Chaldeans "and" Syriacs (Suryoye) are one people, as if someone says that French "and" Catholics are one people knowing that there are Catholic French... So there has never been an awareness campaign and I can assure you that when Assyrians who do not accept the Assyrian name will see

that we are working for them under the Assyrian name as we are working for the Assyrians who believe in the Assyrian name, many of them will then support us. And I am sure they will finally understand that they can not take their rights if they don't work under the Assyrian name. The best example for this is that all the compound names we have heard of so far such as Chaldo-Assyrians and before it we heard about the Assyrian-Suryoyo name but we have never heard any one working under the name Chaldo-Suryoye or Syrian-Chaldeans because they know very well that they will fail politically without the Assyrian name. And the enemies of the Assyrian nation will support every Assyrian who replaces the Assyrian name by sectarian names. If we want to know what our real name is, we should remember which name was fought against by our enemies. Which name was fought by Saddam and now which name is fought by the Kurds, it is only the Assyrian name. That is how we can conclude what the real name is, it's the name that can give us our rights.

You mean that our historical name “Assyrians” is a key for obtaining our rights in Iraq. But the Kurds have obtained a lot despite not having an historical name in the sense you refer to, so obviously historical names are not crucial for obtaining ones rights, as you claim.

AG: The Kurds may have political rights but no historical rights but knew how to work politically. We have both historical and political rights and we abandoned the both.

So it means that we also can obtain our full rights only by pursuing the political rights? So the historical is not important?

AG: No, the historical rights are important. We are attached to our identity because the Assyrian cause is a historical cause, but the Kurdish cause is not a historical cause. The land where the Kurds established their region is not Kurdish land. But the land where we as a people are trying to establish our region is Assyrian land it is Assyria and we are still preserving the Assyrian culture in the form of language, traditions etc.

You say that the compound name has not taken us anywhere the last few years, but many will say that neither the Assyrian name has taken us anywhere for the last 100 years.

AG: No, if we look at history in WWI, only the Assyrian name was used and we had an Assyrian cause and the Assyrian name was known all around the world. The church of the east fought for the Assyrian cause and we had support from many intellectuals from the Syrian orthodox and Chaldean church, but both those churches, as institutions, were against the Assyrian cause, and still are today. And I am not being sectarian when I say this, these are historical facts. So before proposing something called union attempts, we had an Assyrian cause until 1947 when Mar Ishai Shimun was proposing the Assyrian cause in the San Francisco 1st conference of the United Nations. But later some organizations started proposing new names, especially after the 70's and even after the falling of Saddam, the Assyrian cause started to die because these organizations wasted all our time by compromising with some clergy or sectarian associations just for elections or financial support, and finally those clergy left them.

But how can a name give us our rights?

AG: First of all it is not a name issue, but an identity issue. As I said before, our cause is attached to history, we are an indigenous people identified as “Assyrian”. That is why our historical identity

should be preserved and should not be divided or should not look as a sectarian or religious identity.

What is more important in your opinion: receiving our full rights in Iraq or having one single name for our nation?

AG: Both are important. We can not receive our rights with a compound name, because as you see we are today known as Iraqi Christians, why? Because we didn't respect our Assyrian national identity, we innovated compound names by putting the Assyrian name with sectarian religious names for the sake of personal and partisan agendas. Non Assyrians are not obliged to use the compound name, and for westerners it is easier to just call us Iraqi Christians instead of mentioning the compound name. That is why we will be understood to be only a religious group when we use sectarian names for the Assyrians. We should never promote the Assyrian name as a church name alongside other church names. Assyrians are the followers of the Church Of The East, the Syrian Catholic, Orthodox and the Chaldean church, who are living in the historical lands where Assyrians lived and who are practicing the Assyrian culture and traditions, are all Assyrians, and there may be Assyrians from other religion, also there are followers of these churches in India, and Arabs... those are not Assyrians but they follow all these churches, we should accept it because this is history, Giwargis the Bishop of Arabs was appointed for the Christian Arabs in Syria, in the 4th century by Mar Yaco Of Nessibis, so when talking about denominations let's keep the Assyrian national name apart.

But if you had to choose between having one single national name and no full rights in Iraq or full rights in Iraq under a compound name, what would you choose?

AG: Your question is not correct. Before asking this question you should first hear some one asking for Assyrian federalism at least, even though under the compound name. Let them do it and then we will negotiate with them and present one single aim to the Iraqi government.

So you are actually saying that for the SAF, the name issue is negotiable?

AG: I'm talking about the aim, we will not negotiate the Assyrian identity, let them ask for federalism equally with other groups in Iraq and according to the federal Iraqi central constitution, and under the compound name if they insist, and we will keep asking for it under the Assyrian national name, and finally we would be asking for the same goal. But we have never seen any Assyrian group asking for federalism under the compound name... anyway, what will be the name of the region ? Here I'm talking about the proposed Assyrian Triangle (Nohadra and the so-called Nineve plains) together as one region, which is not negotiable.

What do you think about the Kurdish constitution ?

AG: We have no relation to this constitution and we are not concerned about it because we are not a part of the so-called kurdistan people, I didn't read it and don't care what it gave us and what it didn't give us, we have to focus on the Iraqi constitution and our aims should be presented only and only to the Iraqi central government according to the international laws as the indigenous people of Iraq, we are not the subjects of any Iraqi group be it Kurdish or any other.

What can you say about the future of this front (SAF)?

AG: We can not say much for now but we have already started in the right way and we have very expanded contacts with non Assyrians as we have with Assyrian society, be it in the west or in the Middle East or anywhere else. Everything is prepared and many non Assyrian parties have contacted us and offered their full support.

Is it Iraqi parties?

AG: Yes, Iraqi parties

Don't you think in this case you may be faced by the anger of some Arab or Kurdish sides ?

AG: We are not against Arabs neither Kurds nor anyone. But we are against every project that is trying to change the identity of the Assyrian people or land, and we are working according to the equality principals; if there is federalism in Iraq, we should have our own share within one Iraq.

Can you mention any names of parties who support you?

AG: Later, in the right time.

Why can't you mention their name?

AG: Because we didn't start until now, they have declared that they support our goals but nothing has happened yet. We are still planning for another meeting to expand the front as declared in our final statement, and then we will start meeting with everyone who is ready to support, be it Assyrians or non Assyrians.

Do you realize how huge the task ahead of you is?

AG: Yes we do, the task is not really hard, but the building of the Assyrian question is weak since decades and that's why we believe the task is now hard. We have intellectuals, money, means, but the problem is that our people have not used this power yet or organized it. So to organize a people, or to convince them that they should support you, you should tell them that you are working for a better future for them, until now, none of our parties has done this, and the Assyrian cause is misunderstood to many Assyrians as being a humanitarian cause; sending money for refugees, building schools where our students get false education about the identity of the nation and land, and unfortunately many are still proud of this. And we have made the conference to put an end for this and re-build an Assyrian nationalistic ideology that will lead for the resurrection of the Assyrian nationalism after decades of submissiveness by our rooted parties and organizations.

You criticize Assyrian parties although SAF are new yourselves and you have not presented any activity for the Assyrian people. Is it correct of you to criticize other parties at this initial stage?

AG: Yes it is correct because the failure of those parties is one of the main reasons for making our conference, we wish if those parties worked for our mentioned goals so there wouldn't be a need for

new organizations. In the political work of persecuted people, there are several steps. The first step is to propose your goals; the second step is to get the support of other sides and your own people. We have now started with the first step as a new established front and we have published all our goals in several languages. So if those parties are rejecting what I say about their failure in working for the Assyrian cause, then the question is: what is the Assyrian cause according to them? If it is not these goals that our conference has proposed then what is the Assyrian cause?

Other Assyrian groups accuse you for being naive and unrealistic about your goals.

AG: This is their nationalistic education, they are free to say whatever they think, but they should know that we are working for the truth and there is a difference between truth and fact, the truth is that our land is Assyria, but the fact is that it's being called Kurdistan, the truth is that we are Assyrians but the fact is that we are being called Christians of Iraq, and sometimes Christians of Kurdistan, so if we will keep accepting the fact we will fail nationally. A national movement is created to change a wrong fact, and if our parties will work according to the fact and for the fact then we don't need them, because the fact already exists, with or without them. We didn't understand until now what these parties want. Some are saying that they want to join the southern part of the Assyrian triangle to the Kurdish occupation. This is a Kurdish mission, it is a service for the Kurds, and it is not an Assyrian cause.

It is said that SAF has no existence on the ground in Iraq and it is therefore easy for you to talk about creating Ashur region.

AG: No, this is very wrong because The Assyrian General Conference (AGC) is working in Iraq. And now the AGC is the representative of the front in Iraq where it is a registered political entity. I want to say to the people who accuse us of not having any presence in Iraq: When their parties were first established they didn't have any major support and this is the reality for every newly established political body. This front is joining together parties who have the necessary strategy or the necessary Assyrian nationalism or thinking in order to achieve the goals of every Assyrian, and I say again, The people should support the rightful weak rather than the unrightful strong, nationalism is a matter of principles and not a fashion.

Would you agree with others that what you are doing is dangerous, that you are putting our people in Iraq in greater danger by your claims for the Ashur region?

AG: No, there is no more danger than what our people already are facing in Iraq. They are facing church bombings, beheading of priests, kidnapping of innocent people and about 400 000 Assyrians have fled Iraq and so on. There isn't any danger more than what we are witnessing. We have nothing more to loose. We lost our identity and we are loosing our land and people.

Why is the largest Assyrian party in Iraq, the ADM, not asking for establishing an Assyrian autonomy in the north?

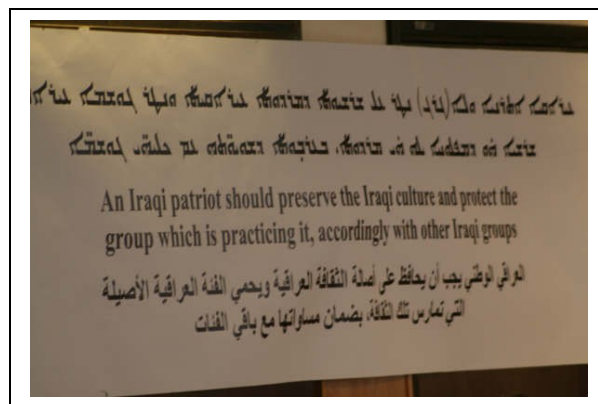
AG: I think they are moving according to a special ADM agenda. I don't like to interfere in other parties issues as a spokesman for the Assyrian conference. We will work with everyone who agrees on our goals and everyone who don't agree with us we will not work against him, and if ADM is ready to present our announced goals in the Iraqi political arena we will support it.

The SAF want a region that is not under Kurdish rule. But Assyrians have been living under Iranian, Turkish and Arab rule for more than a thousand years. Why not live under Kurdish rule today?

AG: Because first of all the Kurdish rule is giving the land a new national name. If it was named “North of Iraq” we wouldn’t have any problems to live with Kurds, Turcoman, and Shabaks etc under the name of “North of Iraq”. But whereas the Kurds are imposing a national name we will be called in the future a part of the Kurdish people and this is unacceptable. The land is one of the national factors of every ethnicity; the land, identity and culture. Now our culture is being changed to a sectarian name, namely Syrian. Our identity is being changed to Christians because of the compound name, and the name of our land is being changed to a Kurdish name and all this is unacceptable.

The SAF does not recognize the Kurdish region, can you explain why?

AG: We don’t recognize the Kurdish region because it includes many Assyrian lands that were confiscated not only in Nohadra (Dohuk) but also in Arbil, so this region is illegal. That is the main reason for not recognizing this region. Assyrians should not acknowledge this region.



Will Save Assyria Front grow?

AG: We already have received many letters of support and people are asking for another meeting which will be announced soon. We have not decided the time and place yet. The other meeting will be held in order to join other parties and organizations to SAF, and then starts our contacts officially as SAF – "Save Assyria" Front.

You are being attacked or let's say criticized by some writers for your ideology, what can you say about this?

AG: All I can say is that every individual has the right to criticize and readers know already what this individual stands for and what is his national background, some are Kurds who were and still are lost in working to promote the Kurdish occupation, and others who are not interested about their identity.. We can’t blame anyone even if he is wrong because we know very well what a big

part of the Assyrian people faced, something that prevented them to be well organized and aware of the dangers surrounding them.

After the conference you were interviewed by the Kurdish and Arab radio stations in Sweden, and after you talked about the SAF goals and finished your interview on the Arab radio, a representative from another Assyrian party was interviewed as well, and he said that you are not Iraqi Assyrians and you have no right to talk about Iraq. How would you like to respond to that?

AG: I want to ask him to read our final declaration where he will see that the AGC is the SAF representative in Iraq. AGC was established in Iraq in August/2005 and is still working there officially as an Iraqi political entity according to the Iraqi laws, I also would like to remind him that his party was established by Turkish Assyrians (following his logic) and now it's working to join the southern part of the Assyrian triangle to the Kurdish occupation. Assyrian nationalism doesn't depend on ID cards; every Assyrian in this world has the right to interfere in Assyrian matters wherever Assyrians are threatened, but unfortunately some politicians are putting these differences to achieve their obscured agenda, this is a new destructive policy in the Assyrian political arena, and it's not the first time we hear such arguments, we already heard them after the falling of Saddam from other Assyrian parties who forgot that all their financial support was from the Diaspora, as they themselves used to say. According to these people, the non-Iraqi Assyrians (as they consider them) have always to support financially but they have no right to talk.

What do you think regarding the Assyrian groups who are asking for including the Nineveh plain to the Kurdish region?

AG: It's not an Assyrian aim, but a Kurdish one, the main Kurdish goal is to tie what they call "Iraqi Kurdistan" to what they call "Syrian Kurdistan", and joining the Nineveh plain to the Kurdish occupation in Iraq will be an important step for the main project which is the so-called "Great Kurdistan". The Kurds have made it too easy for themselves because Assyrians are obliged to ask for protection from the terrorist attacks in Mosul which were non existent before the Kurds asked to join the Nineveh plain to the Kurdish occupation. It is a kind of a mystery that the terrorist attacks and the Kurdish demand both started in April/2004. Anyway, I remember some of our clergies as well asked for this at that time, and also some Yesidi chiefs asked for joining Sinjar to the Kurdish occupation, so it was planned by the Kurds before we heard these parties asking for it, but today we hear them because the Kurdish occupation needed Assyrian political organizations to call for this, not only some clergy, and they found what they wanted.

So what do you say to those Assyrian parties? Many would argue that they are dealing with the fact that we are not a majority anymore in the Assyrian triangle.

AG: We were a majority but the fact today is that we are not, and maybe the fact will be worse in the future, that's why I said before that we should deal with the truth and not with the fact, the Kurdish existence as majority in the Assyrian triangle is illegal, and every Assyrian who submit to the illegal occupation of our land, is working against his nation. Either way the Kurds can't give us any self governing, because the Iraqi constitution does not mention anything about it, nor did any

constitution in this world, there is no self- governing into another self- governing, and these parties are wasting their/our time.

What do you think about Mr. Sargis Aghajan's policy?

AG: He has no policy, it's his party's policy, the KDP, he is a Kurdish politician from Assyrian origin, and we do not consider him as an Assyrian politician because KDP is not an Assyrian party, I have nothing to say about him because we have many Assyrians who are Kurdish partisans and he's just one of them.

Don't you think that he is playing a big role in joining the Nineve Plain to the Kurdish region?

Yes he is, but he is an individual, and we should not make him look like a big obstacle, if our parties weren't weak since the beginning, clergies and such people would never be able to take their place, and I'm sure that Mr. Aghajan is the Assyrian superstar today in the eyes of many simple Assyrians, this is what KDP wanted; to replace parties with individuals.

Thank you for your time, wishing you the success

Thank you, and all the best for Zinda magazine crew and we appreciate their work