

# MERIA

## ISHTAR: DOCUMENTING THE CRISIS IN THE ASSYRIAN IRANIAN COMMUNITY

By Eden Naby\*

*The dwindling of the Middle East's non-Muslim population is nowhere more clearly observable than among Assyrians, the last substantive Aramaic speaking population of the world. With the establishment of Iran's Islamic Revolution, the Assyrian population dropped within a decade from 100,000 to 20,000. This article examines the establishment and the demise of the periodical Ishtar, which illustrates the Assyrians' attempt to accommodate themselves to the new Iran in the hope that a workable solution to living within an Islamist legal, political, and social framework was possible. Should Islamist Iran become a model for Iraq, what will be the fate of Iraq's Assyrians?*

The publication of the weekly *Ishtar*<sup>1</sup> (1981-1983) marks a critical attempt by the Assyrian community in Iran to find a means of living within the cultural and political confines of the then newly established Islamic Republic (February 1979). Introduced during the tumultuous years of radical change in the socio-cultural institutions of an Islamicizing Iran and during the onslaught of the Iraq-Iran War (1980-1989), the position of this Assyrian publication mirrors the fate of other periodicals and cultural personages in Iran. Therefore, how *Ishtar* came to be established, published, distributed, and then terminated after 45 issues is instructive on how the Islamic Revolution affected Iranian culture in general, and minority cultures in particular.

English language analysis of religious freedom in Iran during the 25 years of Iranian theocracy has generally included little information about the Assyrians, one of the quickly disappearing Christian ethnic groups in the country.<sup>2</sup> Rarely, however, is the minority language press analyzed for content. It is rather the main Iranian press—whether conservative or liberal—that provides the basis for most data.<sup>3</sup> This is

due to the obscurity of the minority press, its limited circulation outside the circles of the ethnic group, and the inaccessibility of the language of this press. In the case of the Armenians, the other ethnic Christian community of Iran, knowledge is more widespread than that of the indigenous Assyrians.

The Assyrians, the last Aramaic speakers in the world, are a transnational group with their largest Middle East population located in Iraq. Evidence pointing to the use of Aramaic in northwest Iran goes back to the pre-Achaemenid period.<sup>4</sup> It is the second Semitic language of Iran after Arabic. Those who speak Assyrian live along the border with Iraq in northwest Iran. The Mandaeans of Iran and Iraq originally spoke Aramaic as well, however, they have adapted to Arabic. Prior to its destruction in World War I, the main Assyrian cultural base lay in northwest Iran and around the towns of Urmiyah/Riza'iyeh and Salamas/Shapur.<sup>5</sup> Like the publishers of *Varliq* (1979-1997),<sup>6</sup> the voice of Azeri Turkish intellectuals, some Assyrians saw in the heady early months of the 1979 Iranian Revolution the hope for a more egalitarian cultural and political framework

for the country—one that would allow them a cultural presence. Soon, however, with Saddam Hussein's unilateral attack on Iran's oil-rich Khuzistan province, Iranian authority consolidated around an extremist Shi'a core, and it was no longer safe to express dissent.

The *Ishtar* project was started by men (and some young women) from among those Assyrian families who had stayed in Iran despite the terrible assault on their community during the First World War. However, their efforts largely failed. By 1989, the very families that had spearheaded *Ishtar* had left Iran for Western countries. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 ended up having as profound an effect on the Assyrian presence in Iran as did the killings of World War I. Once more Iran lost a major portion of its Assyrian population—this time to rapid emigration. Thus, while Iran's general population increased by about 150 percent between the 1956 and 1986 censuses, the Assyrian population shrank from about 100,000 to 20,000, or by 80 percent. Had the Assyrian population grown uninterrupted from 1914 to 1956 and at the rate of Iran's general population, it should have reached some 180,000 by the time of the first official census (1956), and 450,000 by 1986.<sup>7</sup> Yet at the start of the twenty-first century, it is no more than 15,000.

The Assyrian population of Tehran underwent such humiliating changes in law and government behavior so as to test the determination of some of the most ardent members of this community to the breaking point. During the 1980s, many more joined their extended families and co-ethnics in Europe, Australia, the United States, and Canada. The already weakened institutions of church and secular organizations were still further weakened as a result of the loss of educated and dedicated men and women

to emigration. Families with female children in particular found themselves under constant strain. Restrictions on dress and association, in place for Muslims, extended further into the social fabric of the non-Muslim population.

*Ishtar's* failure stemmed not from internal Assyrian factors, but rather from two realities of media control in Iran at least throughout the past century: the system's wide policy of licensing and censoring of media, and the heavy-handed means of dealing with politically suspect groups in the Iran of the 1980s. During the first decade of the Iranian Revolution, particularly during the years when the fundamentalists were eliminating all opposition (first from the liberal democrats, then from the left, and finally from its own dissidents), the control of media became especially severe. During the period of terror following the revolution, not even the voice of Ayatollah Khomeini could rein in zealous extremism.

The position of sanctioned religious minorities (*aqliyatha-ye rasmi*) protected in the constitution came under attack. *Ishtar* recorded many attempts throughout 1981-1982 to protect the rights of the community by pointing to the constitution of the Islamic Republic. Lead articles, as if anticipating the crackdown on minority rights and trying to ingratiate themselves to prevent the attack, intoned, "Today throughout Iran, different people, Kurds, Azerbaijanis, Arabs, Lur, Baluch, and smaller others live equally next to each other. And cooperatively, in their Islamic homeland, they stand against world hegemony led by America."<sup>8</sup> In fact, during this period, the Kurds were in rebellion, Arabs in Khuzistan were agitating for a greater share of the oil revenue to remain in their province, and the landless Turkoman had become emboldened to take the

properties of major landlords. On the Tehran political front, the struggle of the Mojahidin-e Khalq against the Iranian Revolutionary Party (IRP) resulted in the bombing of the IRP headquarters, in which some 100 party members were killed. *Ishtar's* pages do not reflect the political struggles within Iran.

The first crisis recorded in *Ishtar* was that of directive #62123 of Aban 20, 1360 (October 13, 1981) from the Tehran provincial office of education, which “sent alarm throughout the Assyrian community.”<sup>9</sup> The strict enforcement of such directives from the Ministry of Education and Training—and especially from the Ministry of Culture and Religious Guidance—led to eventual disintegration of Assyrian schools. Assyrian schools were forced to accept Muslim principals to conform to the law forbidding non-Muslims to serve as head administrators of any organization. Clearly this decision affected other minorities as well, including the Jews, Zoroastrians, and Armenians. Moreover, Assyrian schoolgirls were obligated to wear the *hijab* (veil) in accordance with Muslim Shari’a law. The schools were also forced to introduce Koranic instruction into the curriculum, as they accepted Muslim students. The hardest blow, however, was the ban on the teaching of Assyrian neo-Aramaic in the public schools run by the community; such instruction thus became confined to churches and clubs.<sup>10</sup> Even appeals to the constitution and to the principle of the equal treatment of minorities could not withstand such determination to control education.

### **WHO STOOD BEHIND ISHTAR?**

The licensing process for periodicals and the publication of books in Iran was fraught with obstacles. Many a less persistent

Assyrian abandoned efforts to publish works of poetry and textbooks due to the unpredictable and tedious bureaucratic process involved. Such harassment of Assyrian institutions meant that literary works (poems and short stories) had to be translated from Assyrian neo-Aramaic into Persian and then taken to the censors. At times the censors would only request that part of the book be translated, but once that part had been translated would decide they wanted another part or even the entire book translated. The number of publications decreased, and eventually very little was published. Publication was resumed in 1991 following some leniencies in publication conditions after Khomeini’s death in 1989. However, by then, most Assyrian publications appeared in Persian. Though Aramaic was still the dominant spoken language in the Assyrian community, Persian had become the more widely read language. Persian was also used to avoid problems with censors.

After the collapse of the strong Assyrian periodical press following the destruction of the Assyrians in northwest Iran in 1918, only one Assyrian periodical had been published in the country. The periodical was bilingual, published in both Persian and Assyrian neo-Aramaic. In part, this reflected diminished literacy among the Assyrian community in their mother tongue. Censorship during the Islamic period in particular had added on many extra hours of work in translating the materials into Persian—time the volunteer activists could ill afford. Though the materials were translated into Persian, other Assyrians were recruited by the government to examine the original text in Aramaic—as the censors themselves were unable to read Aramaic—to check for any objectionable content. Understandably, Assyrian writers and editors assiduously avoided content that

would provoke the censors' ire (i.e., love, wine, Assyrian national sentiment, or anything concerning foreign countries). In order to avoid treason charges (such as those that led to the dismissal and flight of men like President Abol-Hassan Bani-Sadr (1980-1981)), *Ishtar* printed anti-American material in its headlines and included pictures of leading Islamic religious politicians in the paper.

Dr. Sargon Bet Oshana (1927-1988), elected as the Assyrian (and Chaldean) representative to the first legislature (Majlis) under the Islamic Republic, was responsible for obtaining *Ishtar's* publication license. Though Assyrians were guaranteed representation in the monarchial period constitution and were allowed the same right under the Islamic constitution, they had only begun to exercise this right since the 1958 elections. Bet Oshana became the fourth Assyrian to hold that office.

Oshana was a medical doctor who came from a respected and accomplished family. His elder brother, General Philip Bet Oshana (1921-1976), was the highest ranking Assyrian in the Iranian military at the time of his service. The family came from Goegtapa. Goetapa was a small town that lay to the southeast of Urmiyah and historically had been one of the most important Assyrian cultural centers in the Urmiyah region. It had been the locale of good Assyrian schools before World War I.<sup>11</sup> These Christian schools (1835) preceded the establishment of the Alliance Israelite Universal schools (1898), which, like the Christian missionary schools, initially served only Iranian Jews but quickly saw the benefit of admitting Muslims and Christians as well.<sup>12</sup>

Dr. Bet Oshana had been politically active as well. His profile was high enough to have been included in the 1981 15-man

Iranian delegation to the 68th Inter-parliamentary Union Conference in Havana, Cuba.<sup>13</sup> As the Assyrian Majlis representative, he traveled often to Urmiyah and its villages. He wrote many of the political articles in Persian that appeared in *Ishtar*, and his image appears on many of its pages. In his writings, he sometimes approved certain questionable government actions. One such example is the imprisonment and eventual execution of Sadegh Qotbzadeh (1936-1982), a Khomeini aid and former foreign minister who had been tried for his involvement in a plot that resulted in the sidelining of the leading liberal cleric Ayatollah Shariatmadari. Dr. Bet Oshana maintained a trust in Iran's Islamic constitution as a means of protecting Assyrians, which, in light of the repression between 1981 and 1983, appear rather desperate. He saw to it that pictures of Khomeini, Khamene'i, and Rafsanjani—all prominently turbaned icons—appeared in the Persian section of the newspaper. Yet the articles accompanying the pictures did not display the same fawning and ingratiating attitude. Indeed, throughout the first several issues, the words "Islamic Republic" were rarely used. The term "Revolutionary Republic" appeared instead. In February 1983, in the general round-up of Communists (Tudeh)—which followed the crushing of the Mojahidin-e Khalq—Dr. Bet Oshana too was arrested.<sup>14</sup>

Assyrian leadership in Tehran was concerned that it had lost its only legislative representative. A delegation consisting of a bishop, several priests and pastors, and the Editor in Chief of *Ishtar* Rabi Issa Benyamin, met with Speaker of the Majlis Hashem Rafsanjani to discuss the matter. According to Rabi Issa, Rafsanjani had the Assyrian delegation led into a room with a tape recorder on the table. When the

machine was turned on, they heard Dr. Bet Oshana's voice repeating the confession extracted from him that he had been a member of the Tudeh Party.

Eventually Oshana was released, but was forced to leave Tehran for the eastern provinces. He never completed his term of office. For over a year, the Assyrians of Iran were unrepresented in the Majlis. In 1984, Atur Khnanisho was elected and served two consecutive four-year terms (1984-1992).<sup>15</sup> Following Dr. Oshana's arrest, only two more issues of *Ishtar* were published. Publication ceased as the periodical had lost its license and the man who might have fought for its renewal.

Rabi Issa Benyamin ("Rabi" meaning teacher) was editor of the Assyrian section of *Ishtar* and the main force behind the publication. Rabi Issa, whose family was from Salamas (north of Urmiyah), has become best known for his imaginative calligraphy and his creation of several new and artistic fonts for the Aramaic alphabet. The *Ishtar* articles he wrote used the vernacular Assyrian neo-Aramaic, the main written language of the Assyrians of Iran (as opposed to classical Syriac, the extinct spoken language of church liturgy).<sup>16</sup>

Many of Rabi Issa's calligraphic creations appeared in *Ishtar*. All Aramaic headlines were written by Issa, as at the time there was no printing capacity to produce bold-faced and enlarged headings. Eventually his daughter, Ramica, learned to type the articles on a manual Olivetti typewriter, one of a dozen or more that had been specially ordered from the Italian manufacturer by the Assyrian American National Federation. This was not the first time that an Assyrian writing product had made its way to Iran from the West. In addition to the modified eastern Aramaic fonts produced by the American missionaries and used in Urmiyah since

1843,<sup>17</sup> an Assyrian by the name of Mirza Aurahim, son of Qasha (Reverend) Odisho of Golpashan, had brought a lithograph machine to Urmiyah around 1900.<sup>18</sup>

The Assyrian articles in *Ishtar* carried less political content than those in Persian and concentrated more on Assyrian matters. These included obituaries of those lost in the Iran-Iraq War, the passing of community stalwarts, and cultural news. Rabi Issa's strong political views—if they could be labeled leftist—grew not out of ideology, but rather like most Assyrians and minorities, out of the belief that a socialist system, exemplified by the Soviet Union, promised more reliable protection of minority rights. In many respects, the existence of an Assyrian diaspora community in Soviet Armenia and Georgia for nearly 200 years (with language, history, and folkloric content) gave many Assyrians in Iran faith in the Soviet nationality policy.<sup>19</sup>

In 1948, Rabi Issa published a handwritten and lithographed issue of *Surgada Umtanaya (Patriotic Calendar)*. He was thus the first person to succeed in reviving Assyrian publishing since the First World War. He enjoyed the trust of many in the community. A group of young Assyrian university students (including his own son Ramsin) helped with the paper. They contributed columns, for example to the sports section (in Persian). They also visited the five Assyrian churches of Tehran every Sunday to sell the paper for 25 rials per issue (then \$40).

*Ishtar* was the product of volunteer labor. The volunteers all had other vocational responsibilities. Rabi Issa, for example, worked as the director of Human Resources at the Iranian Ministry of Environment. In fact, throughout the long history of Assyrian publication in Iran, Assyrian publications have been run by

both men and women whose main profession was not in media. The Assyrian press has thus been a labor of devotion, not financial gain.

*Ishtar's* annual subscription rate of 1,000 rials brought little revenue and the project only broke even. It also received donations from other parts of Iran as well as from Tehran. The publication did not cease for financial reasons or due to lack of volunteer labor, but rather as the result of political repression.

### LANGUAGE AND THE ASSYRIAN PERIODICAL PRESS IN IRAN

Prior to World War I and the destruction of Iran's Assyrian community, all Assyrian periodicals appeared in Assyrian neo-Aramaic. Moreover, Assyrian periodicals—with the rare exception of the Tiflis-based *Kokhva d Madinkha* (Star of the East) of the early Soviet-era—have only published Assyrian neo-Aramaic in the Aramaic alphabet. When the Assyrian press was finally revived in Iran during the years following World War II, most newspapers became bilingual, appearing both in Assyrian and in Persian.

Long before the publication of *Ishtar*, the Assyrians of Iran had attempted several times to resuscitate their periodical press. In Urmiyah in 1849, under the supervision of American missionaries, the monthly *Zahrira d-Bahra* (*Rays of Light*, 1849-1918) was established and became the first periodical published in Iran in any language.<sup>20</sup> By 1914, with the start of Kurdish raids into Assyrian villages in the Urmiyah-Salmas area (just prior to and in conjunction with Ottoman entry into World War I), there were already four Assyrian periodicals based in Urmiyah. This was more than in any other language in the area. However, the only publication that could

claim relative independence from missionary denominational interest was *Kokhva* (1906-1918).<sup>21</sup>

In 1918, the Assyrian cultural renaissance in Iran was put to an end. By that summer, the Christians in Iran situated closest to the still ill-defined Turkish border fled from the Kurdish and Ottoman forces. Tabriz and its Christians were little affected by this turmoil, as the Armenians in Tabriz were protected by the local Muslim population. Having lost two-thirds of their population as well as most of their intellectuals and clergy, the Assyrians who managed to stay in Iran never recovered their cultural strength.

The political instability of the 1940s in Iran allowed little space for the minority language press. During the Mossadegh period (prime minister of Iran from 1951-1953), there were a few failed attempts to revive the periodical press, with the literary monthly *Gilgamesh* (1952-1959) the first to succeed.<sup>22</sup> This publication accomplished the important task of preserving Aramaic poetry written by those who had managed to acquire a solid Aramaic education—despite the closing of many Assyrian language schools with Reza Shah's introduction of universal, strictly Persian, language education. *Kerkha Yerkhana* (*Monthly Paper*, 1962-1969), *Ator* (1968-1979), and *Shvila* (1977-1979) were the other titles that emerged. There exists no record of any other Assyrian periodicals in Iran. All of these periodicals were published in Tehran, though all of the editors, publishers, and writers had come from northwest Iran. On the eve of the Islamic Revolution, two Assyrian periodicals were circulating in Tehran. The first was *Ator* and the second was *Shvila*. However, the chaos of the revolution brought an end to these and at least a hiatus

to many far more firmly based Iranian newspapers and magazines.

The 1960s and 1970s also saw a revival of Assyrian culture and society in Teheran. This included the institution of clubs, a school (Shoshan/Susan), theater groups, musical performances, and the publication of books and periodicals. In addition the instrumental Assyrian Youth Educational Committee of Tehran (*Sita Sapreta Atureta d-Teheran*) was formed along with other groups, such as the Graduate Assyrian Association of Tehran, which initiated and ran cultural affairs in a distinctly secular but strongly ethnic direction. The Tehran-based periodicals circulated in other towns as well including Abadan (where a large and wealthy Assyrian community worked in petroleum related professions) Urmiyah, Kermanshah, and Tabriz. Assyrian neo-Aramaic, which had been developed and strengthened in Urmiyah, had become the standard language of intellectual activity. This was true despite the fact that Persian was becoming more and more popular among the youth after the institution of universal Persian language education since 1934.

An important factor working against the retention of Assyrian neo-Aramaic was the difficulty in maintaining language schools. The Iranian government saw no responsibility toward minority languages. It only allowed private instruction in select languages that formed the basis of separate officially tolerated religions (Assyrians, Armenians, Jews, and Zoroastrians). Since the government did not provide any financial support for language study, the chief burden fell on each community. The communities ran part-time schools at churches or clubs. Had there been any encouragement of Aramaic at any period at the university level, perhaps the language might have progressed. Year after year,

however, even after the acquisition of a printing press from India in 1948, the number of Assyrian language books (including poetry, history, and essays) declined due to lack of readership. Thus the history of the community, when preserved, turned increasingly to materials written in Persian or translated into Persian, by intellectuals whose knowledge of Persian literature and culture had begun to exceed that of their own culture. It is true that during the 1950s increased interest in ancient Assyrian literature led to adaptations of this material into the vernacular. Adday Alkhas (1897-1959), for example, put *Gilgamesh* into vernacular Assyrian. William Daniel (1903-1988) also introduced a modern epic, *The Great Kateena*, in vernacular verse. Yet the latter was made available on audiotape to accommodate reduced Aramaic literacy among the potential audience.

The second factor that reduced opportunity for the propagation of Assyrian neo-Aramaic was the emptying out of Assyrian villages, the main venue for language preservation and teaching. The emptying of the villages together with rapid urbanization of an educated and educationally appreciative population, led to the breakdown of compact population centers. Constant insecurity for Christians, especially from Kurdish marauders, drove many people to the city of Urmiyah. Families then moved to Tehran, and although they made attempts to live near each other or close to their churches, all neighborhoods contained a majority of Persian speakers. Children who grew up speaking their mother tongue at home gained greater proficiency and vocabulary in Persian once in school. They mixed in Persian words when speaking Assyrian, especially for technical terms that did not exist in Assyrian (i.e. radio, television, etc.).

The Assyrian Youth Educational Committee of Tehran made a strong effort to create such new vocabulary as technical advancement required, but with limited effect.

Such factors led to the adoption of bilingual periodicals after World War II. With the exception of the literary magazine *Gilgamesh*, all others contained both Assyrian and Persian sections. *Ator*, edited by Dr. Wilson Bet Mansour, also included an English section after the collapse of Urmiah's Assyrian base and the growth of a large Assyrian diaspora in Europe and the United States. *Ator* slowly began to circulate internationally and, as the Assyrians of Iran created an international Assyrian organization in 1968 (the Assyrian Universal Alliance), *Ator* acted in part as the voice of that international organization.

### **THE SHORT PUBLICATION LIFE OF THE ASSYRIAN PRESS**

The longest continuously published Assyrian periodical continues to be *Zahrira d-Bahra (Sixty-Nine Years)*, a monthly backed by the American missionary effort based in Urmiah. The secular *Assyrian Star* (1952 to present), the second longest continuous publication, serves as the official publication of the Assyrian American National Federation. In both cases, the periodicals outlasted the lifetimes of their original editors and publishers. The other serial publications that have been published continuously and under different editors are the church publications. Institutional support, therefore, is critical for passing a publication on to succeeding editorial staff. Yet, among Middle East minorities in general, religious institutions are the only ones that enjoy the legal protections necessary for continuity. With few exceptions, other Assyrian periodicals

worldwide have been the work of one man, sometimes together with a group of friends.<sup>23</sup> Once the individual passes away or ceases publishing due to emigration, the periodical frequently comes to an end as well. Such was the case with Naoum Faik's widely read *Beth Nahrain (The Assyrian Paper)* (1916-1930), which ended with his death.

This phenomenon of the fate of newspapers and magazines being tied to the fate of their editors and publishers is not confined to the Assyrians and has also been seen in other institutionally weak environments (i.e., pre-Soviet Central Asia, Iran, and Afghanistan). Indeed, as with any periodical press, the publisher and/or editor's political point of view can also serve as a catalyst for a political party or inclination. In more politically and economically mature environments, the equation between a political party and a periodical is less direct and more flexible.

The explanation for short-lived periodicals, however, does not lie simply in weak institutions. In Iran it is also tied to the legal framework underlying the entire picture of the press as well as the financial underpinnings of periodical publication. Since there is no financial gain in the publication of many minority newspapers, there is that much less incentive to continue publication in the absence of personal devotion, especially in light of legal hurdles.

The case of *Ishtar* is instructive, especially because much information is available about its legal and financial framework, its rise, production, and fall. Dr. Sargon Bet Oshana, *Ishtar's* publisher and one of the two men critical to its success, has passed away. The other man critical to the publication's success, editor Rabi Issa Benyamin is still available for interviews. He has participated in almost every effort of

Assyrian Iranians to advance culturally since World War II. Benyamin has also generously handed over his complete set of the periodical (presented to him when he left Iran) to the Harvard College Library for preservation.

## CONCLUSIONS

*Ishtar's* publication history allows for a summary examination of Assyrian hopes that Iran would emerge from the 1979 revolution to grant minorities cultural rights that might even be supported by the state, as was the case in the former Soviet Union. Assyrians in the USSR survived despite purges and restrictions, because they were a recognized Soviet nationality. However, as the grip of the Shi'a establishment grew more oppressive, religious minorities began to lose even the communal cultural rights that they had enjoyed under the Pahlavi Regime. The ascendance of the Islamic Revolution has proven near fatal to the Assyrians, who—unlike Armenians and Jews—have never benefited from a level of outside support and recognition that would draw attention to the problems they face in Muslim-dominant states.

The situation of the Assyrians in Iran during the early 1980s has an eerie resemblance with that of the Assyrians in Iraq since 2003. Opposed to Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime, yet also allowed to conduct their religiously based institutions in an apolitical manner,

Christians in general and Assyrians in particular have come under heavy attack in Iraq since 2004. While some of the barbarity, such as kidnappings for ransom, is criminally motivated, the attacks on churches and priests as well as the beheadings and crucifixions are the result of rabid Islamist zeal. With Iranian inspired Shi'as rising to power in Basra and Baghdad, Assyrians are increasingly being forced into patterns similar to Iran (i.e., the forced practice of hijab, restrictions on employment, and intimidation of immigration). If Iraq witnesses the same rate of decrease that has occurred among the Assyrian population in Iran, then the fate of Assyrians in Iraq is sealed. The largest and most compact Assyrian population of the Middle East—the last speakers of the oldest continuously written and spoken language of the region—may be no more.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The word *ishtar* comes from the name of an ancient Assyro-Babylonian goddess of light, fertility, and rebirth. See especially *Riches Hidden in Secret Places: Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Memory of Thorkild Jacobsen* / edited by Tzvi Abusch

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(Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Eliz Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Ali Granmayer, "Minorities and Press in Post-Revolutionary Iran," in Tudor Parfitt

and Yulia Egorova (eds.), *Jews, Muslims and Mass Media: Mediating the 'Other'* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), pp. 55-67.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of this newspaper as the community became a victim of Stalinist purges, see Eden Naby, "Les Assyriens d'Union soviétique," *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique*, Vol. 16, No. 3-4 (1975). For a summary of the Assyrian periodical press world wide, see Gabriele Yonan, *Journalismus bei den Assyriern: ein Überblick von seinen Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Augsburg: Zentralverband der Assyrischen Vereinigungen in Deutschland und Mitteleuropa, 1985).

<sup>5</sup> Eden Naby, "World War I and the Displacement of Iranian Assyrians in Azerbaijan" (forthcoming).

<sup>6</sup> *Varliq*, published in Tehran by a group calling itself *Afkari-e Goruh-e Farhang/Adabi Anjuman-e Azarbaijan* (The Ideas of the Group of Culture and Literature Committee of Azarbaijan), was a monthly established directly after the fall of the monarchy. It then became a quarterly and was published irregularly until at least 1997. It soon became a "one man show," and it is not clear whether its publication continues. Like other Assyrian periodicals, it was not published from Tabriz, the Azeri cultural base in Iran, but rather from Tehran. Like many of the Assyrian periodicals, it was bilingual, written both in Azeri Turkic and in Persian.

<sup>7</sup> Dominique Carnoy, "Chrétientés de la République islamique," *Les cahiers de l'Orient*, No. 48 (1997), pp. 85-91. Estimates of Iran's population prior to the 1956 census are available at the Utrecht University Library's Iran website, <http://www.library.uu.nl/wesp/populstat/Asia/iranc.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> *Ishtar*, No. 1, 1 Tishrin II (October 3, 1981), p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> This directive affected the several minority language schools run by Assyrians, Jews, and Armenians and signaled the end of their independently-run community existence by regulating personnel and introducing Muslim principals; *Ishtar*, No. 3, 29 Tishrin II (Oct 31, 1981), p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> For details on the comparative repercussions of such action in the minority communities, see Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran*, pp. 76-84. Sanasarian's greater familiarity with Armenian Iranians and her consultation of Armenian written sources allows her to understand the Armenian situation in greater detail than that of other minorities.

<sup>11</sup> One of the worst massacres of WWI took place in Goegtapa. By the late 1940s, Goegtapa already had a substantial Shi'a and Sunni population with only a few Christian households remaining. Following the Islamic Revolution, the town's Christian population was lost. For demographic information in the late 1940s, see *Farhang-e joghrafiyai-ye iran*, Vol. 4 (1330/1951-1952) p. 470.

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the impetus and result of the establishment of these schools for the Jews of Iran, see Faryar Nikbakht, "As with Moses in Egypt: Alliance Israelite Universelle Schools in Iran," in Houman Sarshar (ed.), *Esther's Children: A Portrait of Iranian Jews* (Beverly Hills, CA: Center for Iranian Jewish Oral History, 2002), pp. 200-12.

<sup>13</sup> The author is grateful to Houchang Chahabi for identifying this reference; Preliminary documents: agenda, draft resolutions, and reports of the Inter-Parliamentary Union's 68th Conference,

Havana, Cuba (Geneva: Secretariat of the Union, September 1981).

<sup>14</sup> In the Assyrian communities throughout the Middle East—especially in Iran and Iraq—the attraction of the Soviet Union lay in the promise of minority rights as represented by Soviet nationality policy. Within the Soviet Union, Assyrians—although scattered from Leningrad/St. Petersburg to Samarkand—enjoyed recognition as one of the 100 nationality languages.

<sup>15</sup> For a summary of Assyrian representation in the Majlis, see Homer Ashurian, “Iraniyan-e Ashuri: Mardomi ke bayad as now shenakht,” *Javanan*, No. 901 (2004), p. 58-59.

<sup>16</sup>

<http://www.calligram.com/New/new.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Rudolf Macuch, *Geschichte der spät- und neusyrischen Literatur* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1976), p. 123.

<sup>18</sup> Private communication from Mirza Aurahim’s grand-nephew, March, 26, 2005.

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion on Assyrians in the former Soviet Union, see Naby, “Les Assyriens d’Union soviétique.”

<sup>20</sup> Browne affirms this statement but makes other mistakes, as discussed in Naby, “World War I and the Displacement of Iranian Assyrians in Azarbaijan.” Jan Rypka describes both the early periodical press and confirms 1851 as the date of the establishment of the Persian language periodical press, two years *after* the Assyrian publication *History of Iranian Literature*. (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1968), p. 338.

<sup>21</sup> For a discussion of this period and the Assyrian press, see Naby “The Assyrians of Iran: Reunification of a ‘Millat,’ 1906-1914,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 8 (1977), pp. 237-49.

<sup>22</sup> In 1946, the first “periodic” circulation of an Assyrian publication since 1918 appeared in Tehran. It was a calendar and almanac called *Surgada Umtanaya*. See Yonan, *Journalismus bei den Assyrern*, p. 61, who suggests a later date (1954) for the commencement of this effort.