



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Arabic and Aramaic in Iraq: Language and Syriac Christian Commitment to the Arab Nationalist Project (1920-1950)

Baarda, T.C.

Citation

Baarda, T. C. (2020, January 8). *Arabic and Aramaic in Iraq: Language and Syriac Christian Commitment to the Arab Nationalist Project (1920-1950)*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/82480>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/82480>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/82480> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Baarda, T.C.

Title: Arabic and Aramaic in Iraq: Language and Syriac Christian Commitment to the Arab Nationalist Project (1920-1950)

Issue Date: 2020-01-08

Conclusion

At the beginning of this dissertation, I quoted Faisal I, the first King of Iraq, saying that there is no difference between Muslims, Jews, and Christians when it comes to patriotism. This idea was certainly part of official Arab nationalist ideology in Iraq in the first decades of the modern state. The question whether this statement holds up to the experience of the Syriac Christians of Iraq has been a common thread throughout the dissertation. The various groups of Syriac Christians showed highly diverging ways of engaging with Iraqi Arab nationalism and, for that reason, Faisal's ideal was not applicable to all of them to the same extent. The question is not simply whether Christians could participate in Iraqi patriotism, but rather under what conditions. As some of these conditions boil down to assimilation, the question is equally whether and why the Christians wanted to fall under this wing. Identification and language use are the keys that I have used to answer this question. This general conclusion thus consists of three parts. First, I discuss the groups of Syriac Christians in Iraq that can be distinguished, according to the names they used for themselves, at which levels these groups existed, and with whom they cooperated. Second, I discuss language use and the discourse around it. Both parts come together in my third point of discussion, which concerns the levels of commitment of the Syriac Christians to Iraqi Arab nationalism, or alternatives to it.

Groups and identification

In the previous four chapters, I have discussed four types of sources created by authors and other actors that come with similar types of identification and language use. Looking at explicit self-identification,

we can reduce this number to three groups. First, the Assyrians; second, the Chaldeans, Syriac Catholic, and Syriac Orthodox; and third, the “secularist” Syriac Christians—that is, those who did not identify using their religious background. The first group was discussed in Chapter 3, the second group in Chapters 2 and 4, and the third group in Chapter 5. The reason why I conflated the categories of Chapters 2 and 4 into one group is that while the language use of the manuscripts and the religious journals respectively is completely different, the style of identification is the same: the *tāʾifa*, limited and bound together by the ecclesiastical boundaries of the group, is the basic means of identification as a group.

The Assyrians form the first group. This group consists of East Syriac Christians who originated in the Hakkari mountains and Urmia plains and arrived in Iraq as refugees at the end of World War I. These Christians belonged in majority to the Assyrian Church of the East, and in minority to the Chaldean Catholic Church and to Protestant groups. My analysis excludes any of the members of the Assyrian Church of the East who were already in Iraq before World War I, who reportedly also identified as Assyrians. Since I have not found sources about their identification or language use, it is not possible to tell whether their identification shows the same features. Neither have I found sources concerning Chaldeans who identified as Assyrians—the Chaldeans in this dissertation all belong to the second group. The identification as Assyrian of this group was brought from the place they came from, where Assyrianism originated and was best developed. Assyrianism had developed within the Ottoman Empire into a national or ethnic form of identification, accompanied by terminology such as “race” and “nation” in English, and not limited to a single religious group because of the inclusion of Catholics and Protestants apart from the Church of the East. The Iraqi sources that I have used do not explicitly express ethnic or national identifications, but other texts from and about the Assyrians allow us to assume the presence of an ethnic or national identification. The fact that this group identified as Assyrians, without any exception, is however very clear from my sources. In Chapter 5, we saw that the Syriac Orthodox Rafāʾil Buṭṭī, just like Nematallah Denno as the director of his communal school in Mosul, identified as Assyrian in the early years after World War I. Identification as Assyrian was common among West Syriac Christians

in the beginning of the twentieth century, and Rafāʿil Buṭṭī and Nematallah Denno were influenced by that. However, I have not found evidence that Assyrian identification among West Syriac Christians persisted after the 1920s, let alone evidence of mutual solidarity or collaboration between the West and East Syriac Christians in Iraq. There are no signs either that the Assyrians from the Urmia and Hakkari regions considered the other Christians to be part of their group.

The second group is formed by Chaldean, Syriac Catholic, and Syriac Orthodox Christians who, separately from each other, primarily identified with the churches they belonged to. The terminology connected to this identification in Arabic is usually *ṭāʿifa*, and sometimes *milla* (the Arabic equivalent of *millet*). In Syriac the word *umtho* is used to refer to the Syriac Orthodox. I have characterized their identification as “*millet*-style identification,” indicating a certain continuation of the Ottoman *millet* practice with a role of religious boundaries and leadership in society. By law, religious groups had few special rights, limited to non-Muslim religious courts for family law, but the fact that this type of identification is so prominent points to a continuation of the *millet* practice in terms of social relations. Identification with a religious group is to be expected in manuscripts, since they were produced in ecclesial contexts, but the same phenomenon is visible in the journals *al-Najm* and (*Lisān*) *al-Mashriq*, even in the contexts of social affairs. There are no signs that any of these *ṭāʿifa*-s tried to reach out to the other Syriac Christians or considered them to belong together—rather, this type of identification appears to keep the different Syriac Christian groups apart from each other. There is one exception to this: in the late 1940s, the Syriac Orthodox in (*Lisān*) *al-Mashriq* occasionally used the word *umma* (nation) to refer to *al-Suryān* (“the Syrians”), and at one point this nation is explicitly described as including the other Syriac Christians—including the East Syriac Christians—as well.

The third group contains Syriac Christian secularists from all denominations except the Assyrian Church of the East. In their journalist activities, their religious identities did not seem to play any role at all. The world of *ṭāʿifa*-s in which they lived was not foreign to them: all three actors had religious backgrounds and they—or their family in the case of Paulina Ḥassūn—were educated in church-sponsored institutions. However, they crossed the boundaries of their respec-

tive *ṭāʿifa*-s and did not use them for identification in their public writings. Rafāʿil Buṭṭī, who wanted to get rid of the influence of religion in society and education, was considered a danger for the power of the *ṭāʿifa*-s and for this reason he occasionally came into conflict with clergy. Overall, however, it seems that Rafāʿil Buṭṭī was satisfied with the way Iraqi society was formally organized, without many special rules for members of religious groups, but still despised the informal role of religion in society.

One of the conclusions must be that there was no commonly accepted way to refer to all Syriac Christians altogether. With the exception of the “Syriac *umma*” of the Syriac Orthodox at the end of the 1940s, all actors considered their group to be only a subset of what I have defined as “Syriac Christians.” The situation could have been different if Assyrianism had caught on in Iraq. Some Syriac Orthodox Christians used to identify as Assyrian in the early 1920s, and if they had continued doing so this may have resulted into a well-established form of *umthonoyutho* or unity discourse. It is probable that the political unrest concerning the Assyrians from the Hakkari and Urmia regions made this impossible. The negative reputation of the Assyrians deterred the other Syriac Christians from following them, making the unifying value of Assyrianism lose momentum.

Arabic and its alternatives

Arabic and Aramaic were used by members of all above-mentioned groups, but it is the differences in usage that interest us here. People preferred to use different languages for different purposes. The spoken language does not always correspond to the preferred language for formal purposes, and the language that is used in manuscripts may again be different. The combination of these native languages and preferences for formal usage is different for each of the above-mentioned groups, and reflects their way of looking at themselves and at Iraqi society at large. Arabic and Aramaic, the latter in the form of Classical Syriac and Neo-Aramaic, show differences in usage between their appearances in traditional, “pre-*nahḍa*” environments, and modern, “post-*nahḍa*” settings.

All in all, Arabic had the best position. It was the spoken language of part of the Christians of all denominations except for the As-

syrian Church of the East, and almost completely so in larger cities such as Mosul and Baghdad. But Arabic especially enjoyed the status as the preferred language for formal purposes for most, but not all, Syriac Christians. This preference was best pronounced by the secular intellectuals, and among them Anastās al-Karmilī and Rafāʿil Buṭṭī are widely renowned outside Christian circles for their role in the advancement of this language: Anastās al-Karmilī for his contribution to Arabic linguistics, and Rafāʿil Buṭṭī for his efforts to establish Arabic-language journalism in Iraq. But the Chaldean and Syriac Orthodox authors of the second group showed equal esteem for the language, and crucially, the fact that they were writing for an audience within their own groups does not change that. The Chaldeans even present the Arabic language as “theirs,” and while the Syriac Orthodox do not explicitly say that Arabic belonged to them, they treat the language with high esteem. All these authors show proof of their aptitude to use Arabic by the refinedness of their language, characterized by proper grammar, a rich vocabulary and the use of phrases from canonical classical literature, including Islamic texts. The Assyrians discussed in this dissertation clearly preferred Neo-Aramaic and Classical Syriac, also for formal purposes, but Arabic was recognized as the language of the country and was taught in Assyrian schools even before this was obliged by the government. Nevertheless, especially in the early decades after World War I, the Assyrians do not show any appreciation of the Arabic language, let alone ownership.

Aramaic, in the form of Classical Syriac and Neo-Aramaic, was also used as a formal language, but on a far smaller scale. Classical Syriac and Neo-Aramaic stood next to each other and were normally considered variants of the same language: in general, the same words were used to refer to the classical and the colloquial languages. On the whole, a similar phenomenon is visible as with Arabic: various actors posited a form of Aramaic as the preferred language for usage in formal contexts; hence, as a conscious *alternative* to Arabic. This is the case for the Assyrians, who exclusively used Aramaic in their publications. For most of the actors, this was partly because they had not grown up in an Arabic-speaking environment and were simply new to this language and because the future of the Assyrians in Iraq was far from certain, but it should also be seen in the light of their deliberate endeavors to preserve knowledge of Classical Syriac and Swadaya

Neo-Aramaic for the next generation through the publication of language learning aids and language lessons in the Assyrian schools. For the Syriac Orthodox manuscript scribes in Bartallah, Classical Syriac functioned as an alternative to Standard Arabic: the sudden absence of Arabic and Garshuni after World War I indicates a conscious choice, and the way in which they used Classical Syriac made it suitable for (limited) new, creative texts. This determination to use Classical Syriac is in line with the twentieth-century endeavors to revive Classical Syriac as a secular language next to its continued usage for religious purposes. Apart from that, however, Classical Syriac was limited to the religious domain. In addition to that, while the formal, modern usage of Arabic is the same for all Syriac Christians who engaged in it, this is not the case for Aramaic: Neo-Aramaic writing is only attested for the Assyrians, while only the Syriac Orthodox wrote creative texts in Classical Syriac. This fragmentation—the existence of a writing tradition for both vernacular and classical variants of Aramaic, together with their different ways of usage of these variants—in addition to the much smaller number of speakers, made that Aramaic had a weaker position than Arabic. In the case of the Syriac Orthodox, the position of Aramaic was even further weakened, because it stood next to the formal use of Arabic, which was widespread in their circles—Syriac was only used in the purely religious domains.

The usage of Arabic and Aramaic laid out above are forms of modern, conscious and consistent usage of these languages. For Arabic, this is the result of the *nahḏa* or Arabic renaissance, which made it possible that, by the end of the nineteenth century, Christians and Jews used Standard Arabic in the same way as Muslims did. For Classical Syriac and Neo-Aramaic, it is likely that the parallel of Arabic influenced the way in which these languages were used, too. In Chapter 2, however, we have seen numerous examples of more traditional language use. This includes the custom of mixing Arabic and Classical Syriac within the same manuscript, the writing of colloquial Arabic, and especially the use of Arabic Garshuni (Arabic in Syriac script). Absent in modern mediums of publications, including journals and books, the language of manuscripts and private letters show that these traditional practices were far from extinct. This “pre-*nahḏa*” language use only occurred with the authors in the second group, and existed next to full-fledged standard use of the respective language elsewhere

within the same denominations. Since it is unclear how conscious the users of “pre-*nahḏa*” language were in their habits, it is impossible to assert that they did so as a means of identification. The use of Garshuni by various Syriac Christians in Iraq, often explained as a way of preserving Syriac identity, can therefore not be interpreted as such. If at all a way of identifying, use of Garshuni is weaker than original use of “proper” Classical Syriac.

Despite the potentially uniting powers of Aramaic, with which all Syriac Christians had a connection, the differences in *usage* of this language were too large. Even if the hegemony of Arabic could have been overcome, the alternative of Aramaic would not have been readily available. In those cases where Syriac Christians considered themselves to be part of one group—we saw this for the common Assyrian identification in the early 1920s and for the discourse about an all-encompassing “Syriac nation” at the end of the 1940s—the factor of language could not be overcome. For those who were willing to embrace an Arab identification, however, Arabic was ready and waiting for them.

Arab nationalism and its alternatives

The Syriac Christians had different and sometimes opposing views about their position in Iraq, boiling down to two interrelated aspects: the extent to which they embraced the state of Iraq, and the possible existence of any alternative form of national identification and nationalism. Concerning Iraq, their opinion ranged from a complete lack of interest in the state to an all-encompassing genuine appropriation of Iraqi Arab nationalism. Alternative forms of national identification or nationalism were Assyrianism, which appears to have been omnipresent among the Syriac Christians from the Hakkari and Urmia regions, and “Syriacism,” or a national or ethnic identification as “Syriac.” In both cases it is questionable to which extent these identifications can be interpreted as forms of nationalism.

An extremely strong embrace of Arab nationalism is visible in the Chaldean journal *al-Najm*, and in the writings, memoirs and actions of the Syriac Orthodox Rafāʿil Buṭṭī. In both cases, we see full commitment to the Arabic language, but also an identification as Arab. In the Chaldean case, the identification as Arab is only explicitly indicated at

a few places, while Rafāʿil Buṭṭī leaves absolutely no doubt that he is an Arab, and even traces his family background to the pre-Islamic Arab Lakhmids. While the Chaldeans may have seen themselves as Arabized, Rafāʿil Buṭṭī was convinced that he was a “real” Arab. Equally interesting is the fact that both opted for the hardline, right-wing current of Arab nationalism, connected to the *Ḥizb al-ikhāʿ al-waṭanī*, instead of a more moderate variant, such as the one represented by the *al-Ahālī* movement. This form of Arab nationalism was not very tolerant towards non-Arab citizens. Rafāʿil Buṭṭī went the furthest in this, as he—in line with the ideology of this party—expected from all inhabitants of Iraq to Arabize, that is, to assimilate, or else that they leave the country. While this theoretically left the door open for all Iraqis through Arabization, it came with a harsh attitude against the Assyrians. The Chaldean elite was less explicit in what they exactly meant with their endorsement of the *Ḥizb al-ikhāʿ al-waṭanī*, and they did not write anything about the Assyrians, either. The fact that their endorsement came shortly before the Simele massacre, when anti-Assyrian sentiments were at a peak, and that they then kept silent after the Simele massacre in 1933 and honored the new King instead is telling. While this may be interpreted as an exaggeration on purpose in support of Arab nationalism to prevent anti-Assyrian sentiments from evolving into generic anti-Christian sentiments, overall, the Chaldean support of Arab nationalism must be interpreted as representing a genuine belief in this system to the advancement of the Chaldean case.

A middle course was steered by the Syriac Orthodox of (*Lisān*) *al-Mashriq*, and possibly also by the Syriac Catholic elite. They endorsed the state and its institutions without an explicit support of Arab nationalism, let alone of a strict variant of it. It is not clear whether they did so because they did not consider themselves to fit into the definition of Arab, hence having to recourse to the more tolerant “Iraqist” solution as represented by the *al-Ahālī*, movement, or because they simply did not see any reason to support a particular political current. The envisioning of a Syriac nation in Syriac Orthodox circles at the end of the 1940s did not translate in any apparent political activity in Iraq, and as a potential alternative to Arab nationalism it did not materialize. Given their generally good relationship with the government, this position was apparently seen as acceptable. The smaller

sizes of the Syriac Orthodox and Syriac Catholic churches also made that their political views were much less of influence. In this way, these two churches managed—like the Chaldean Catholic Church—to keep their traditional structures relevant. Together, they kept the Ottoman *millet* practice intact to a great extent.

Outright rejection of the Iraqi state is often associated with the Assyrians, but this is only partly true. With his school in Mosul, Joseph de Kelaita shows that he was already preparing the Assyrian youth for a long-term stay in Iraq in the beginning of the 1920s. The Protestant clergy connected to the Assyrian school in Baghdad even expressed their loyalty to Iraq in a letter to the Protestant missionaries. Political Assyrian nationalism was absent from the documents that I came across in my research. The willingness of the Assyrians to adjust to the new situation should therefore not be underestimated. Yet, their way of identification remained of an essentially different nature than that of the other Syriac Christians.

An essential difference between the Arab nationalism of Rafāʿil Buṭṭī on the one hand and that of the Chaldean clergy on the other is that for the Chaldeans, Arab nationalism came on top of their social identification as a *ṭāʿifa*. For Rafāʿil Buṭṭī this was irrelevant. The example of the Chaldeans makes clear that there was no obstruction in Arab nationalism per se to hold on to these traditional, pre-nation-state, forms of identification as long as it came with identification as Arab and absolute loyalty to the Iraqi state. In a sense, the Chaldeans opted for the best of two worlds: their church could retain its relevance for worldly affairs thanks to their managerial role in the Chaldean *ṭāʿifa*, while at the same time they could maintain a good relationship with the state. The same is true for language. While Arabic formed an integral part of Arab nationalism and there is no way that the Chaldeans could have participated in Arab nationalism without committing themselves to the Arabic language, there was no obstruction for the Chaldeans to keep using Aramaic next to it: Classical Syriac in church, in manuscripts, and occasionally in their journal in the context of old texts, and Neo-Aramaic as a spoken language for many. The opposite is also possible. The Syriac Orthodox in (*Lisān al-Mashriq*) showed no commitment to Arab nationalism, and even seemed to have their primary identification with a Syriac nation. The fact that they held the Arabic language in high esteem at the same time

and used it as their own was not perceived as a contradiction. Arabic was therefore a foundational ingredient of Arab nationalism, but speaking Arabic did not automatically translate into taking part in it.

* * *

Having come to the end of this dissertation, it is time to go back to the beginning. Was King Faisal right by saying that religion does not matter in Iraqi patriotism? In a way, he was. Even the strictest forms of Arab nationalism allowed for the inclusion of Christians, who, not as “minorities” in the Western sense of the word but as *ṭāʾifa*-s, even enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy. Holding on to certain cultural aspects of Syriac Christianity, such as the Classical Syriac language, was no obstacle either. Arab nationalism however equally defined the limits for Christians. The Assyrian position, which did not necessarily reject integration into Iraq but certainly rejected assimilation as Arabs, was unacceptable for Arab nationalists. This, combined with a rather uncompromising attitude of some nationalist Assyrians, eventually caused an inevitable clash.

The question remains, however, if the Syriac Christians who *did* feel at home under the wing of the Iraqi Arab state were indeed treated in the same way as their fellow Muslim citizens. There is enough evidence for the existence of generic anti-Christian sentiments during the time of the Simele massacre to say that this equal treatment of Arab Syriac Christians had its limits. The continuation of the traditional *millet* practice in Iraq—as a mentality, to speak with Sami Zubaida—next to the modern citizenship ideal, allowed the churches to retain their relevance in the new Iraqi society. However, it also meant that the citizenship ideal as expressed by Faisal and many Syriac Christian authors was curbed by traditional patterns, in which religious differences were more important than they were supposed to be.