



Chaldeans in the United States: Between the Need for Political Activism and the Problem of Self-designated “leaders”

Ghassan Shathaya

In a letter to the chairman of the Chaldean Federation of America, Mr. Saad Marouf, the editor-in-chief of “Umtha Kaldaitha”, Mr. Ghassan Shathaya, raised several issues of importance to our Chaldean community in the United States. All in an effort to prioritize the agenda of our Chaldean activists and streamline their efforts towards helping our people in Iraq. It also raised the question about the activities of certain individuals in Detroit area who are claiming the status of “Chaldean representatives”. Individuals who in addition to lacking the political knowledge, refuse to fully commit themselves to the Chaldean cause and do what it takes of presenting and defending the Chaldean agenda whether to US officials or members of other Iraqi political groups. Here is the full text of the letter:



Dear Mr. Saad Marouf,

Please, find enclosed a copy of my letter to the US State Department official you have met recently during your visit to Washington, DC to discuss Chaldean refugees issues.

I am hoping that the content of the letter will clarify many Chaldean issues that you might not be aware of. It attempts to set the political agenda and aspirations of our Chaldean people. Goals, I am sure the majority of our people will fully agree with me on. I am also hoping that this letter will send a message to all Chaldean activists in the Detroit area not to shy away from engaging themselves in the political struggle of our people, and to those who don't want to get involved in political matters to step aside and let those who want to work do their job for the best interests of our people.

It's unfortunate that there seems to be a class of “meeting strugglers” in the area of Detroit where self proclaimed leaders of the Chaldeans meet and discuss issues among themselves that do not go beyond the walls of the rooms of their meeting places. Those individuals are claiming political representation when the majority has simplistic and shallow understanding of the challenges facing our Chaldean nation. And to add insult to injury, those individuals simply refuse to take their case and claims with US officials, whether representatives of the State Department or Congressmen and Senators of the State of Michigan. They refuse to meet and discuss Chaldean concerns and aspirations with members of the Iraqi Opposition and even refuse to discuss them with members of the Iraqi government that's engaged in variety of oppressive measures against our Chaldean people. Saying that, those self-proclaimed leaders seem to enjoy meeting with Assyrian political representatives, and lately mainly to get their sponsorship and recognition as THE “representatives of Chaldeans”!! In other words, to meet with Assyrians, and mainly to satisfy one's own selfish and egotistic agenda. An “easier and less costly” task compared to dealing with the political professionals of the State Department and representatives of Iraqi groups.

It's a well known fact that our Chaldean national rights will not be secured through the Assyrians, for they're “not the oppressors” of those rights that someone need to spend so much time and effort in meeting with them. Those rights must be secured by meeting with those who have the final say and could make the final impact on our Chaldean people's interests i.e. the representatives of Arab and Kurdish groups.

Saying that, there's a difference in having those Assyrian groups meet with Chaldean activists who are fully aware of the activities and agenda of Assyrianism political groups as well as the political map of Iraq, and having them meet with incompetent individuals that are being used by those groups to continue their self proclaimed representation of all the Christians of Iraq. Also, seeking unity between our Assyrian and Chaldean people should not be confused with having Assyrianism political groups claim representation of Chaldean interests or attempt to create “alternative and acceptable” Chaldean “leaders” whom they could “deal and wheel” with according to their own political agenda and the “personal goals” of those “leaders”.

In my many years of tireless work to achieve our Chaldean people national rights, I have been subjected to a long list of personal attacks and an aggressive campaign to distort and discredit my positions. Attacks and ill campaign by certain Assyrianism political groups who saw my defense of Chaldean interests as a threat to their own agenda of presenting the Chaldeans as a religious sect of their “Assyrian nation”, and hence claim their representation. An ill-campaign that's targeting, worldwide, Chaldean political activists who are seeking and working towards Chaldean national awakening. In Iraq, Europe, Australia, Canada, and the United States, Chaldean activists are being portrayed by Assyrianism supporters as either “extremists”, “agents of the Chaldean church”, “agents of the Iraqi government” or even “agents of the Kurds”. Worse as “enemies of the Assyrian nation who are working to divide it into Chaldean and Assyrian sections”, as if having a pride in one's Chaldean heritage is a direct threat to those claiming an Assyrian one.

While such attacks could be understood and expected against any individual refusing to bargain over the interests of his nation, it's truly disappointing to

see certain members of the Chaldean Federation repeating such attacks, and this time mainly to discredit any individual who might “threaten” their self perceived “leadership” of the Chaldeans.

Recently, certain Assyrianism political groups have changed tactics by claiming “inclusiveness and respect for the Chaldean name”, in a political ploy intended to stop the Chaldean national awakening or at least slow it down. Acts that have nothing to do with their public claims about the “unity of Assyrian and Chaldean people” but rather to serve their own shortsighted “political party” agenda. A leader of one of those groups met recently in Detroit with certain Chaldean activists to inform them of the great changes of political thinking in his party towards the Chaldeans, only to repeat his old claims of “Chaldeans are a religious sect belonging to the Assyrian nation” with American and European media as soon as his feet left Detroit.

Finally, I am hoping that you share my thoughts with other members of the Executive Committee of the Chaldean Federation and hope that you and other leaders of our Chaldean community in Detroit look at Chaldean political activists, like myself, as an asset for our Chaldean people and provide them with all the help needed to do their best for the benefit of our Chaldean nation. I am also hoping, that in the future, you direct the enquiries of the representatives of the US government, as well as others, to those in our Chaldean community who are most equipped and qualified to answer their questions. Thank you and God bless,

Extracts of Mr. Shathaya's letter to the US State Department - Iraq Desk sent on 21 October 2002:

(. ethnically speaking Chaldeans, Assyrians, and Syriacs are all of the same ethnic ancestry of the native people of Mesopotamia....

..Now, to close this letter, here is what I could see as a common agenda that both the US State Department and Chaldean activists could work on:

1. Establishing contacts with Chaldean political activists in the United States and in northern Iraq. All so as to gain their support and secure their participation in the new Iraq which President Bush and the Congress is hoping to establish after the removal of Saddam Hussein. A goal that meet the wishes, hopes, and aspirations of all the Iraqi people to remove that ugly cloud that hangs on their homeland.

2. It's hoped that the US State Department will make it clear, to all, that no group must present itself as a "de facto" representative of the Chaldeans. Lacking political representation (well, no longer that now with the establishment of Chaldean Democratic Party) should not be the excuse for others to use to further their agendas. Assyrian groups, while sharing common interests with the Chaldeans should not be allowed to speak on Chaldeans' behalf.

3. It's also hoped that the US State Department will present, in its reports and press releases, the ethnic make up of Iraq to all other US Officials and media as is the real fact on the ground.... It's truly disappointing to see the level of confusion in the US media (and even among US officials) when it comes to the Christians of Iraq. Some of that confusion is a result of the lack of correct data and conflicting information as could be clearly seen in some of the State Department releases in reference to Iraqi Christians.

4. It's hoped that the US State Department will use its grace with members of Iraqi Opposition to support that the upcoming new constitution of Iraq will secure the national rights of the Chaldeans. Those rights are no different than those demanded by the Arabs and Kurds themselves i.e.

- the right to equal participation in the political decision making of the Iraqi State,
- the right to preserve our unique Chaldean culture, language, and freedom of practicing our Christian faith,
- the right to equitable distribution of Iraq's wealth to all its citizens regardless of their ethnic or religious backgrounds.
- the right to secure a democratic and free future for Iraq so as all its people could live in peace with each other and with their neighbors.