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Shock and Awe: The U.S. Led Invasion and the Struggle of Iraq's Non-Muslim Minorities

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Shock and Awe: The U.S. Led Invasion and the Struggle of Iraq's Non-Muslim Minorities

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Dedication

To Samhar, Johnny Yahya, and Beauty.

Abstract

Shock and Awe: The U.S. Led Invasion and the Struggle of Iraq's Non-Muslim Minorities

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This paper examines the transformations that took place in the discourse of Iraq's non-Muslim minorities after the U.S. led invasion in 2003. By looking at the first three years of the invasion, this research captures the emergence of sectarian identities among Iraq's Mandaeans and Christians. Relying on never-before examined evidence, this paper argues that the invasion caused these minorities to adopt clear sectarian tendencies as a reaction to a political environment that was becoming less secular every day. While all members of these two groups did not share similar political views, most of them started expressing themselves politically based on sectarian grounds.

Table of Contents

Introduction

This thesis looks at the transformations that took place in the discourse of Iraqi ethnic and religious minorities around the time of the U.S. led invasion in 2003. While the terms Mandaean and Christian (Chaldean and Assyrian) can be thought of as religious signifiers, they are simultaneously ethnic signifiers, because in Iraq, like most other places in the world, ethnicity and religion are inseparable. The core of this project will examine how the two minorities, the Mandaeans[1] and the Christians, perceived the new reality of the invasion, their place in the larger Iraqi political sphere and their relationships in relation to each other as well as to the larger ethnic and religious groups, namely the Shi'is, Sunnis, and Kurds. Dealing with fundamental questions such as are they religions or ethnicities? What is their place in the new Iraq? This thesis explores how minorities both inside and outside Iraq used the newly granted freedom of expression as well as the internet to construct what Fanar Haddad calls sectarian identities. Relying on never before accessed digital archival material among other sources, this research

[1] The Mandaeans, or Sabians Mandaeans, also known as al-Sabia'a al-Manda'iyeen in Arabic, or simply just as al-Sabi'a, is a gnostic religion which considers the southern parts of Iraq, especially the marshes in Misan Province, and the southwestern parts of Iran in the Ahvaz Province to be their homeland. They have spread over the years to many cities in Iraq and Iran. (Shirazi, An Encyclopedia of the Islamic Republic 2008). Considered by many to be one of the smallest and most endangered ethnoreligious groups, the Mandaeans number no more than 100,000 individuals worldwide according to the most optimistic estimates. (Shirazi 2008) While the origin of Mandaeanism remains unknown, scholars have speculated about the Zoroastrian origin of the religion. Recent scholarship, however, suggests Mandaeanism to have evolved from an older, extinct religion known as the Kentaean religion sometime in the late antiquity (Häberl 2013). Today's Mandaeans adhere to the teachings of John the Baptist, a fact that won them the misnomer Christians of St. Johan even though they are not in fact Christians. The Mandaean main holy book, the *Ginza Rba*, or the *Big Treasure*, seems to have borrowed from Kentaean and Zoroastrian sources as well as other later sources, which makes it very different from the bible (Bladel 2007). A small number of the Mandaeans in Iran still speak Mandaic, a dialect of eastern Aramaic, most Mandaeans in Iraq and Iran speak Arabic or Farsi. For more information, see Faegheh Shirazi's entry on the Mandaens in the *An Encyclopedia of the Islamic Republic,* 2008, pp. 329-33.

explores the status of these two minorities in a post-war Iraq which was marked by sectarian tensions. .[2]

The single party policy the Ba'ath party applied since the 1960s along with the ruthless persecution of members of Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) deprived non-Muslim minorities in Iraq of all the traditional venues through which they expressed their political leanings. Further restructuring within the pan-Arabist Ba'ath party accompanied Saddam Hussein became president of Iraq. The continuous reliance of the Ba'ath leadership on tribesmen from Tikrit, Saddam Hussein's hometown, further alienated and marginalized non-Titkriti Iraqis. The short period of tolerance towards the ICP effectively ended the year Saddam Hussein came to power as the ICP "formally broke with the regime, most of its senior leadership fled the country" (Tripp 2007, p.210). The Iraq-Iran war in 1980 followed by the Second Gulf War in 1991 saw Hussein's grip on power increase exponentially. Uprisings in the Kurdish controlled areas in the north and Shi'i dominant cities of the south prompted Saddam Hussein to use extreme force to suppress them.

The almost complete censorship of publications and media left the voices of minorities either suppressed or, at best, echoing state propaganda. The instigation of the "faith campaign" in 1994, a move seen by many as Saddam's attempt to highjack the rising religious tide in order to increase government control, was, as the historian Charles Tripp argues, another blow to the Ba'ath 's claim to secularism.[3] The move alienated non-Muslim minorities even further. For the smaller groups such as the Mandaeans, it blurred the distinction especially between Sunni Islam

[2] Occasionally, this study uses the Turkmen as well as other minorities to make certain points of comparison or contrast. Lack of comparable, accessible sources in either Arabic or English forced limitations on including the Turkmen in this study as a third case study.

[3] For a detailed overview of Iraq's modern history and Saddam Hussein's rule, see Charles Tripp's masterful study, *A History of Iraq*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 3rd ed., 2007

and the ruling party. Secular Middle Eastern governments, as Saba Mahmoud argues, consistently strengthen the sense of sectarian identity among minority, as well as majority, populations whenever they tried to "regulate religion" or interreligious interactions. (Mahmoud 2016, p.15) In this sense, pre-invasion Iraq does not deviate much from the norm which Mahmoud identifies. Although it could be argued that the external forces in the form of wars, economic sanctions, etc. further worsened the internal situation in Iraq. The gradual collapse of the socio-political space around minorities deepened their isolation within the country. Rather than remedying their predicament, the U.S. led invasion complicated matters further by consolidating power in the hands of the three largest groups, in particular the Shi'is. The minorities were left wondering what their position was in the new Iraq.

Minorities in Kurdistan did not always fair better. The 1990s saw the Kurds establish autonomy and fight for power. The struggle between warring Kurdish leaders, Masoud Barazani and Jalal Talabani, was only concluded in 1996 when the former asked for Saddam Hussein's help to drive the latter out of Soleimaniya, effectively putting Barazani in control of the fate of all of Kurdistan and parts of Kirkuk. The Kurdish policies of *Kurdifying* Turkmeni and Christian areas, a policy which continued and even intensified after the 2003 invasion, in addition to deteriorating security and economic stagnation, were all factors that drove wedge of sectarian division deeper between minorities and the dominant groups. (Tripp 2007).

The fact that Kurdistan allowed the Christians, Turkmenis, and Yezidis (also known as Izadi) to establish their own political parties between the early 1990s and the early 2000s indicates the sectarian nature of the political atmosphere in Kurdistan. It is possible that the rising sectarian attitudes of Iraq's minorities, especially the non-Muslims, was a response to what

Khalil Osman calls the primordial sectarianism of the Shi'is, Sunnis, and Kurds in Iraq. Osman sees sectarianism to have been a permanent characteristic of the state-making process of Iraq. He attributes this sectarianism to "the failure to resolve the inherent tensions between ubiquitous primordial non-state, including and above all sectarian, ethnic and/or tribal identities… and concepts of unified nationhood and a uniform citizenry inherent in building a nation-state... " (Osman 2002, p.2). This research does not go far back enough to argue for a primordial sectarianism among minorities, it rather notices an increasing trend of sectarianism and intra-sect divisions taking place among non-Muslim minorities during the time of the U.S. led invasion.

Osman's notion of sectarianism relies on the history of authoritarianism in the modern state in Iraq. In this sense, he goes further back than Tripp who links sectarianism in Iraq with Saddam Hussein's rule. For Osman, the "problems of sectarianism…figure as epiphenomena of the crisis of the modern state in Iraq" (Osman 2002, p.30). Osman's notion of primordial sectarianism is important to account for the unresolved historical tensions that could have existed as early as the beginning of the twentieth century if not earlier. His definition of sectarianism, however, requires further definition. To be sure, he is not the only scholar to leave the term undefined or accept its general vagueness. For this reason, Fanar Haddad chooses to do away with the term sectarianism altogether, adopting instead the term sectarian identity.

Haddad uses the term sectarian identity instead of sectarianism to indicate that "we are dealing with perceptions and emotions" of group and individuals rather than a large, well-defined network of interactions that extends from the macro level of a society to the micro level of the individual. (Haddad 2011, p.3) By taking this approach, Haddad attempts to present what drives sectarian identities in the Iraqi context to be emerge and be adopted by the individuals. In other words, what motivates these sectarian identities to be 'activated' as he puts it. Looking at Iraq's

Shi'is and Sunnis, Haddad enumerates four possible drivers that activate sectarian identities. These are "external influence, economic competition, competing myth-symbol complexes and contested cultural ownership of the nation." (Haddad 2011, p.10). In the case of the Mandaeans and the Christians, the last two of these drivers apply more than the first two. This conclusion would not have surprised Haddad who also argued that these two drivers were the most important sectarian dynamics in post 2003 Iraq since it is through myths and symbols that sects memorize their traumatic experiences, glories, and heroic figures. They then give these symbols narratives which validate the sect's claims to 'their embodiment of the nation" (Haddad 2011, p.22).

Haddad's *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* develops a complex, theory of sectarian identities in the context of Iraq's largest sects, namely the Shi'is, Sunnis, and Kurds. His model for using sectarian identities rather than sectarianism represents a welcome shift in the scholarship in the studies that deal with the subject in post-invasion Iraq. Elsewhere, Haddad develops the notion further still, calling for replacing the term sectarianism with the adjective sectarian to be followed by a noun such as 'relations,' 'unity,' etc. Doing so, according to Haddad, would clarify "some aspects of sectarian identity" better than the all-encompassing term sectarianism does. (Haddad 2017). One limitation in Haddad's work is that it overlooks minorities as examples of emerging sectarian identities in Iraq after 2003. This research fills this gap, if only partially. It examines the way sectarian identities emanated in the discourse of Mandaeans and Christians of Iraq after the invasion.

The first chapter examines the way Mandaeans and the Christians thought of themselves before the invasion and how their conception of who they were and what they were began to change following the invasion. Both groups shared multiple similarities in terms of lacking

strong leadership. Both groups also lacked internal cohesion. They disagreed many fundamental issues. In the case of Christians, the disagreements took on an ethnic turn, solidifying the separation of the ethnic groups among Christians and ending any attempt at unifying them. As such, the first chapter documents the early rise of the sectarian identities of Mandaeans and Muslims.

The second chapter continues chronologically from the first. It examines some of the symbolic drivers that activated the sectarian identities of both Mandaeans and Christians. Both groups started seeking and adopting old myths about their origins. Also, members in both groups started adopting narratives of victimhood as violence against members of minorities increased in 2004. The chapter then examines how the two elections of 2005, the Representatives Assembly elections in January and the Parliamentary elections in December, saw both groups engage with fervor in sectarian politics.

The originality of this thesis and its importance derive from the primary sources it uses. The sources, all online based, consist of some of the largest records of communication known for these groups. The first and most comprehensive of these sources is the archive of the Mandaean Yahoo Group. An email group exclusive for Mandaeans, the Yahoo group contains no less than two hundred thousand emails dating back to the year 2000. While it was mainly a diaspora tool of communication, the Mandaean Yahoo grew in size over the years and now hosts Mandaeans from all over the world, including Iraq. The Mandaean Yahoo Group archive holds a very rich, never before explored record of communication of contemporary Mandaeans. With emails dealing on various topics from politics, to social relationships, and existential concerns, the sheer volume of the record and the number of its participants gives us an unparalleled inside look into

the concerns, views, and politics of living Mandaeans. As a Mandaean, I as well as many members in my family have group members access to this Mandaean Yahoo Group.

The second primary source is the message archive of ankawa.com. An Iraqi Christian website, ankawa.com holds a rich archive consisting of more than thirty-six thousand messages dating to June 2002. Being open to the public, the Christian website lacks the intimate interactions of the Mandaean Yahoo Group. Nonetheless, it hosts a large number of articles, messages, and interactions between diaspora Christians and their Iraq based fellowmen. All in all, it provides an indispensable resource to understand the Christian perspective of the changes that took place within their communities before, during, and after 2003.

Chapter 1: Sectarian Identities Emerging

Around the time of the invasion, the Mandaeans and Christians of Iraq found themselves in comparable situations. Despite differences in the size of their populations, the discourse of the two minorities shared multiple similarities. This chapter looks at these minorities' discourse in the wake of the invasion and asks how the invasion changed it. It argues that the invasion caused these two minorities to fragment further, instead of becoming more united. Analyzing the discourse of these minorities reveals that they lacked internal cohesion, inclusive political organization, and a strong leadership to keep them from seeking inner divisions. The first part of the chapter focusses on the Mandaeans while the second part looks at the Christians.

"Who…[is] going to speak for us?"

As one of Iraq's smallest non-Muslim minorities, Iraq's Mandaeans started large scale migrations since the end of the last century due to many of the conditions outlined above. A few thousand Mandaeans were already settled in multiple countries around the globe by the turn of the century (Nashi 2002) In 2000, the Mandaeans started using the Mandaean Yahoo Group to link the Mandaeans living in diaspora. Up until April of 2003, most of the group's communication took place in English. As a result of that, most of the voices encountered early in this study belong to individuals who have a high level of education or who have lived in English-speaking countries for a while, or both. The Mandaean Yahoo Group only permits Mandaeans to access it. As such, the electronic group represents a haven for its members to debate on politics, religion, and Mandaeans' internal organization, etc. The electronic group offered many of its

members the opportunity to communicate freely for the first time in their lives. Making use of their newly found freedoms, the group members attempted to understand what the Mandaeans were.

The Mandaeans debated whether they were a religion, an ethnicity, or a family (a clan-like social entity). Debates on these matters took place even before the war. In 2002 members of the Yahoo Group from New Zealand and the United Kingdom started using the term "community" to refer to the Mandaeans. These Mandaeans adopted the term community to overcome differences and emphasize unity. New Zealand Mandaean Farhan Yousif, a physician, warned of lack of communication between members of "our community." For as he saw it "[f]or every moment of silence we choose to take, we are making the choice to remove the cement that binds the bricks of our relationship. Everyday more cement dries up and crumbles. Everyday a new brick comes crashing down." (Yousif 2002). More than a year earlier, Yousif had written to the group urging members of "this loyal community" to stay united to "build a strong community and family ties" (Yousif 2001). Corroborating Yousif's point on the importance of community as a conceptual framework to imagine the social organization of the Mandaeans, Eb Al Kheimssi asked the Mandaean Yahoo Group co-founder and moderator, who is also the head of the Mandaean Associations in America, Dr. Suhaib Nashi, to use the "word "community" more often and think of how we can help one another outside the realm of religon," (Al-Khamisi 2002) Nashi, on whom more will be said later, showed hesitation in adopting the term uncritically. He requested further clarification "from Eb AlKhamissi about the definition of community." (Nashi 2002).

The debate on the term community and its applicability to the Mandaean case originated in a very tempestuous episode of the Mandaean Yahoo Group series of communication. It came

at a time when Mandaeans questioned their very existence in diaspora and their links to Iraq. A random insult by an unidentified group member started what came to be known as the "Zigma Storm" which left them pondering the meaning of their existence as a religion, what they viewed as scared, and what to them meant to be a Mandaean. It also forced them to think of their lack of cohesion and internal organization, two facts that persisted well beyond the invasion.

The Zigma Storm started with a disdainful insult. A troll named Zigma300 accused the entire Mandaean priesthood of failing to rise to the challenges brought upon by the age of internet as they neglected equipping the Mandaeans with a strong foundation of religious knowledge, focusing instead on limited personal and financial gains. Zigma300 lamented what he saw as the lack of central authority and competence within the "community." According to Zigma300, outsiders pretended to be Mandaeans and Mandaean temples, *Mandis*, proliferated without a check. "Importers" he said were "claiming to be Mandaeans, Men starting Mandees all over the world."[4] Zigma300 then proceeded with a vulgar attack that shook Mandaeans to their core "I Face every living Termetha, Ginzafri and So Self proclaimed Reysh Ema . In the name of Hibil Zewa son of the father of all light Minda id Heyya, i spit in the face of each and everyone of you for your ignorance."[5] (Zigma300 2002). The irony of using the by then relatively new technology to attack the priests at a time when many of them were not yet familiar with it added

[4] Throughout this chapter, I kept the English text in quotation marks as it appeared in the original messages, with all their typos and vague expressions. Preserving the original text despite its faults is a matter of academic honesty. It also communicates to the reader the difficulties these members faced in using the new technology and a non-native language to express their ideas.

[5] A *Termitha* is a low-ranking priest. This rank is religiously higher than a layman, but it indicates a student priest. The word *termitha* in Mandaic has the same meaning as the Arabic word *telmith*, literally meaning student. A *Ganzibra* is a higher degree of priesthood. *Rish 'ama* is the highest degree of priesthood in the Mandaean religion. *Minda id Heyya* refers to the spirit of life, or God in Mandaean theorlogy. I left the typos as they appear in the original. For a detailed study of the hierarchy of the Mandaean priesthood, and the Mandaean religion and culture in general, refer to E. S. Drower's classic work *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran: Their Cults, Customs, Magic, Legends, and Folklore.* Oxford: Clendon Press, 1937.

to the potency of Zigma300's barrage. It proved the point that the Mandaean priesthood of Iraq did really need to rise up to modern challenges.

Zigma300's charge continued as he listed more serious accusations against the priests. He then asked Mandaeans to take a very radical step, to boycott the priests:

> You[6] are but mere merchants of spirituality. You claim knowledge of Heyya and all you know is how much you are going to make of our community. If you don't do something about this and i am taking to each sheikh or so called sheikh. If you don't start teaching the rites, rituals and Gnosis of the mandaeans to your Sons & Daughters. You will wind up as ignorant dogs of the faith.I face each true Mandaean to wage war on ignorance for the sake of our children. Their greed has led to the dissolve of our religion. I ask each true mandaean to read our religious texts ask the learned people to answer their questions to fight back to hold the so called Termithas and ban them from our society until they repent. Close the doors in the face of ignorance and greed. Never let it in, (Zigma300 2002)

The frustration with Mandaeans' lack of central unifying authority, lack of consensus on priorities, lack of knowledge of the faith, fear for the fate of the religion and the lack of initiatives to save it are very visible themes in Zigma300's message. He directed all this anger towards the priests. In doing so, he tested the Mandaeans' consensus on what they held more sacred: their faith and religion or the men who performed the duties of their religion. The stormy debate that ensued form this challenge would change how Mandaeans viewed themselves and would force them to think of their organization, or lack thereof.

Zigma300's verbal onslaught generated a wide range of reactions that ranged from his instant ban by the group moderator, to anger in the form of threats of suing for defamation, to more sympathetic responses and calls for unity. Eb al-Khamisi was one of the first to offer an opinion on Zigma300's message. His long response started by formally renouncing Zigma300's

[6] Referring to the priests

approach, yet he took his message to heart by asking "What do we maintain from this mandaean(ism)? and what do we need from our priests to do?" Attempting to resolve the dichotomies between faith and tradition, or religion and the practice of religion, he concluded that "Mandaean(ism) is no longer a religion… thus it's a community." (E. al-Khamisi 2002). For al-Khamisi, a community was the only conceptual category that could encompass individuals who ranged from those that did not believe in metaphysics to those who did so very much.

Al-Khamisi's response was echoed by other members. S. J. Farhan, a medical doctor living in the United Kingdom, wrote of having a "sense of belonging" despite not being religious. "[W]e have a very instentical [intrinsic?], distinguished, solid and a very well identified sense of belonging,socsialy, humanley, psychologicaly, culturaley,and emotionally MANDAEAN." (S. J. Farhan 2002). Despite the typos and somewhat vague expressions, Farhan's point about feeling a sense of belonging that is divorced from religious beliefs or spirituality comes across clearly. The religious alienation he identified was a common feature among many of the Mandaeans who lived in the diaspora before the invasion. This alienation, incidentally, was not too different from the alienation that Zigma300 raged against. It was an alienation that originated from a lack of religious knowledge and, more importantly, a lack of spiritual guidance.

Another noteworthy reply to Zigma300 came as a surprise to everyone. A young educated priest named Alaa Nashmi wrote to the group reminding them that Zigma300 had entitled his message "(word of truth) and," he added, "i want to listen to him." (Nashmi 2002). Nashmi's unexpected call for greater understanding won the group's admiration and was received very positively as many members commended his initiative. Some saw in this new open-minded mentality as the only hope for Mandaeans: "with this wisdom" al-Khamisi

predicted “we can only win our future.” (E. al-Khamisi 2002). Others, like Princessq8, went even further, inviting Zigma300 to rejoin the conversation and freely express all his thoughts, but on condition that he “he agrees to make his argument without insulting anybody.” (Princessq8 2002).

Princessq8 was one of the very few feminine voices in the group at that time. Hers’ represents a true minority voice within a minority voice. Her positions compared to the others in a group dominated by middle-aged to old, professional, university educated men, usually came across as radically democratic. She consciously hides her identity in the group because of fear that group members might not take her words seriously if they knew who she was. “i am a strong beliver,” she said, “that, unfortunatly, SOME members would communicate differently to others once they identify their gender or their background.” (Princessq8 2002). She was also the first to lament identifying and publicly shaming Zigma300: “Personally, i regret the fact that his identity was revelead without his premision. it doesnt matter who he is or what he is, what matters is that he has an openion that needs to be looked over.” (Princessq8 2002).

For the Mandaeans in the Yahoo Group, the Zigma Storm was an important exercise in democracy in the age of the internet. The potency of the insult brought voices never before heard in the group and generated a genuine debate. Although Zigma300 was identified and actually wrote to the Group Moderator apologizing, everyone agreed that he had touched a vital nerve for Mandaeans. Were Mandaeans a religion, a community, or something else? What role did priests play within Mandaeanism? And what did democracy represent for Mandaeans at a time when their world was set to change as the horns of war started blowing?

Al-Khamisi, who was an active member of the group and showed enthusiastic engagement in the debate on the Zigma Storm, linked the debate to the discussion on democracy

that was taking place before the invasion. He did not understand democracy in the sense of voting for political parties and winning governments by a majority voting. Democracy for him took on a very different meaning. In a talk that he had prior to the war with Imam Hassan al-Qazwini, an influential Shi'i scholar who has headed a number of important Islamic schools and institutes in the USA and elsewhere, al-Khamisi recounts telling him "I am a Sabian Mandaean, and the way I understand democracy… is about the protection of my rights and your rights too as individuals first." (E. al-Khamisi 2002)[7] It is out of this conviction in democracy's role in guaranteeing individual rights that he turned to the group members urging them to show more tolerance in dealing with cases such as Zigma300's. He argued that the importance of democracy was not in rhetoric, but "more importantly is to practice it."

Responding to al-Khamisi, a young member from New Zealand, Furat al-Saleem, elaborated a curious position on democracy, alas one that expressed clear Islamophobia. For him "[i]f the state is not secular and democratic in the same time, then it's not a free state." He explained his position claiming that an Islamic government was not capable of true democracy or a true representation of minorities. By holding on to a secular state that guaranteed minorities rights through what he believed to be three things, a constitution, a democracy and what he called the "separation of powers," one can guarantee that Islamic forces will not swallow up the rights and liberties of minorities. This was vital for him because "Islam and freedom" he wholeheartedly believed, were "two opposing forces and," he continued, "that's why the whole Islamic world is not and will not be free for as long as I shall live!" (Al-Saleem 2002).

[7] For more on Imam Hassan al-Qazwini, visit his official website. www.qazwini.org.

Suhaib Nashi, who is the group moderator and an accomplished pediatrician in Morristown, New Jersey, weighed in again on the debate, or by now multiple debates, that were generated by the Zigma Storm. He started out by agreeing with al-Khamisi and Zigma300 on the threats facing Mandaeans and the need for serious action. "Extinction in the next 100 years," he warned with a markedly scientific tone, "is not unthinkable." Yet he recognized the importance of unity and collective efforts to educate the youth and preserve "the religion," but without priests these attempts would be futile. Suhaib, however went a step further in identifying a major problem that Mandaeans had not yet overcame. Their lack of spiritual leaders. "[W]e do have a major problem here. Some of our Priests are not true spiritual leaders. Some are not truly educated in Mandaean theology and most will disagree on simple matters." (Nashi 2002). While Mandaeans have a formal elected religious leader, *Raes al-Taefa*, in Iraq, Sheik Sattar al-Hilou, he lacked, and still lacks one might argue, overwhelming support among Mandaeans for a number of reasons. As a matter of fact, he only attained the rank of *Ganzibra*, the second highest rank, in 2002.[8] (Nashmi 2002). The Mandaeans lack of strong, unifying leadership clearly marks their weak, unsure position inside and outside Iraq at the time of the invasion.

Nashi suggested electing a Mandaean Spiritual Council whose job it would be to take on the leadership of the Mandaeans, at least in religious matters. The Mandaean leadership he called for should "actually help to lead any change in the religion to adjust to the new circumstances." (Nashi 2002). By adapting to changing circumstances Mandaeans, according to him, had a better chance of survival. Such a council, Nashi confided, was already being worked on, but it needed more efforts to be established. Nashi's call for generated some excitement in its own merit. A poll was started within the group asking members whether they thought the council would be

[8] See footnote 5 on page 10 for details on the hierarchy of the Mandaean priesthood.

useful. Only 7 members out of more than a hundred or so at the time participated in the poll. All of them answered yes. (Mandaean@yahoogroups.com 2002).

While some members evidently agreed with Nashi's suggestion, others thought Mandaeans needed to take part in the opposition outside Iraq. In al-Khamisi's opinion, Nashi's call for adaptation to changing circumstances "is half if not less than [half] a solution" because it could only work for Mandaeans in diaspora. Because Mandaeans were too spread out, he thought managing them would be very difficult. (Al-Khamisi 2002). It was in this same message that al-Khamisi urged Nashi to use the term "community" as mentioned above. Al-Khamisi's frustration with the Mandaeans' powerlessness when acting alone outside Iraq forced him to adopt al-Saleem's view. He declared that "Our only "serious" hope is to survive in a Democratic, Constitutional, Secular Iraq anything else would be an attempt to buy time and ladies & gentlemen TIME IS RUNNING OUT." (Al-Khamisi 2002).

Nashi was skeptical about the value of al-Khamisi's call for Mandaeans' participation in Iraqi politics. In a long message on the matter, he asked whether it would be effective to participate in the political dialogue that was taking place among opposition forces outside Iraq. He saw a challenge in that because Mandaeans, he said, did not have a "Mandaean Liberal Party…like the Asirians, [Assyrians] The Turkman, Yazidies or the Kurds." Participating on a non-sectarian, individual basis in larger political forces, according to him, was not advisable either because "Who…[is] going to speak for us?" For Nashi, representing Mandaeans in Iraq from the outside also posed an ethical dilemma. On the one hand, doing so would put the lives of Mandaeans in Iraq face to face with the wrath of Saddam Hussein. On the other hand, diaspora Mandaeans lacked the right to speak for Mandaeans inside Iraq. "Do we have the right me and you," he asked al-Khamisi, "sitting behind our computers in the West and endangering any sole

[soul] inside Iraq?" (Nashi 2002). Closer to the date of the invasion, however, divisions within the body of diaspora Mandaeans would surface to an extent not seen before.

The Zigma Storm, with all the debates and unprecedented number of responses it generated, shows that Mandaeans lacked several important features.[9] First of all, they lacked a general consensus on whether they were a religion or a community of believers and non-believers who shared a sense of belonging through blood, and culture, etc. Secondly, they lacked a clear leadership that unified them. Neither the Mandaeans' religious authority nor their elected community members had the kind of over whelming support that could enable a strong, popular leadership to emerge. More importantly, diaspora Mandaeans, or at least some of them, realized through this episode that they lacked the organizational capability and legitimacy to represent and speak for all Mandaeans. Apart from harboring the hope for a secular, democratic Iraq to save the religion, Mandaeans saw little value in taking political action against Saddam's rule on sectarian grounds. With that realization, they treaded the political scene carefully. But they debated whether to join the opposition under the banner of their religion or keep a low profile while the events played out, divisions started to surface.

Near the end of December 2002, a formally written message from the Sabian Mandaean World Council, signed by Dr. I.M. Jawdat, announced to the group that the Council managed to meet with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the US Committee for Refugees, Refugee Council USA, Denyse Sabagh, former President American Immigration Lawyers Association in addition to a number of senators and aid organizations. The Council's meetings were to "to discuss the increasingly severe plight of Sabian Mandaeans and what may

[9] August's archive contains 113 messages, almost double the average monthly emails for that year which is 60.5 emails per month.

be done for Mandaeans to prepare for the ramifications of a potential Iraqi invasion." With the aim of documenting the abuses that Mandaeans faced, the Council urged the Mandaeans to send Dr. I.M. Jawdat all cases of human rights violations that Mandaeans anywhere had experienced in order to document them and use them to help Mandaean refugees around the world. The Message also set a deadline of three weeks during which these documents were to be collected. (Jawdat 2002).

"Dear Dr IM Jawdat," read the first reply immediately following the Council's message, "Please tell us who are you ,and what the World Sabain Mandaean Council is ??" It then continued, adding that "we have no idea about it. We need more informations and thank you .sincerely yours Araby Farhan AlKamisi N.Z." (A. F. al-Khamisi 2002). Araby Farhan al-Khamisi is a well-known Mandaean lawyer who wrote prolifically on multiple online Iraqi newspapers and websites. One of the most senior and active members in the group, he had been involved with Iraq's Mandaeans' legal representation in pre-invasion Iraq for many decades and was living in New Zealand at that time. A. F. al-Khamisi's message underscored the lack of knowledge and trust the group members had about the Council and its organizer.

Predictably, some members of the group suspected the Council of being linked to the CIA and of not representing the Mandaeans democratically. Others asked to give the Council a chance as it "may be just another society that try to help the Mandaeans worldwide." (A. N. Bahoor 2003). Defending himself and his new organization, Jawdat replied quickly identifying himself and how the Council was formed. Yet that attempt failed to stop the mounting suspicions. Jawdat claimed that the Council was formed "recently from mandaeans in different countries trying to act now to help the [M]andaeans [world-wide] and specially those in need in Jordan, Yemen and Indonesia." (Jawdat 2002). Jawdat's attempt to clear the suspicions was

muddied when members affiliated with the *Council* accused all those that opposed it of being communists. Instead of waiting for the fire to be contained, Jawdat cast more oil on it when he hastily announced the creation of the British Mandaean Council. A number of unelected Mandaean individuals were appointed to run the new UK based branch of the Council. The unexplained sense of urgency in Jawdat's actions raised more doubts about the true intentions of his organization.

For Nashi as well as for other members in the group, the problem with the Council was that it was formed and was acting outside of the umbrella of the Mandaean Associations Union.[10] The *Union* in 2002 was far from homogenous. According to Nashi, it consisted of no less than thirteen organizations in eight countries in addition to "One or two Mandaean Human Rights Organizations" and an organizing committee between the European and the American Mandaean Societies. Australia had two organizations for a population of 2000 which contained three priests. The USA also had the same amount of organizations for half the population and only one priest. Sweden on the other hand had three organizations for a population of roughly 3000 Mandaeans which like Australia, contained three priests. (Nashi 2002). Given this large number of organizations for a relatively small, but very scattered population, the creation of more organizations whose members were unelected, at a time that preceded the war was bound to raise suspicions about the Council's agenda.

Although the tension between the Union and the Council subsided eventually when Jawdat called Nashi and agreed to work with the Union, this episode illustrates the divisions and lack of clear hierarchy within the organizational structure of the Mandaeans. The agreement

[10] The Arabic title adds the phrase "in diaspora" to the name of union. See mandaeanunion.org.

between the Union and the Council did not affect matters on the ground much, but it brought an official closure to what could have been a serious schism within the organizational body of the Mandaeans. Furthermore, even though the Nashi, on behalf of the Union, had made a historic decision not to contact or join the Iraqi opposition a few days before the agreement with the Council, the Council did not rebel on that decision or at least did not seek to undermine it.

The Mandaeans debated whether to participate in the Iraqi Opposition Conference in London which was organized by the George W. Bush's administration to take place on December 10th, 2002 to "legitimize the goal of regime change." (Phillips 2005).[11] The opposition conference was attended by Shi'is, Sunnis, Kurds, Assyrians, and Turkmen. The Mandaeans were not invited, so they debated whether they should contact members of the opposition to try to secure a spot in the conference. Nashi, speaking on behalf of the Mandaean Associations Union, made a clear, firm stance that Mandaeans would not contact Iraqi opposition forces that were participating in the conference in London. For Nashi, Mandaeans would not join the Iraqi opposition on pure sectarian grounds. "What is happing now in the "opposition meeting"" he said, "is a fight for chairs we have no place in it." (Nashi 2002). Nashi's position was further backed by al-Khamisi who saw no advantage in joining the opposition as a sect. As he put it, "what are we gonna say that is so different from the other minorities?" (E. al-Khamisi 2002). This evidence, made public here for the first time, is not to be taken lightly. It is nothing short of

[11] David L. Phillips's book, *Losing Iraq*, provides an insider's account on the haphazard nature of the London Opposition Conference. The Conference was originally set to take place in Brussels. The Belgian government however changed its mind closer to the date because staging the conference would conflict with its official policy towards the Iraqi government. The date on which the conference was to take place changed multiple times and so did the list of initial participants invited to attend. All that planning meant little however as hundreds showed up uninvited when the Conference began asking to attend and claiming to represent Iraqis. Phillips, who was a senior advisor to US Department of State and who was involved with the planning of the Conference since it was first conceived, concluded that the Conference "revealed the difficulties of achieving consensus among Iraqis" as they "disagreed sharply on the size and allocation of seats on the coordinating committee."

a historical proof that, prior to the war, the official Mandaean position was markedly anti-sectarian. This position was made in spite of lacking internal cohesion, leadership, and political organization.

"We are a people through our nationality"

Christians in Iraq showed far more organization and political activity than Mandaeans in the months preceding and following the invasion. Sharing a religion with the West meant that they received special attention from Rome as well as from the United States, a privilege not available for other religious and ethnic minorities in Iraq. Another advantage they enjoyed was that many Christian communities had lived in the northern regions of the country since ancient times. In modern Iraq, that meant living in Kurdish controlled areas. Kurdistan allowed Christian parties to participate in local and parliamentary elections and in 1992 gave them the freedom to learn Syriac, their native language in schools. (Hussein 2003). After the invasion, the Christian parties connected with their people in Baghdad and other Iraqi cities and became active in the post-war political scene.

In Western academia, the Christians of Iraq fall into three ecclesiastical designations: The Nestorians (Assyrians), the Chaldeans, and the Jacobites. The name Syriac-speaking Christians is sometimes falsely applied to them. (Donabed 2012). Having lived in either Kurdish speaking or Arabic speaking regions, and having experienced the national education system, it was only natural that the Christians began to identify more and more with the Iraqi national identity and some of them either spoke Kurdish or Arabic as their primary language.

In that nationalistic atmosphere, some Christians felt threatened that they were forgetting their mother tongue, the Assyrian language, especially in the Ba'ath controlled regions. They blamed the "Chauvinistic Iraqi regime" for starting a "policy of identity liquidation" in 1972 to Arabize them. (Hussein 2003). This policy peaked in the 1977 when the Iraqi government carried out a national census that did not mention the Assyrian ethnicity, forcing Christians and other minorities to identify themselves as either Arabs or Kurds. Reacting to what they saw as a hostile situation, a group of militant Christians formed the Assyrian Democratic Movement or *ZOWAA*, which is short for movement in Syriac. Their objective was to "to satisfy the political objectives of the Assyrian people in Iraq, in response to the oppressive brutality of the regime in Baghdad, and its attempts to liquidate our national existence in our ancestral homeland of Bet-Nahren." (Assyrian Democratic Movement n.d.). Three of ZOWAA's leadership were executed by Saddam Hussein's regime between 1984-5. By 1989 the ZOWAA had moved to Kurdistan and continued its armed struggle there against the Iraqi government.

As of 2003, ZOWAA was actively participating in the Kurdistan's parliamentary system, had a number of publications in Syriac, as well as a Union for Assyrians, branches in multiple Western countries, and an active Chaldean, and Syrian Women (Ishu 2002). ZOWAA, however was not the only political Christian party. One example is rather obscure the Assyrian National Party which has an active news site in Arabic. This party was active during the invasion, but not much information is available on it apart from scant news pieces announcing meetings it held with ZOWAA recently. This fact indicates that the two parties could be working together but are still not united.[12]

[12] The party's current website, www.atranaya.net has taken over its old site www.atranaya.org which was active during the war in 2003. For news on the recent meeting between ZOWAA and the Assyrian National Party in the Northern Iraqi city of Dahuk, see http://www.zowaa.org/وفد-من-الحركة-يزور-الحزب-الوطني-الاشور/#.W_5eBPZFzmI

Apart from the ZOWAA and Assyrian National parties, both of which are Assyrian, there is at least one Chaldean party. In 2000, the Chaldean Democratic Union (CDU) Party was formed in Kurdistan after a series of attempts that last close to eight years. According to its official website, the party's formation came in at a vital time to fill in a gap in Chaldean political representation, to voice the demands of the Chaldeans, and to end the Chaldean's marginalization. During the time of the CDU's formation, the Assyrian parties, according to the same source, "were working on promoting the notion that all Christians [in Iraq] were Assyrian." (Tomi, 'The Foundation of the Chaldean Democratic Union Party was a Historical Necessity' 2008) It is worth noting here that the Syrians (Jacobites), Suriyanyeen in Arabic, do not seem to have their own political party and have no distinct voice like the Chaldeans or the Assyrians. The same is true for the Armenians who are overlooked by the discourse of all the other Iraqi Christians despite having a population of about 20000 if not more in 2003 and a presence in Iraq and the region since at least the 16th or 17th centuries. (Logan 2010).

The political tension between the Chaldeans and the Assyrians will be examined thoroughly in a later section. As for now, it suffices to say that up to the time of the invasion, both the Assyrians and the Chaldeans were using a unifying discourse. One example of that was the 46th issue of the *Chaldo-Ashur* Supplement to the Communist Party of Kurdistan's newspaper *Regay Kurdistan*.[13] The Supplement's Op-ed piece was entitled "We are one people." (Oghanna 2001). The all-encompassing tag 'one people' or 'one society', *Sha'ab wahid,* in Arabic, seemed omnipresent in all official Christian discourse at the time. From articles to opinion pieces, they all referred to Christians as one people, or a *sha'ab*.

[13] Its official website is http://regaykurdistan.com.

Another example of unifying discourse is the website ankawa.com used in this research. The website ambitiously claims to be the meeting point of "the sons of our Chaldean, Assyrian, and Syrian people, and all sons of Iraq, and all our friends from around the world."[14] (About Site 2014) The very name of the site, *Ankawa,* is not arbitrary either. Located on the outskirts of Erbil province in the north-eastern part of Iraq, Ankawa has been described as a "Microcosm of Christianity" in the Kurdistan Regional Government, KRG. Enjoying relatively more safety and a better standard of services than the rest of Erbil, Ankawa has attracted offices of aid agencies, oil companies, and consulates of a number of Western countries, including that of the US. (Logan 2010). The choice of the name Ankawa for the website therefore invokes a sense of unity and harmony among Christians.

Whereas the Mandaean Yahoo Group functioned more like a closed group where members felt free to communicate and debate endlessly on all sorts of topics, ankawa.com, by contrast, is a public platform open for all. It is, therefore, more conservative in terms of the content it hosts. Furthermore, the site is dominated by representatives of the political Christian parties who intend on communicating official party positions. Exceptions to this rule do exist, however these are scattered and hard to find. Their existence nonetheless hints at the possibility of larger debates taking place among the Christians which were kept away from the public. One such debate revolves around the intentions of using the name people, *sha'ab* to refer to the Chaldean-Assyrian-Syrian Christians of Iraq.

In a comment on a deleted topic on ankawa.com entitled "Kurdistan, God's Confused People,' a member of the site named Ishak Yako asks the writer to delete the topic not because it

[14] "A meeting place for our Chaldean, Assyrian, and Syriac people as well as all Iraqis and all our friends from around the world."

could potentially upset the Kurds, but because such topics "do not serve the Christian People." Commenting on Yako's message, another member called Kamil Issa Kunda, asked Yako to define what he meant by Cristian people. "The French, Italians, and English are all Christian people" he said before adding, "or did you mean to say our people the Chaldo-Assyrians?" Kunda went on to explain the nuance he was pointing at. Christianity for him was a religion, but the Chadlo-Assyrians are a people by right of their ethnic nationality, a *qawmia*. He asserted that "[w]e are a people through our nationality." Yet for Kundo, there was no problem in "opening up towards the others who share our land and country as they are our brothers and fellow countrymen." Yako then replied saying he meant the Chaldo-Assyrian people when he said *sha'ab*. As for opening up to fellow countrymen, Yako's believed they should first "accomplish what they [Christians] want then we can defend others…" (Kunda 2003).

The exchange above, short and formal as it might be, affords us a rare look at an internal Christian-Christian debate in which the meaning of the word 'people' was negotiated. Which Christians does this term include? Which ones does it leave out and why? The term 'people' as used above could be stretched to include Assyrians and Chaldeans, the two biggest designations of Iraqi Christians, but did it also include the Syrians (*Jacobite*)?[15] One thing is clear however, it certainly did not include Iraq's Armenians. Leaving out certain Christian groups highlights the ethnic nature of this categorization. 'People' hence referred to an ethnicity, or more than one, that was also Christian in faith. As will be seen soon, conflicting political parties would

[15] The Jacobite meant here refers to members of the Monophysite Eastern churches, in particular the Syriac Christians, known in Arabic as 'Suryan.' These are not to be confused with the Jacobite of England. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines the Jacobite of England as "a partisan of James II of England or of the Stuarts after the revolution of 1688." (Merriam-Webster 2019)

capitalize on the fluidity of this term as they decided which Christians were their 'people' and which ones were not.

Two weeks before the exchange above took place, Yako brought up an important point, not less important than the one brought up by Zigma300. Yako's message, in contrast to Zigma300's is shorter, and endlessly more cordial. In his message, Yako requested Christian priests to unify the Church "and the group of parties" so that they would have a stronger voice in Iraq. (yako 2003). Yako's request unfortunately went unnoticed. While Zigma300's message blamed the Mandaean priests for lack of initiative to save the religion and teach the language to the youth, Yako's message urged the priests to unify separate designations within the Christian religion. Doing so, according to Yako, would lead to political unification. In their own ways, both messages envision an agency which the priests and, by extension, the religious institutions not only lacked, but arguable could never attain. While Zigma300's vulgarities caused a storm within the group, Yako's polite request passed unnoticed like a breeze in the Christian forum. The silence that accompanied this message proved ominous for Iraq's Christians and their political parties. These parties, which until then had promoted language of unity and harmony, would soon turn on each other with strong vengeance, revealing serious ideological fissures that no discourse could disguise.

By October of 2003, the Chaldo-Assyrian National Council was formed.[16] On the Council's agenda was a large conference that would include representatives of Chaldeans, Assyrians, and Syrians from Iraq and neighboring countries as well as representatives of Paul Bremer, the leader of the Provisional Coalition Authority in post-invasion Iraq. The conference

[16] Al-Majlis al-qawmi al-Kaldo-Ashuri.

was to be held in Baghdad between October 22-4th. On October 5th, the Chaldo-Ashur Society in Windsor, Canada, posted a statement congratulating Iraqi Christians on the formation of the new Council, but it commented disapprovingly on certain Chaldean actions. Among the issues that the Windsor-based Society mentions was a letter addressed to the leader of the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq, Paul Bremer, signed by 19 Chaldean priests. The body of the letter was not included, but it could be implied from the Society's message that the letter represented an attempt by the Chaldean priests to be recognized officially by the name Chaldean so as to be distinguished from Assyrians and other Christian designations. This is indicated by the message's structure which starts off saying "Commenting on the letter signed by the 19 Chaldean priests and addressed to Mr. Bremer...we supply the following notes:". The first note listed states that the:

> Chaldo-Ashur Society in Windsor/Canada believes in the unity of our Chaldo-Assyrian people and in the compound name 'Chaldo-Assyrian' for our people and in the Syriac language…as a temporary solution to the *naming predicament*. (Emphasis added). (Society 2003)

The statement makes it clear that the Windsor based society emphasized unity in name as a first step towards a bigger form of unity, one that is religious, cultural and ultimately political.

The long statement went on listing seven additional points which elucidated the Society's position on the Chaldean's choice of naming. As the Society saw it, the tag 'Chaldean' was a misnomer, one that was used historically to designate religious attributes, not a national or an ethnic marker as the Chaldeans intended to use it. The name Chaldean hence became "a historical mistake in our church's name, [a name that is given] to every Catholic Assyrian. We ask them [the Chaldeans] to correct this mistake as they have a duty to God and to their posterity." (Society 2003). Here, the Society, was referring to the old accusation that 'Chaldean' was a name given to the Assyrians (Nestorians) by Pope Pius VIII 1830 to distinguish them from

other non-Nestorian Catholics. As can be expected, the Chaldean Democratic Union Party (CDU) did not take kindly to this statement.

The CDU's thundering response came in close to two weeks after the Windsor Society's statement. Addressing its own followers "the sons of the Chaldean nation, *Ummah*", the CDU started its response reviewing the recent history of Assyrian attempts to "deny the national existence of the Chaldeans.[17] This was done, according to the CDU, by overshadowing and defacing the Chaldean identity." The CDU likened the alleged Assyrian cultural aggressions against the Chaldeans to the Ba'ath's policy of denying ethnicity expression in the 1977 census. In both cases, according to the CDU, ethnic or national, *qawmi*, naming was forced on the Chaldeans. In a stunning counter attack, the CDU flipped the Society's accusation on its head, claiming that the Assyrians had only gained the name 'Assyrian' a century ago. Being new comers to the scene who only represented about 10% of Iraq's Christians, the Assyrians, according to the CDU, had changed their failed tactic of denying the existence of Chaldean identity at around the year 2000. Since then, they deployed the new tactic of compound naming (i.e. Chaldo-Assyrian) in an attempt to "go around the Chaldeans and contain them." (CDU 2003). From this point on, the CDU's counterattack became full-fledged.

Building on the accusation of cultural containment, which would henceforth gain a permanent spot in Chaldean discourse, the CDU enlisted eighteen points detailing the extent of the Assyrians' attempts to dominate their relationship with the Chaldeans. Citing reasons such as the Assyrian parties' lack of transparency and undeclared agenda, the CDU announced pulling out of the upcoming Conference in Baghdad. Furthermore, the CDU declared rejecting the

[17] Ummah, a large community. In Arabic the word usually refers to a large socio-political, or religious entity such as the Muslim world or the Arab world.

compound naming convention ‘Chaldo-Assyrian’ and urged all other national parties to reject it as well. More importantly, the CDU affirmed the Chaldean desire to have the name *Chaldeans* stated in the constitution separately from other Christians. By disassociating themselves from all other Christian ethnicities in the constitution, the Chaldeans would effectively end any attempt at unity among Iraq’s Christians. The ideological difference over the naming convention was not simply a Chaldean vs Assyrian issue. As will be shown in the next chapter, some Chaldeans were with the name Chaldo-Assyrians and some Assyrians held the belief that each Christian sect was a separate ethnicity. A minority among Assyrians believed both groups to be wrong, claiming instead that all Iraqi Christians were Assyrians. Whether any one of these views, or none of them, were correct is not the contention of the research. What is of value here is that this debate became an essential part of symbol-myth driver, to borrow Haddad’s terminology, for the activation of the sectarian identities of the different Christian sects. This fact would be solidified during the 2005 elections which will be covered in the next chapter.

The Chaldean Conference eventually took place without the participation of the CDU and concluded by forming the *Independent Chaldo-Assyrian Council*. The opening statement, read by the Chaldean bishop Shlaimon Wardoni, explained that the reason behind name Independent Chaldo-Assyrian Council was to “unify representation, not liquidate any of the nationalities or ethnicities.” (Issa 2003). For the Chaldeans who believed that the Assyrian or Assyrian dominated parties such as ZOWAA, were marginalizing them and “containing them” made it their point that any representation of the Christians, whether in the constitution had to accept the different groups of Christians as separate ethnicities. It is common in the discourse of their parties for instance to find reference to the Christians as “Chaldeans, Assyrians, Syriacs.” Choosing the compound term would help the Chaldeans in two ways. First, it would ensure that

the Chaldeans, as a separate ethnicity, would gain the status of Iraq's third largest ethnic group. The new status would make it hard for Assyrian parties to claim representing them. The second, and more important way in which this would help the Chaldeans is in the elections. Separating the votes on ethnic basis would ensure the Chaldeans get more votes than other Christian groups.

The declaration of forming the new Independent Council was undermined on the same day by an announcement by the Chaldean News Agency that the preparations had begun for the first *National Chaldean Conference* which was to take place in mid-February of 2004. On the agenda for the Chaldean conference was "discussing the future relationship with the Assyrians and the Syrians and countering the attempts to deface the Chaldeans' national identity." (Agency 2003). To complete their undermining of the Chaldo-Assyrian Conference, the announcement added that the first Chaldean Conference would see the establishment of the *National Chaldean Council*. The sad irony of having two separate Christian councils announced on the same day, one practically for the Assyrians while the other strictly for the Chaldeans, set in stone the ethnic separation of Iraq's Christians.

The clear lack of a strong, unified, political leadership among Iraq's Christians is noteworthy here. The evident proliferation of political parties, committees, and societies claiming differing ethnic backgrounds testifies to the fact that the Christians had failed in producing a transethnic leadership. The discourse of all the political Christian parties (Chaldean and Assyrian) examined in this study never mentions a religious authority like the Patriarch Raphael Bidawid I, the Patriarch of Chaldeans of Babylonia (born in 1922 CE, died in 2003 CE). This is not to say that the political parties did not abide by the guidance of their religious authorities, but in as much as the evidence looked at in this study is concerned, these parties acted autonomously, mainly out of ethnic motives. Describing themselves as "national parties of

our people," Iraq's Christian parties seemed to clearly regard above all else their individual nationalities, *qawmiat,* which actually meant ethnicities. Their religious authorities, well intentioned as they might have been, could not bridge the ethnic divide as Yako's message from earlier had indicated. Much like the Mandaeans who had priests but lacked a spiritual leadership, the Christians had party leaders and religious leaders, but lacked a strong, unifying political leadership.

Iraq's Christians showed more organization, politically and culturally, than the Mandaeans around the time of the invasion. Having benefited from the democratic conditions in Iraq's Kurdistan region in the late nineties, they reinforced their presence in the region and their political parties flourished, continuing their work in Baghdad after the invasion. Their short-lived attempts at unity, however, remained superficial. Like Mandaeans, Iraq's Christians lacked internal cohesion. This lack surfaced before the Chaldo-Assyrian Conference which was the first attempt to make their compound name official.

Only a few months before the invasion, Mandaeans faced political choices that put their unity to the test. They chose to disengage from politics on sectarian basis and barely managed to stay united. The Christians on the other hand spoke about ethnic unity at the level of naming, but they failed to translate that unity into a reality on the ground. Within just a few months of the invasion, serious ethnic fractures became visible on the façade of Iraq's Christians. As the following chapter aims to show, being left to their own means in an increasingly sectarian Iraq, both the Mandaeans and the Christians would turn inward, creating and circulating mythologies about their ancient histories to justify their existence in Iraq. They would also adopt a discourse of victimhood, accusing Muslims of marginalizing minorities and limiting their representation in government.

Chapter Two: Sectarian Identities Exploding

The American invasion of Iraq and the replacement of the Ba'ath rule government of the country with a sectarian based form of government left Iraq's minorities in shock. Caught off guard by the new reality, they now confronted a new political system which they needed to participate in but did not exactly know how. Lacking leadership and inner cohesion as we saw in the previous chapter, they turned inward. Despite their differences, both the Mandaeans and the Christians reacted in similar ways to the new political reality. Their initial reaction was two-fold, intellectual and political. Intellectually, they looked for their ethnic origins, sought myths that helped them better conceive of their sectarian identities. The different ethnic groups brandished competing myths about their origins. The Christians claimed an uninterrupted ethnic history in Iraq extending more than six thousand years. The Mandaeans went much further, claiming that their religion started with Adam, the first human being, and continued unchanged ever since. Politically, they all played the sectarian game. Politically, they participated in the two rounds of elections that took place at the beginning and end of 2005. Their participation was on a more or less ethnic basis. Interestingly, disappointments in the elections did not cause them to abandon their sectarian polarizations. On the contrary, political upsets made them invest in their divisions further, joining and forming bigger coalitions that preserved, if not encouraged, their different ethnic identities.

With time, Mandaeans and Christians moved into a more developed stage of identity forging, that of myth making. I use the word myth to refer to the combination of fact and fiction essential for the creation of group identities. In doing so, I rely on Haddad's notion of myth-symbol complexes and its importance in the expression of sectarian identity. I recognize that Haddad had Shi'is and Sunnis in mind when conceiving of this notion, not non-Muslim

minorities. On one level, he examined the centrality of religious symbols such as al-Hussein's and his step-brother al-Abas in the making of the collective imagination of the Shi'is, and to a lesser extent Arab Sunnis.[18] On a second level, he identified as myths the competing claims between Shi'is and Sunnis as to who suffered the most before and after 2003. As Haddad points out, "[o]ne of the most noticeable features of sectarian identities in post-2003 Iraq have been the divergent memories of the Ba'ath-era and the different conceptions of the post-2003 order." (Haddad 2011, p.147). Such claims hold true for Iraq's Mandaeans and Christians as well.

The myths that Mandaeans and Christians propagated increasingly after the invasion laid down the ground for their sectarian identities to emerge and be stated ever more loudly. The proliferation of violence and abductions of members of both minorities understandably reaffirmed this sense of group identity. Remarkably, neither the Mandaeans nor the Christians would take part in the sectarian violence that would escalate between the Shi'is and the Sunnis. Despite adopting a sectarian worldview to express their political aspirations, both Mandaeans and Christians remained peaceful and descried violence in all its forms against all their adversaries.

"I was a 100% secular"

[18] The events at Karbala refer to the the story of the Battle of Karbala which took place in 680, or in the year 61 of the Islamic, Hijri calendar near a location where the Iraqi city of Karbala exists today. In this short, but tragic, encounter between al-Husayn ibn Ali, who is the prophet's grandson, his step-brother, al-Abbas ibn Ali, his family members and other companions on the one side and the army of the head of the Umayyad dynasty, Yazid I, on the other side ended in solidifying the position of the Umayyads as the undisputed leaders of Muslims. Al-Husayn, al-Abbas and others in his family and among his companions faced gory deaths at the hands of Yazid's followers. The magnanimity of the Battle of Karbala left an indelible impact among the Shi'is and is commemorated every year for ten days during the Hijri month of Muharram. For more information, see https://www.britannica.com/event/Battle-of-Karbala. Accessed on 4/26/2019.

Mandaeans on the Yahoo Group started 2004 with a debate on whether they should become a missionary religion. By becoming a missionary religion, if such a move could be contemplated, Mandaeans would gain the benefit of attracting new followers through marriage among other means. The fear of Mandaean youth marrying out of their "fathers' religion" periodically emerges in discussions among diaspora Mandaeans. Arguing for the end of endogamy through missionary activity, Ziad Sbahi stated that "[t]his measure caused us great harm as our numbers declined and our ideology became RUSTY" (Z. Sbahi 2004). Attracting new blood into the religion, according to Sbahi, would give it a new life. He did not explain what exactly caused him to think that Mandaeans, as religion, community, or culture, was experiencing a decline, but that anxiety was not uncommon among diaspora Mandaeans as we saw earlier. Some group members disagreed with Sbahi's proposal. In their arguments, one can see the seeds of a myth germinating.

Replying to Sbahi, Rana Salam beseeched Sbahi, and those who agreed with him, to "please…keep your self to your fathers religion."[19] Salam's defense of Mandaeans emanated from two separate convictions, logical and religious. The logical conviction was based on the reasoning that Mandaeans who marry outsiders, such as Muslims, will end up becoming Muslims. This is because Islam, according to Salam, does not allow converts to revert back to their original religions. As for religious conviction, Salam argued that the Mandaean religion is better than, say Islam, because it is the first religion known to man.

"We are from Adam so we are the oldest religon,, thay are [meaning Muslims] just 1400 years…." (Salam 2004). By claiming Mandaean to be the first religion (or ethnic group?) which

[19] Typos appear in the original.

descended from Adam, the first man, Salam was only repeating a religious myth which came to be a common narrative of the Mandaean origin despite lack of historical evidence.[20] Salam reported the myth as a factual statement, one that did not require any questioning. Other Mandaeans shared her convictions too.

One of the most important parallels to Salam's argument came from a well-respected religious figure, Alaa Nashmi, the same charismatic priest who had weighed in on the Zigma Storm in the previous chapter. Nashmi published a piece on the Mandaean religion in which he answered ten questions on various Mandaean topics including their origin. Using quotes from the Ginza Rba, the Mandaean holy book, Nashmi repeats Salam's myth, albeit in more detail claiming that "the Mandaean religion differs from other religions in that it has no human founder, it is simply the innate law, or *shariah*, of life, [*sharsha ed hai*] which the father of mankind, Adam, knew and abode by. (Nashmi 2011).[21] The Mandaean religion, as Nashmi sees it, predates even humans. The abstract nature of such a conception of religion lends itself to the realm of spirituality. Nashmi does not investigate the epistemological premises of his claim. He does not, for instance, explain how he interprets the Mandaean notions of spirit, nature of knowledge, and religion, or how any of that relates to the individual. It would be more guesswork than anything to attempt extrapolating the meaning of any of these notions based on what Nashmi tells us. Yet Nashmi does not attempt a high-level explanation of Mandaean

[20] For nuanced and well researched account of the origin of Mandaeans, see Kevin van Bladel's important book *From Sasanian Mandaeans to Ṣābians of the Marshes*. In this book, Bladel argues that oldest known manuscript by an outsider to mention the Mandaeans was an account from the Sassanid period by a certain Bar Konay. Buildinng his case on that text as well as other sources, Bladel argues that the Mandaeans must have derived their religion from the Kentaean religion sometime around the fifth century. For more details see, Bladel, Kevin T. *From Sasanian Mandaeans to Ṣābians of the Marshes*. Leiden: Brill, 2007

[21] The original text of the Nashmi's piece, which was posted on Yahoo Group in 2004, is not viewable in the Yahoo Group. The same text was later published on Mandaean.dk, which is the website of the Mandaean Charity Committee in Scandinavia.

theology for the simple reason that his targeted audience consists of mainly Mandaean living in diaspora who probably knew very little about their religion.

Nashmi's spiritual take on the Mandaean religion, simple, literalist, and under-developed as it might be, underpins an important tendency among Mandaeans during that time. It tells us that the Mandaeans who used digital media as a source of information, sought simple, if under-developed, platitudes about their religion. This simplistic tendency replaces a previous, more mature attempt to understand the origin of the Mandaeans.

In the mid-1990s, the Mandaean author Aziz Sbahi wrote *The Origins of Sabians and their Religious Beliefs* which presented a historically grounded narrative of the religion. In his book, Sbahi traced the Mandaeans to the Babylonian era. The book was popular enough to have had multiple editions printed between 1996 and 2002. More known for his history within the Iraqi Communist Party as a secretary of the party, Sbahi wrote a widely-read book on the ICP. [22] In contrast to Nashmi's account, Sbahi's book, seems radical.[23] Sbahi concedes that the Mandaean religion "could have been affected by one hue or another" of the religions of Mesopotamia and the Dead Sea region. Sbahi sees the Mandaean religion to have originated in an environment that experienced multiple currents of religious beliefs ranging from the Hellenic to the Babylonian, and from Gnostic to Judaic. Through a dynamic exchange of ideas and beliefs over many centuries, the Mandaean religion, according to Sbahi, emerged in its most current form (A. Sbahi 2002).

[22] *Decades from the History of the Iraqi Communist Party*, known in Arabic as "*Uqud min Tarikh al-Hizb el-Shiou'i al-Iraqi"*
[23] Known in Arabic as "*Usul al-Sabe'a al-Mandaeyeen wa Mu'taqadatehim al-Dinia"*

Clearly, Sbahi's view could not have been more different from Nashmi's. The differences start from their sources and work their way up to their conclusions. Sbahi read only secondary literature on Mandaeans because of lack of knowledge of Mandaic while Nashmi read only the religious texts and ignored all else. For Mandaeans in the post-invasion era however, the lightweight, unhistorical, even mythical, view of religion, such as that espoused by Nashmi, had the most appeal. This is because such a view afforded the Mandaeans a useful myth on which they can found their identity as one of Iraq's most ancient sects, if not the most ancient of them all. At an era when Iraq's minorities experienced identity crisis, competition between various ethno-religious mythologies thrived.

Conceiving themselves as the oldest, or one of the oldest sects in Iraq did not offer the Mandaeans any protections, however. News of Mandaean individuals targeted and killed, gold shops robbed, and individuals kidnapped spread in the Yahoo Group very quickly. Understandably, one of the most terrifying incidents for the group members involved the kidnapping of a young girl:

> Dear Mandaeans, I was informed that the girl who was kidnapped in Baghdad /Zayona on Monday May 25, 2004 is … Her mother is... .The girl is in her last year at the College of Technology/Computer Science. She was kidnapped in front of her house while she was giving the garbage truck operators some charity. (Mutlag 2004)

The victim was released, according to an update message, after the family had paid ten thousand US dollars. Understandably, incidents such as this signaled to the Mandaeans that they were immediately targeted. As we will see later, the Christians who had their share of targeted attacks had also reached a similar conclusion.

Not all the news Mandaeans received in the Yahoo Group were true however. Misinformation and fake news of killings and kidnappings spread equally quickly, adding to the

chaos that seemed to mark the daily life of psot-invasion Iraq. “Dear friends,” announced one message, “We've heard a rumor from San Diego that Shiaa militia massacred 31 Mandaeans gathering in the Mendi in Baghdad.” (A. Bahoor 2003). This piece of fake news was soon debunked on the ground that a major incident such as this would have resounding repercussions among Mandaeans worldwide very quickly had it really happened. Fake as it certainly was, this incident, and others, indicate a growing sense of distrust, even fear towards Muslims, especially the Shi’i Muslims.

Some Mandaeans did not need a proliferation of bad news to reach the grim conclusion that they, as a religious minority were being targeted in Iraq. “Ibrahim and Adam are our first prophets, they were living in Iraq” claimed Raed Omara from Holland then urged Mandaeans inside and outside Iraq to take action. According to him, “[y]ou cann't keep silence if someone don't want to justify your exist[e]nce.” (Omara 2004). It is not easy to discern what action was Omara exactly calling for. What is clear from his message though is that this action needed to be taken by Mandaeans for Mandaeans.

Omara’s message followed from a thread in which he argued with another group member, Aassam Salem, whether it would be better for Mandaeans to stay in Iraq, “our holy place from many thousands years” or leave it. Omara’s position is that leaving the spiritual homeland will cause Mandaeans to stray away from their religion. In response to Omara, one group member, Salem, sums up what he perceives to be an irreconcilable situation for the Mandaeans in Iraq in one sentence. “[L]iving among the Muslims is like the fighting” Salem states before asking, “way [why] i have to fight !” (Salem 2004). The deep distrust, the impossibility of conceiving coexistence with Muslims, and the implied call to abandon Iraq reflect some of feelings that Mandaeans harbored towards the reality of post-invasion Iraq. These

feelings proved central in affirming their sectarian identity as Mandaeans, Iraq's oldest ethno-religious group. It is this image which would dictate how they expressed themselves politically.

Other Mandaeans also weighed in on the debate of leaving Iraq or staying and facing the unknown. Ghazi Elmanah, an active Yahoo Group member, took Salam's position. Horrified by what is happening in Iraq, he declared that "I am beginning to think that the mandaeans do not have a place in Iraq any more.". For the Mandaeans who believed that their ancestors have lived in Iraq since the dawn of time, such a confession must have been not only very painful, but also very distressing. He suggested contacting the US State Department, but his suggestion does not go far. Elmanahi wonders what would happen to his fellow men "if and when the[y] take power" (Elmanahi 2004). By "they" Elmanahi could be meaning either Muslims or Islamists. The blurring of the line between the two categories, Muslims and Islamists, indicates a dangerous twist in the way Mandaeans, and later Christians, began to view the Muslim other. Elmanahi's ambiguous over-generalization proved to be sufficient to lead others to go far beyond ambivalence.

Responding to Elmanahi, Faheem al-Saleem makes the case that Muslims have always been the cause of Iraq's misery. He read the Islamic conquest of Iraq as a two-stage conversion process. First, they "converted the Iraqis into Muslem." The second, and more interesting stage according to al-Saleem, was that they turned Iraqis "into Arab by hook or crook." Fast forward to the modern times, al-Saleem saw a continuity of Muslim oppression. "[T]his had continued," he said, referring to the oppression, "with the Otomans & then with the Sunni King Faisal & his family." For al-Saleem, even the Iraqi monarchy was an oppressive Islamist entity, not because of a certain policy that they adopted, but apparently only because they were Muslims. The tirade goes on to include the Ba'athis and "their leader," Saddam Hussein. Al-Saleem has no faith in

Shia government either. For him, the Shi'is "have no experience in leading…the country." He goes on to predict that "they will lose" the chance of governing Iraq which is given to them by the Americans due to their lack of experience. (F. al-Saleem 2004).

Trying to mitigate what could turn into a sectarian circus, Suhaib Nashi, the Yahoo Group co-founder and moderator, intervened, reminding group members that the people who are committing terrorism "are the same people who for the last forty years killed" and committed many atrocities against Iraqis.[24] Staying optimistic, Nashi reaffirms that "[t]he mandaeans survived before and will survive now." Whether mass migration was the only way to preserve Mandaeans, Nashi leaves that up to the Mandaeans living in Iraq to decide. He then assures "those who escape for a legitimate reason" that the Union will help them "as much as we can" (Nashi 2004). Calm and reassuring as Nashi's words they indeed were, they could not persuade Mandaeans not to think in sectarian terms. As a matter of fact, his words even failed to convince him not to take a sectarian stance as will be seen soon.

The growing senses of alienation, hopelessness, and oppression combined with a crystalizing sense of religious and ethnic identity among Mandaeans manifested themselves in the elections. The elections in question here are the National Assembly Elections which were held on January 30, 2005. "To make that deadline," according to The New York Times, "it was believed, there was no time to conduct a census or… [draw] district lines." (Weisman 2005) The nationwide election would see 275 members chosen for an assembly tasked with voting on the

[24] Nashi's specific time reference of forty years ago refers to the year 1963. In this year, pro-Nasserist members of the army, supported by Ba'ath party members carried out a military coup against the founder of the Iraq republic, Abdul Karim Qassim. Qassim's rule remains popular among many Iraqi leftists today and is very popular among Mandaeans in the Yahoo Group as evidenced by Nashi's reference. (Tripp 2007)

new constitution. The elections excited the Mandaeans as it promised change. It also offered them the opportunity to exercise sectarian politics.

The Mandaeans had no strategy to speak of to tackle the elections. Taken, as it were by surprise, they neither knew the role they could play in it nor how to go about participating in it. More than 3 weeks prior to the election date, confusion was the order of the day. This confusion is best summed up in Dr. Ayar Farhan's email addressed to Suhaib Nashi:

> I would like to know what is the Mandaean idea regarding the election; which group are we voting for as Mandaean in Iraq and abroad; is there any instruction to vote for our candidates (if there is any) and in which list are there[they] placed, and why in this list? [25] Or is it left for individuals to vote whatever they want? Or are we using tactical vote, that is difficult to control if we have a proportional representation in place? Do we have any instruction from Iraq on this matter? (A. Farhan 2005).

Farhan's email clearly shows concern for the Mandaeans' position within the elections. His confusion could also be interpreted as an anxiety that the Mandaeans might not benefit from the elections if they were not prepared for it. He did not know if the Mandaeans were to vote for a specific coalition or a specific candidate. In other words, he did not know whether to vote on a sectarian basis or personal, ideological preference. The anxious undertone of the message implies that the lack of planning needs to be addressed, with urgency. His suggestion regarding tactical votes retains some vagueness. It does imply though that without a clear plan and agreed upon candidate, the elections would not benefit the Mandaeans.

Farhan's message above closes with a very interesting question. It asks whether there had been any guidance from Iraq on this matter. This question reflects not only the deep concern that

[25] The word list means political coalition. *Qaem'a*, which in translates literally to *list*, is the term usually used in Iraq's elections.

Mandaeans in diaspora had for their co-religionists back home, but also a readiness, if not an expectation, that Mandaeans in Iraq should take the lead in organizing and guiding the Mandaean vote. Likewise, his closing question implies yet another question, namely what they would do if they did not have instructions from Iraq. The Mandaeans recognized the opportunity that the 2005 elections, rushed and haphazard as it was, presented them to enter Iraq's political arena.

For Salam Farhan, who wrote replying to Ayar Farhan, the answer was simple. Writ in upper case letters to maximize the emphasis, he urged "ALL MY FELLOW MANDAEANS" to "PLEASE CONCENTRATE ON THIS =OUR RIGHTS IN THE CONSTITUTION,,,THE FUTURE OF OUR COMMUNITY ,,THEIR RIGHTS." What is at stake for Farhan is nothing less than the very future of Mandaeans. Their rights, as he sees them, depend on the constitution. The constitution, according to him must be changed to include the name Mandaean. This is a necessity for him because "the mandaeans" he said "[have] never ever [been] mentioned in the constitution before." (S. Farhan 2005). Farhan, like other Mandaeans and Christians who spoke of the need of having their religion or sect mentioned in the constitution, viewed that as an ultimate goal by itself. This fact signals the tendency among Iraqi minorities in the wake of the invasion to hold the constitution in very high regard.

If Farhan's goal was to have the Mandaeans mentioned in the new constitution, the way he saw to making that happen was through was very straightforward: to have a Mandaean elected. "we want and need badly and desperately" he says, "some one--mandaean--to succeed to be a member to act for his own community to docu[m]ent our rights." The key word, in Farhan's plan is someone *Mandaean*. As Farhan understands it, only a Mandaean can represent Mandaeans in the political sphere. To this end, he again urged his fellow-Mandaeans, again in his all-caps style, to postpone "ALL OTHER MATTERS NOW…OUR OBJECTIVE IS

HAVING OUR RIGHTES DOCUMMENTED IN THE CONSTITUTION" (S. Farhan 2005). Farhan's call for the Mandaeans to bypass all their differences and agree on working together to gain legal recognition resonated with other group members. For some members, the call for a Mandaean vote became more than just a call, but akin to an imperative.

Even before any confirmations of Mandaean candidates participating in the elections had come out, the expectation was that some Mandaeans would run for the elections and, more importantly, "we should support" them. For example, Alaa Nashmi, the young priest we encountered earlier, showed a rather lenient stance as he was willing to support any candidates viewed as "liberal, secular, [and] believe in the rights of minorties" (Nashmi 2005). As a man of religion, Nashmi only recognized secular and liberal candidates as being sensitive to minorities rights and, therefore, worthy of "our" vote. By contrast, the Mandaean candidate, in Nashmi's view, did not need to be secular or liberal to gain the Mandaean vote because, Nashmi presumed, they will naturally seek the benefit of "our community."

The implication of Nashmi's position is that non-secular Muslims will not work for the benefit of minorities. Interestingly, some of the Mandaeans like Nashmi saw sectarian politics, if applied by Muslim Iraqis to be problematic. They recognized that sectarian politics, a politics based on religious difference such as the Shi'i – Sunni politics, would certainly overlook the rights of minorities within the system they participate in it. Yet, these same Mandaeans could only see themselves participating in politics on sectarian basis, as Mandaeans. The attempt here is not to pass a judgment on how Mandaeans chose to express their sectarian identity politically. As Fanar Haddad reminds us "the morally charged and negative connotations of the term "sectarianism" preclude its usage in a meaningful way" (Haddad 2011, p.25). Rather, the goal

here is to understand how Mandaeans, or more specifically the Mandaeans presented in the Yahoo Group, conceived of projecting their sectarian identity in the new Iraqi political space.

Nashmi's ambivalent position towards the non-Mandaean candidates who might champion the Mandaean cause proved too 'liberal' for some group members. Furat al-Saleem for one, made it the duty of Mandaeans to elect a Mandaean, and only Mandaean, candidate at all costs. After coming across unconfirmed news that an unidentified "Mandaean figure" would join a political coalition. or list, called the People's Union, he immediately assumed "that this is the list we are endorsing." Who the candidate was, what ideological currents shaped their political preferences, and more importantly, why should other Mandaeans ignore any of these considerations when choosing that candidate are some of the many questions that al-Saleem avoids when making his assumption. The matter, as al-Saleem presented it, did not warrant a debate at all. Even before confirming whether a Mandaean would indeed be in the People's Union, he urged all Mandaeans to vote for People's Union "regardless of your ideology." (F. al-Saleem 2005). When a Mandaean candidate was finally confirmed to run for the elections, al-Saleem's view becomes standard among the group members.

Mandaeans of the Yahoo Group did not wait long before the news was announced. Roughly a week after the thread above transpired, a formal announcement was shared on the e-group by none other than Nashi himself. Written in red letters, the title of the massage declared "Yes For Subhi al-Mubarak, the Upcoming Mandaean Candidate for the Iraqi Parliament." Penned by the candidate's campaign coordinator, Samera Sibahi Khalaf, the announcement confirmed al-Saleem's rumor. Mubarak was running in the People's Union coalition. Alternatively known as Coalition 324, the People's Union, according to Khalaf, is a coalition that has a "democratic, secular program." (Khalaf 2005). Khalaf did not give details on the

nature of the People's Union, its political agenda, and how it was formed or funded. What she told us, instead, was that this coalition included representatives of the Chaldeans and Yazidis. Khalaf also gave a short biography of Subhi Mubarak. Assuring readers that he was "born to a Mandaean family." He took on multiple roles within Iraq's General Mandaean Council.[26] He was elected Secretary-General of the Council, according to Khalaf still, after the invasion. With his experience at the Council and the excitement that seemed to enwrap his campaign, Mubarak's star quickly rose.

The excitement was hard to contain indeed. Following Mubarak's formal announcement, Yahoo Group members started a race of endorsements. Faheem al-Saleem suggested "voting for Subhi [Mubarak] right no[w]" within the Yahoo Group as a way to measure support for the Mandaean candidate within the online community. (F. al-Saleem 2005). Voting never took place as al-Saleem had suggested but calls for endorsement in the form of "I too [e]ndorse Subhi Mubark" proliferated very quickly. The overwhelming support within the group prompted a group member to suggest calling Mubarak "Mahboob el-Jamahir," Arabic for fan favorite. (Al-Sam 2005). Fan favorite is an apt description for Mubarak, especially since he apparently was not the only Mandaean to run for the elections. We know of at least one other Mandaean, Riyad Radhi, who ran for the same elections from his hometown of Basra and was registered under the National Reconciliation coalition, headed by Ayad Alawi. Unfortunately, Radhi was brutally assassinated with his son on his way back home from work one day before the elections. (Zahroon 2005). Despite his tragically short run, Radhi's candidacy garnered no interest among the Yahoo Group Mandaeans, for whom Mubarak remained unrivaled.

[26] In Arabic it is *Majlis 'Umum al-'Taefa al-Manda'yia*.

The endorsements for Mubarak's campaign peaked when the group moderator, Suhaib Nashi, publicly endorsed him. Before the invasion, Nashi had unequivocally rejected to participate in the opposition conference in London because that would have been a participation on sectarian basis. Less than three years later, the same Nashi was urging the Mandaeans to publicly endorse "the representative that you think will serve the Mandaean[s] [the]most" and adding "I personally will indorse Subhi Mubark." (Nashi 2005). Nashi went even further still, as if his full, public endorsement was not sufficient, he shared a message from Um Yahya from Denmark who said she would defy her old age, blindness, and poor health and head to the voting center with three interpreters to cast her vote for "the son of Mubarak…with hope that my participation would benefit our people in Iraq." Nashi commented on Um Yahya's words saying, with a hint of religious zeal, "May Hayy (God) keep you as a symbol for us." (Nashi 2019). In a short period of less than three years, Nashi's staunch secularism transformed into sectarian peacocking. Some group members found that change objectionable. [27]

Reacting to the whole trend of endorsing Coalition 324 (aka the People's Union) some group members criticized the overt sectarian attitude of the group. Layla al-Roomi, Nashi's sister, became "angry" because some group members were "asking people to vote for 324 because there is one mandean name in it." She asked rhetorically "where is your s[e]cular non[-] s[e]ctarion appro[a]ch to the iraqi problem [?]" Al-Roomi's almost unique position within the group reflects the great change that overcame the Mandaean approach to politics. Speaking with a collective voice, she explained that "we do not want to change into another [en]tirely

[27] Nashi would later argue that Mandaeans have no safe home in Iraq anymore in a co-authored article with John Bolender, Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara. Highlighting the exodus of large numbers of Mandaeans from Iraq following the U.S. led invasion and the targeted persecution many of them experienced, Nashi and Bolender call on the international community, and in particular the US and EU, to adopt Honderich's Principle of Humanity and take in all the Mandaean refugees "to prevent this humanitarian disaster from continuing." (Suhaib Nashi & John Bolender 2009)

rel[i]gious group." The only way forward, according to her, was through working within the larger socio-political sphere as part of the Iraqi whole. She then went on to call for "respect and tolera[nce]" to replace "hatred" towards other "religions and cultures." (Layla al-Roomi 2005)

Al-Roomi's important critique woke up some ambivalent feelings that otherwise would have remained unvoiced. Wondering how he ended up sectarian, Faheem al-Saleem responded to Layla in a message that can serve as eulogy to a secular zeitgeist that had once prevailed in Iraq. "I am just divided" he tells al-Roomi, "between my deep secular feelings and my Mandaean Gnostic feelings!" These two sides of him never reconciled with each other it seems. Recounting what must now be a distant past at the time he was in his twenties, he said "I have never been like this.I was a 100% secular." "Was" is the keyword in this statement, for "nowadays," he lamented, "things look different." By different, he of course meant sectarian. Al-Saleem could neither explain his past secularism nor his current sectarian attitudes. He did not understand how he became sectarian, yet he sought to justify it as a means to protecting the rights of Mandaeans. "By hook or crook," he said, repeating his old idiom, "we need every vote." The idealism that had once colored his past has morphed into a realism that dictated his present. (F. al-Saleem 2005). This was true of al-Saleem as well as many others of his generation of Mandaeans and Christians, not to say Iraqis in general. Political oppression, wars, invasion, migrations, and other forces beyond their control or comprehension must have disrupted their existence in ways hard to imagine, leaving them isolated and forgotten, their world confined to their religious and ethnic sects.

Al-Roomi's rhetoric of inclusiveness and collaboration had generated mild support within the group, but ultimately failed to persuade anyone within the group, including al-Roomi herself, to vote for any coalition other than 324. Al-Roomi argued that she was voting for 324 "because it

is the only non-sectarian non rel[i]giuos group." (Layla al-Roomi 2005). A few other group members agreed with her, but that position ultimately made no difference since they all voted, or said they would vote, for 324. Yet even with all that support, the total Mandaean left not a dent on the election's outcome.

The election concluded with the Shi'i majority United Coalition as the clear winner with Da'wa party's head, Ibrahim al-Ja'fary eventually heading the government. Subhi Mubarak did not make it. Going into the elections, Nashi as well as other Mandaeans admitted that they did not "feel so optimistic... I think Itehad Al-Shaab will get about 5% (+/-)." (Nashi 2005). The failure of Mandaean's first true sectarian approach to politics however proved to be a much-needed reality check. Democracy did not guarantee representation as the Mandaeans were to learn. For the Mandaeans, the true lesson of the elections was that it altered them to the importance of revising their approach.

Failure in the elections prompted Mandaeans to look into their political approach and revise it. Some doubled down on sectarian politics, blaming the election's failure on what they saw as the fragmented political outlook of their co-religionists. Championing this view in a discussion thread with Suhaib Nashi, Dr Ayar Farhan maintained that "[w]e should learn from this experience for next time…let…us have ONE organization purely Mandaean one no…other, to nominate our candidates." Farhan's position originated from a strong feeling of disappointment. His choice to blame those who did not vote or voted for coalitions other than 324, might be viewed as a typical case of scapegoating, but it is also not a surprising reaction, given that this is the first democratic exercise for many of them. (A. Farhan 2005).

Suhaib Nashi did not see eye to eye with Farhan. Having developed a better sense of the election process, Nashi was certain that "we could not put one person in the Parliament no matter

what." Breaking down the causes of the failure, Nashi admitted that Mandaeans did not have "enough numbers that will agree on one candidate." To make up numbers, Nashi believed that Mandaeans needed to collaborate with other minorities such as the "Christians, Yazidies, Shebek and others" who found themselves in a similar situation. (A. Farhan 2005).[28] The minorities' candidate who would make it to the parliament, according to Nashi, should represent all of them. There was another option, Nashi told us, which was discussed by Mandaean delegates with the Committee that would aid in writing the constitution in March. According to the new proposal, minorities "should have reserved seats in the parliament as the situation of the Pakistani Constitution." Pleasantly surprised by Nashi's well-thought response, Farhan readily agreed with the idea of a coalition of minorities, and suggested, with visible excitement, that "we should work on it from now." (A. Farhan 2005).

Although their first exercise in democracy failed, Mandaeans realized more or less that they could not win a sectarian game in place where they constitute a very small minority, and when large numbers of this small minority lived in diaspora. The myths they propagated about being the as old as mankind, gave them a false idea in their sect's place in Iraq's demographic picture. The worsening security situation was conducive to the rise of anti-Muslim sentiments, which pushed some of them to view the whole history of Mandaean existence under Muslim rule as a history of continuous oppression. A sectarian outlook to politics, by and large, determined their choice of candidate in the first parliamentary elections after the invasion.

Not all Mandaeans harbored sectarian feelings and a serious debate into the nature, and value, of sectarian politics for Mandaeans took place before the elections. Fearful of a Muslim

[28] Nashi's discussion is taken from the same thread of Ayar Farhan's message.

majority government and lack of representation, most Mandaeans, who by no means were not the only Iraqi sect to do so, were prone to act on sectarian impulses and choose to vote for a coalition that had a Mandaean candidate in the belief that he will fairly represent them. It was only when the elections concluded with their candidate not winning a seat that Mandaeans realized that they needed stronger coalitions, mainly with other minorities, to ensure some representation. In doing so, they realized that as a single sect, in the current political system, they lacked the numbers to gain any representation. They began thinking of joining bigger coalitions but did so on a purely sectarian basis.

"Are you with the Chaldeans or the Assyrians…?"

Although the post-invasion Christian political scene varied a great deal from the Mandaean's, many similarities existed. Feeling neglected by the temporary constitution and being targeted by terrorist attacks, the Christians, like the Mandaeans, turned inward. To supposedly record the heritage of Iraqi Christian, they called for a calendar that predated Christianity. They started remembering their recent history under the Ottomans and in modern day Iraq as one of continuous oppression against the Christians, a claim that elicited sectarian, anti-Muslim sentiments. Yet despite agreeing on parts of this narrative, the Christians continued to invest in their ethnic differences fighting, verbally, fiercer than ever before. As the 2005 elections drew closer, Chaldeans and Assyrians and other Christians organized themselves into separate political coalitions according to their views on the issue of ethnicity, hence cementing their divisions further still.

The year 2004 saw multiple terrorist attacks on Iraq's Christians. Most notable among those were a series of apparently coordinated bombings on a number of churches in Baghdad and Mosul, the two Iraqi cities with the largest population of Christians outside Kurdistan. The attacks left no less than ten dead and scores injured (ankawa.com 2004). These attacks continued a terrifying trend that started after the invasion and saw multiple attacks and kidnappings of Christians, including the gruesome murder of a septuagenarian nun in 2002.[29] The 2004 attacks marked an escalation which would only worsen over time. Two kinds of reactions emanated from the attacks. The first kind of reaction was directed at the Christian parties who were likened to "shops, whose owners are only interested in buying and selling at the expense of the people whose name they stole." The site member who wrote this reply, Jamil Rafael, went on to say that "I get a quiver of anger every time I hear a party called Christian, or Chaldean, or Assyrian, or Syriac" (ankawa.com 2004). Rafael directed his anger at the political parties who used or "stole" as he put it, the ethnic or religious names to achieve personal gains. This view was not unlike that of the Mandaean Zigma300 who smeared the Mandaean priesthood for what he saw as neglecting their duties. Among both Christians and Mandaeans, there seemed to have been a number of politically and religiously uninvolved individuals, the so-called ordinary people, who would not hesitate to blame their religious or political authorities whenever they think they failed them. They represented an outlier at any case as not many people espoused their strongly worded views.

The second, more important reaction harbored an anti-Islamic sentiment. Instances of such a reaction could be traced to earlier events targeting Christians. In 2003, Nabil Daman

[29] It was not uncommon for news of this sort to be circulated on the Mandaean Yahoo Group or for news regarding Mandaeans to be shared on ankawa.com.

wrote on ankawa.com complaining about what he saw as an "Usuli" and "Salafi" (i.e. fundamental Islamist) attempt ban alcohol shops in Iraq, a measure that could impact, according to Daman, the livelihood and the freedom of choice of Christians. While ridiculing the effectiveness of such a measure, the incident reawakened in Daman memories of religious oppression that, he feared, might come back to life. "I remember in the seventies," he recalled, "how the police used to hover around areas of Christians and Yazidis in Ramadan to humiliate and imprison who ever lights a cigarette or drinks a cup of water in the heat of the summer." (Daman 2003). It is not clear if Daman was implying that Iraq's police in the seventies were Salafi Islamists in any way, or whether they were lay-Muslims acting out of pious impulses. He did not seem to distinguish between a state sponsored fundamentally religious police force and a number of pious policemen in an otherwise secular police force. Not that such a distinction would probably matter to him anyway. As far as he, a member of a religious minority, was concerned the authority, by and large Muslim, showed intolerance towards a minority group he identified with. It is this implication that won him the affinity of other group members.

Once one starts viewing the world in the binary form of a religious majority versus a minority, it becomes hard to draw clear boundaries. Like some Mandaeans who viewed the Monarchy as being an oppressive Islamic state, some Christians saw Iraq in the seventies, by all accounts one of the most secular forms of government in the region at the time, as religiously intolerant, Islamist state. While Mandaeans viewed the history of Islam as one of continuous persecution of Mandaeans, Christians went as far back as World War I, to re-read the Armenian Massacre as part of a larger Christian Massacre. This massacre was committed, according to a shared statement by multiple Christian groups, by "the leaders of Ottoman empire, and their aids and local tribal agents." The massacre was, according to the same group, "planned and intended"

against the "Chaldeans, Syriacs, Assyrians" to "end the civilization that dates back thousands of years and the shared values of the Christians who have inhabited this region… " (Syriacs Gathering Movement 2004).[30] Like the Shi'is and the Sunnis who competed over whose narrative of victimhood, as Haddad would put it, was more tragic, the Christians, like the Mandaeans, looked back at their history and viewed it as a continuum of religious oppression, one in which they featured as the perpetual victims.

Similar to the Mandaeans who used myths to affirm their group identity as the most ancient religion, the Christians thought of themselves as Iraq's original inhabitants. In a meeting in Naṣiriyah in 2003 which included more than 100 representatives of various Iraqi political factions, a representative of the Democratic Assyrian Party reminded the attendees that Iraq's history goes back "not just 1400 years, but 7000 years." The representative was hinting at the fact that Muslims were not the earliest inhabitants of Iraq, but latecomers compared to the Christians (Zowaa 2003). This claim was later backed by a precise calendar for the year 7305-6 which corresponded with the year 2006 (Almalih 2005). On their part, the Chaldeans also made

[30] The story behind the massacres of the Christians in Iraq during the World War I is not as straightforward as this view presents it. In *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires 1908-1918*, Michael A. Reynolds sheds light on the issue by placing the Christians of Anatolia, which included the Armenians and Iraq's Christians, in the historical and imperial contexts of the war. Caught up in the bitter struggle between the failing empires, the Ottoman and the Russian, the minorities in the borderland areas were supported by the Russian empire in an attempt to create a pro-Russian front inside the Ottoman empire that could prove useful in the event of a Russian invasion. The Russian empire therefore supplied them with weapons and in fact these armed groups, according to Reynolds, killed thousands of Turks. Retaliating with a brute force familiar among the imperial powers of the time, the Ottomans, led by the Unionists reformers, carried out a vicious campaign against the Armenians the goal of which, according to Reynolds "was if not the extermination of the Armenian community, then the devastation of it such that it could no longer have a credible claim to Eastern Anatolia." (Reynolds 2011, p.152). Other ethnic groups such as the Kurds and Jews also faced similar fates to the Armenians. According to Reynolds, potentially as many as one million Armenians out of a population of possibly one and half million perished in the as a result of the Ottoman campaign. The Christians, according to Reynolds, suffered losses "comparable in proportionate terms "to those of the Armenians. For more details, see Michael A. Reynolds. *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires 1908-191*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

similar claims regarding their origins.[31] Whether these calendars are accurate or not, or whether the historical claim which the calendar makes was based on any factual evidence is not the contention of this paper. The argument to be made here is the following: After the invasion, minorities felt the need to reassert their group identities, true, imagined or a bit of both, and to seek to authenticate these identities through claiming, rightly or wrongly, a prehistorical connection to the land. This tendency indicates an anxiety that minorities felt after the changing political scene, probably to a degree they had not felt before.

Some Christians built on the many similarities shared among their co-religionists in an attempt to bridge the widening divide between the Chaldeans and the Assyrians. Alas, the push back against such attempts pronounced the divisions even louder than before. Early in February of 2004, a call for unifying the Christian churches of Iraq under one name went very much unnoticed. (Ibrahim 2004). A month earlier, a more organized effort was initiated with the promising formation of the Assyrian Unifying Front.[32] The front claimed its goal to "devise a strategic plan to address the Coalition Authority, the Governing Council, and the international society regarding the demands of the Assyrian nation…" (Front 2004). The vague nature of the goals of the Front as well as the names of the individuals who formed it and signed the foundation statement drew much criticism from ankawa.com's members. Serious accusations mounted against the Front's members linking them to the Ba'ath party and blaming them for

[31] See for example the Chaldean author Amer H. Fatuhi's book, *Chaldeans/ Kaldani Since the Early Beginning of Time 5300 B.C. – 2004*. The book focuses on the "continuous ethnic presence" of the Chaldeans in Iraq since the antiquities. (Fatuhi 2007). Also, contrast this view with Shak Hanish's examination of the history Iraq's Christians which, he argues, has no records earlier than the ninth century B.C., a date that is much later than many of Iraq's Christians would accept. (Hanish 2008)

[32] In Arabic it is *al-Jabha al-Ashuria al-Wuhdawia*.

undermining the cause of the Assyrian people. (Front 2004). The Front's attempt seemed to have been born dead as the Front's name vanished soon after it was announced.

Other unifying attempts among diaspora Christians proved more successful than the Front's. Assyrochaldean Students and Youth Union of Michigan (A. S. Y. U. M.) represents one such attempt. Although described by the participants as a "confusing" experience, A. S. Y. U. M. met at least twice. In the second meeting, the 20 or so young members who held the meeting agreed "to keep any relation to politics or religions out of A.S.Y.U.M." (Stephan 2004). Another unifying attempt came from Linköping, Sweden with the formation of the Chaldean, Syriac, Assyrian Ethnic Council to "support the unification process." The Linköping Council provided an overview of the nature of their work and the discussions that took place among its participants going back to December of the previous year. The Linköping Council found it important that Christians should "avoid debating the naming issue at length in order to settle it while [we are still] at this elementary stage of unification." The naming issue, according to the Linköping Council required "calm and studied" seminars and discussions in order to properly address it. (Khoshaba 2003). Both the A. S. Y. U. M. and Linköping Council succeeded, however marginally, in bringing Christians together because they avoided debating the contentious naming issue. Unlike them, Christians inside Iraq did not have the luxury of avoiding that issue.

The calls for unity from overseas did not cause the widening divide between the different Christian political parties. Of these, the Assyrian party ZOWAA and the Chaldean Democratic Union Party (CDU), leading armies of indoctrinated intellectuals on each side, were the main rivals. The ideological differences between the two parties were embodied in the persons who headed them. Yonadam Kanna, the head of ZOWAA was a staunch believer in the Assyrian nature of all of Iraq's Christians. On the other hand, Ablhad Afraim who headed the CDU

believed wholeheartedly in the Chaldean specificity, so much so that he wrote a two-volume book in Arabic entitled *History of the Chaldeans* in addition to a large number of other books and essays on the Chaldeans. He once said that any Christian who would not accept the precedence of the Chaldeans over other Christians is a "traitor." (ankawa.com 2005)

Despite their clear ideological differences, both Kanna and Afraim shared a lot in common, so much so that the first stages of their biographies could be mistaken for each other's. To start with, both were born in 1951. By 1991, both were actively participating in the uprising against Saddam Hussein's regime following the Second Gulf War. In that same year, both of them participated in a short-lived movement that attempted to unite the Chaldeans and the Assyrians. Soon afterwards, they found themselves holding high positions in Kurdistan's then nascent independent government under the rule of Masoud Barazani. Kanna became a Minister of Labor and Housing for elven years then a Minister of Industry and Energy for two years. In July 2003, he was chosen by the Coalition Administration to be a member in the Governing Council. He was the only Christian to be chosen for that role (zowaa.org 2018).

Afraim's luck was more mediocre than that of his archrival. After the unification attempt of 1991 had failed, Afraim also entered the parliamentary elections in Kurdistan, as did Kanna, but he ended up with the less glamorous position of a Deputy Minister. Afraim claimed that he was given that position as a compensation for the rigged elections which saw the parliamentary seat he won "taken by force and in an illegal way." Afraim boasted of using his position in government to help his fellow Chaldeans with jobs and humanitarian aid. A large part of Afraim's career was spent protecting Chaldean identity and advancing cultural goals. For instance, he is credited with stopping a mosque from being built next to a Chaldean church in the

Duhok province, he wrote the national Chaldean anthem, and he represented the Chaldeans in the London Opposition Conference (Chaldean Patriachate of Babylon 2014).

The raging war between Kanna and Afraim seeped into their followers in no time. Chaldeans on the side of Afraim questioned the legitimacy of Kanna's leadership as they accused him of "boarding the American tank." (Tomi 2012). They also accused him of nepotism and of using the Chaldo-Assyrian title as a trick to "win over some nationalist Chaldeans." (Sargon 2004) On the other hand, proponents of Kanna so no harm in replying to these accusations with equally damning charges of sectarianism, falsifying history, and having a questionable loyalty. "We don't know," wondered one Kanna supporter addressing a supporter of Afraim, "are you with the Chaldeans or the Assyrians…?" before concluding that they were neither. This supporter was not implying that Afraim and his supporters are not Christians, but that they are working against the interests of Christians in general by "spreading dissent" among their co-religionists (Sargon 2004).

A third group of Christians which believed that all Christians were naturally Assyrians also existed but proved less consequential than the other two groups. Headed by Ishaya Ishu, the Assyrian coalition formed under the name the General Assyrian Conference (GAC). GAC considered the naming issue to be of paramount importance for Iraq's Christians and exhibited zealous views regarding the Assyrian land in Iraq. (Media 2017). Its approach to the naming issue differed significantly from the previous views we have encountered. While Kanna's side called for Chaldo-Assyrianism and the Chaldeans wanted to keep the Chaldeans, Assyrians, Syriacs ethnically separate, GAC insisted with fervor on the Assyrian origin of Iraq's Christians. As Ishu put it, "the constitutional division between Chaldeans and Assyrians is criminal for our people. This is a sacred matter for us and we will do our best to reunite the Assyrian people"

(ankawa.com 2005).[33] GAC kept a low key overall and did not seem interested in the verbal fights which took place on ankawa.com.

The verbal fights between the two main sides of the debate proliferated. At times they fought over who had a larger turn out of followers at a party event. At other times they repeated the same old fights over whose ethnicity was true and whose was made up. Despite their fierce nature, these fights and heated debate did not affect the reality of Iraq's Christians much. As Emanuel Yukhana argues in his book, *Our Civil War: The Naming War*, the verbal war between the two became meaningless after the constitution was redrafted to include their names separately. This fact represented the legal divorce of the two ethnicities. As he put it, "our civil war was won by the extremist Assyrian action and extremist Chaldean reaction." Yukhana rightly points out that the warring Assyrians and Chaldeans neither took into consideration other Iraqi Christians such as the Syriac, nor did they account for the effects of their disagreements on Christians in neighboring countries. (Yukhana 2005).

As discussed in the first chapter, some Chaldeans pushed for a change in the constitution to name the different ethnic Christian sects separately. The Chaldeans also wanted their name to come third in order after the Arabs and the Kurds. Not all Chaldeans were in favor of such a change, except their voices were not loud enough. When a group claimed representing Chaldeans in Sweden expressed its support for the change, some Chaldeans immediately pushed back questioning the legitimacy of such a representation. (The Committee of United Chaldean Forces 2005). On the other hand, some Assyrian groups expressed their disappointment at the change. One Assyrian organization claimed that the change constituted a "breach on the rights and

[33] List 800 included among other Assyrian groups the Yazidi Movement for Reform and Progress. Whether that is due to the fact that Yazidis use Syriac in their sacred texts, and therefore could be considered ethnically Assyrians, is left unexplained.

reality" of the Christians in general (Democratic Assyrian Organization 2005). The change in the draft of the constitution might have settled the legal debate, but the verbal fighting lingered on.

The continuous verbal fighting proved useful for both ZOWAA and the Chaldean parties in the parliamentary elections which took place in December 2005.[34] Having by that point established a fellowship, these parties had learnt from the National Assembly elections back in January that they needed to grow even bigger if they wanted to make it to the parliament. Having ran in the January elections in multiple independent parties and failed, the Christians, like the Mandaeans, realized that they needed to take part in larger coalitions in all future elections. The available material on the elections of January in ankawa.com indicates that such a realization drew the framework according to which both ZOWAA and the Chaldean Parties approached the elections in December. As Fuad Budagh, a representative of the Chaldean coalition in Baghdad put it, "We will not repeat the same mistake of the last elections and enter [the election] in a large number of parties and scatter our people" (Yusef 2005). Having learnt the lesson well, it was time to form coalitions.

Both ZOWAA and the Chaldean parties became the nuclei of much bigger Christian coalitions.[35] The polarization over the issue of naming convention proved enough to ensure each side a decent following. Interestingly, Chaldean, Assyrian, and Syriac Christian groups joined

[34] Unfortunately, ankawa.com is missing a several months' worth of archival content from the end of December 2004 till mid-year 2005.

[35]It is worth noting that I use the term Chaldean parties to refer to the fact that these parties were not represented by the CDU. The CDU, headed by Afraim, was based in Kurdistan and remained regionally bound, most likely to secure the Chaldean vote in the region. The CDU did not enter a coalition with other Chaldeans in Baghdad despite the similarity of their positions on the issue naming. The Chaldeans in main land Iraq, along with other like-minded Christians, formed a coalition headed by Fuad Budagh.

each side, a fact that reflects the by now cross-ethnic nature of the ideological difference. ZOWAA and the Chaldo-Assyrian Syriac National Council came together to form List 740 under the formal name al-Rafidain (the Two Rivers). Kanna was the head of the new coalition which included 78 Christian figures including a number of academics and represented all Iraqi provinces (Geljana 2005). List 740 earned a single seat in Baghdad. (Kireev 2007). However, they quickly complained of being victims of elections fraud. (Kit 2006).

The Chaldean Ethnic Council along with the Assyrian National Party, the Independent Syriac Movement, and others formed list 752 al-Nahrain Watani (the Two Rivers [are] My Home). Heading list 752's Baghdad office was Fouad Budagh. Despite all he said and did for the Chaldean cause, Afraim opted not to join list 752, which would have been the natural ideological choice for him. Rather, he chose to join the Kurdistan Alliance, a move which secured him a parliamentary seat in the elections. (Kurdistan Government 2005). List 752 failed to gain a seat, a fact which suggests that Afraim, an experienced politician by that point, must have known that his chances in the elections were better running alongside the Kurdistan Alliance than his co-ideologists. GAC formed list 800 and entered the elections but did not gain any seats either.[36]

The non-Muslim minorities, it is important to point out, were only reacting to the way the elections played out which, as Osman points out, "only acted to fuel sectarianism." The elections, which Osman reminds us, were seen by the Shi'is as a "golden opportunity to rectify the political power disparity between them and the Sunnis." (Osman 2002, p.212) As a result, they organized themselves in large coalitions, or lists which guaranteed political dominance.

[36] For a detailed breakdown of the 2005 Legislative Elections results, refer to the electoral archive on https://www.electoralgeography.com/new/en/countries/i/iraq/iraq-legislative-election-2005.html. Accessed on 4/26/2019.

Knowing that they will never rule Iraq in a such a political system, some Sunnis called for boycotting the elections altogether.

Like the Mandaeans in the previous elections, the Christians viewed the elections as a chance to exercise politics on sectarian grounds. Affected by what Ismail et al calls a "climate of politicized sectarianism," the different Christian parties and figures, like other Iraqi sects, took an approach that was "organized around sectarian political blocs." (Ismael and Ismael 2015). The key difference between the two was what they thought of as being their sect. Some Christians viewed their sect being one inclusive category called the Chaldo-Assyrians. Those who believed this ethnic view represented them voted for list 740. Others who believed the Christians to be separate sects voted for list 752 and for Afraim as part of the Kurdistan Alliance. A third, smaller group believed all Christians to be Assyrians and voted for list 800 but won nothing. What remained absent from this scene were the Christian voices that called for a non-sectarian approach to the elections.

Iraq's Christians found themselves turning increasingly inwards after the U.S. led invasion. They sought mythologies about their history which backed their historical narratives as in the use of a Christian calendar to assert their ancient origins. Within the Christians, some sought to reconsider their history of interaction with the Muslims as one of continuous oppression. In doing so, they adopted, as did the Mandaeans, a narrative of victimhood. Understandably, the rhetoric of victimhood emanated after the increasing violence which the Christians were facing in Iraq. Yet, despite all they had in common, Iraq's Christians remained very divided ethnically. The attempts to bridge the divide lacked support from the Chaldean and Assyrian political and religious leadership, and therefore remained small and based outside Iraq. The Chaldean – Assyrian divide over the naming convention dictated the political affiliations of

the Christians. This was clearest in the way they organized themselves before the 2005 parliamentary elections as well as in how they voted in the elections. The Christians entered coalitions with other Christians from different ethnicities whose ethnic views aligned with theirs. The only exception was Afraim who joined a Kurdistan-based party, but only to secure the vote of the Chaldean constituency in the region.

By defining their political outlook along sectarian lines, the Christians did not deviate from the Mandaeans or other sects in Iraq who organized themselves around "sectarian political blocs" as Ismael et al rightly put it. The Christian case was particularly complex due to the multiplicity of the competing ethnic claims they made about themselves. Luckily, their differences, sharp and angry as they were, remained contained within the sphere of discourse and never translated into violence.

Conclusion

This paper started out with the following question: How did the U.S. led invasion affect the discourse of two of Iraq's non-Muslim minorities, the Mandaeans and the Christians. The short answer to that question is that it made their discourse more sectarian. Short answers are problematic however when applied to questions like this. As Fanar Haddad reminds us, [w]hen considering sectarian identity we are dealing with perceptions and emotions rather than attempting a grand narrative of sectarian relations with clearly defined categories and borders, we should begin by recognizing the inherent ambiguity of identity." (Haddad 2011, p.3) With this in mind, this research looked at examples of the discourse of Mandaeans and Christians between the years 2002 and 2006 to identify changes in their conceptions of themselves and how they expressed themselves afterwards.

The first chapter looked at how the Mandaeans and the Christians conceived of their group image around the time of the invasion. Both groups were debating basic notions of group identity. The Mandaeans on the Yahoo Group were debating whether they were a community or a religion. The Christians debated whether they were one people or multiple ethnic groups. These unsettled categories, along with the lack of clear leadership, led to disputes that questioned the existing narratives of history and identity. The 2003 invasion exacerbated this tenuous reality. The Mandaean organizational body suffered cracks that could have seen it divide in half as the Sabian Mandaean World Council emerged seemingly out of the blue, claiming to do a job already performed by the Mandaean Associations Union. The Mandaeans showed remarkable resilience to engaging in politics on sectarian basis before the invasion. They refused to take part in the London Conference of Iraqi opposition as a sect, but they did not stop Mandaean individuals from participating in it as members of other parties. In the case of the Christians, real

divisions along ethnic lines surfaced soon after the invasion. A number of Chaldeans rebelled on what they considered an Assyrian attempt to contain their ethnicity and suppress their identity. They formed their own parties and started heated disputes over issues of legitimacy and representation. Christian minorities like the Syriacs and the Armenians remained more or less silent and marginalized.

The second chapter continues form the first. It looks at how the discourse of the Mandaeans and Christians continued to change. The worsening security situation and the rapid sectarian-ization of the political sphere saw the non-Muslim minorities turn more and more inwards. They propagated myths about their origins which bolstered their sense of group identity. They also adopted narratives of victimhood which helped them view their shared history with Muslims as one of uninterrupted religious oppression. These myths strengthened their sectarian identities, a fact that became very visible in the 2005 National Assembly elections and the Parliamentary elections. The Mandaeans, by and large, voted for a political coalition that contained a Mandaean candidate. Most Mandaeans chose that coalition because it had a Mandaean candidate in it, while some of them chose the coalition because it was what they considered a secular coalition. Their sectarian tendency made some question what happened to their old secular views. How they became confined to a sectarian choice is the story of the 2005 elections.

The Christians participated in both elections in multiple coalitions that differed on the issue of the ethnicity of Iraq's Christians. Chaldeans, Assyrians, and Syriacs disagreed on whether they were one ethnicity or multiple ones and they polarized in political parties that reflected these conflicting, and competing, views. While this multiplicity of Christian parties drew severe criticism from many non-partisan Christians, the criticism revolved around the

argument that such divisions scattered the Christian vote. In the Parliamentary elections at the end of 2005, three distinct ethnic Christian views dominated the scene. The first view which believed all Christians to be one ethnicity, which they called Chaldo-Assyrian. This view was championed by ZOWAA which was headed by the Assyrian Kanna, who was also a member of the Governing Council appointed by the U.S. led Coalition. This view was prevalent enough to win a seat. The opposition to this view claimed that Chaldo-Assyrian was a made-up ethnicity. They argued that Chaldeans, Assyrian, and Syriacs were separate ethnicities and they managed to change the constitution to state that. This view was led by multiple Chaldean parties in addition to some Assyrians and Syriacs who agreed with that. This view won the parties that supported failed to win a seat in Baghdad but won one seat in Kurdistan in the parliamentary elections. A third, less known view claimed that all Christians were Assyrians in origin. This view remained marginal and failed to gain any parliamentary seats.

To a large extent, sectarian tendencies dictated the minority vote in the 2005 elections. This fact reflects a deeper truth which was that the U.S. led invasion created a political atmosphere in which sectarian identities developed at a rapid pace. Many people who used to lean left politically or who identified as secular found themselves cheering for candidates who either shared their ethnicity or, in the case of some Christians, who agreed with their conception of ethnicity. To their credit, the minorities remained peaceful throughout this period, always preferring words to bullets as a means of settling their debates.

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