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Diaspora Roles and Integration in a Host Country:

A Study of the Swedish-Assyrian Community in Stockholm

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Abstract

Assyrians are members of a stateless nation with roots in the Middle East, although due to conflict, persecution and instability a majority of Assyrians now live in diaspora in many different countries. The Assyrian community in Sweden now numbers approximately 100.000 individuals, of which approximately 18.000 to 25.000 live in the greater Stockholm area. This thesis utilizes the example of the Swedish-Assyrian community to analyze two research topics: the political engagement of a diaspora within a host country; and diasporic efforts to maintain a distinctive culture and contribute to its own nation building while residing in diaspora, a particularly pressing question for a stateless nation, such as the Assyrian nation.

This thesis utilizes ethnographic data acquired via personal interviews with Swedish-Assyrian individuals and participant observation to discuss these research subjects. With regards to diaspora political engagement, the thesis finds that Swedish-Assyrians utilize their rights as Swedish citizens and their voices as Assyrians to engage with both Swedish politics and Assyrian causes. They are motivated by both Swedish political issues and by the Assyrian national cause. The ethnographic data is further used to analyze the discourse on identity and nation-building among the Swedish Assyrian community, including the impact of the host country's culture and policies on the diaspora group and attempts to create a unified nation through education and placing emphasis on an ethnic, rather than solely religious, identity. These efforts bring Assyrians in Sweden closer together by helping to bridge differences in language and culture, but as Assyrians internationally now find themselves also affected by the cultures of their new nations, new differences and divisions simultaneously appear.

Keywords

Assyrians, Diaspora, Diaspora Politics, Migration

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Finding Assyrians: In the Middle East, in Sweden

Assyrians have interested me since I was an undergraduate. While interning in Amman, Jordan during my third year of college, I met a number of Iraqi refugees who were residing in Amman, the majority of whom were awaiting resettlement to another country. In line with statistics on the groups leaving Iraq since the 2003 invasion, significant portions of these refugees were Assyrians.

At that time, having read only a little about the minority populations of Iraq, my attention was drawn to this community due to their religious identity (Assyrians being Christians). However, as I continued to research and speak to them, I realized that religion is in fact a secondary aspect of their identity. Principal aspects are their roots and historical ties to the ancient Assyrian empire, one of the first civilizations of Mesopotamia, as well as continued use of a distinct language. I learned about their ongoing marginalization in the Middle East, which has only worsened after 2003, and the subsequent sectarian conflict and broader regional instability. I also learned about the large Assyrian diaspora outside of the Middle East, especially in Sweden. After graduating, I moved to Sweden through a Fulbright grant to study Iraqi refugees in the Stockholm area, and I specifically focused on Assyrians and their own internal integration of the various waves of Assyrians arriving from the Middle East.

1.1 Thesis Aim and Research Questions

This thesis will address two major research questions:

1. How does a diaspora community, specifically a stateless diaspora, maintain its distinctness in a host country? Relatedly, how does a stateless diaspora contribute to its own nation building inside a host community?
2. How does a diaspora engage politically in the host country?

The focus of this thesis will be the Swedish Assyrian community, which will serve as an example of diasporic discourse and activism among a stateless nation that is wrestling with diffusion into the host country and the desire for a homeland and for cultural maintenance in diaspora. I will address Swedish Assyrian political engagement and the discourse among

Swedish Assyrians on political aims, integration, and nation building. The issues covered by political engagement will include both external engagement with the homeland and Swedish foreign policy as well as internal issues of assimilation, generational gaps, and nation-building across national boundaries, both the boundaries of the Middle Eastern countries where Assyrians have migrated from as well as the new boundaries created by the variety of countries in which Assyrians have settled.

The main purpose of this thesis is to contribute to an understanding of stateless diasporas and their political engagement, as well as to a deeper understanding of integration at a time when migration Sweden and the European Union is hotly contested. Assyrians in Sweden are an example of a community that has integrated well into the host country's society and labor market, but still seeks to maintain a separate identity and avoid assimilation. In addition it is a community that participates in the political sphere and has members who seek to impact the politics of its host country as well as the politics of its region of origin. This thesis also seeks to make a small contribution towards the study of the Assyrian people, especially to the study of their situation in diaspora.

1.2 Thesis Outline

The second chapter is an overview of the methods used in this thesis, as well as reflections on the study of this community. It also delves into the history of the Assyrians, beginning with the ancient empires from which they claim descent, to their arrival in Sweden, and following into a history of early nationalist movements and political parties in the Middle East. The historical background of this community is important for understanding the present-day political aims of Assyrian activists. These aims include pursuing claims to land and acknowledgement of historical and modern-day grievances with the states of the Middle East due to, for example, the continued genocide denial by Turkey and the erasure of Assyrians as an ethnic community in discussions on Iraq and Syria. An understanding of the development of Assyrian nationalism is also useful as the history of Assyrian nationalism and early Assyrian nationalist thinkers continue to influence present-day Assyrian activists.

Chapter 3 will set up the theoretical framework and literature review related to the study of a diaspora community, including diaspora political engagement. The subject of political activism and the use of diasporic identity as a political tool are relevant as it is discussed in the later chapters.

Chapters 4 and 5 use ethnographic material to address the research questions. Chapter 4 will discuss Swedish-Assyrians' history of organization in Sweden and outline the main subjects of political engagement and Swedish-Assyrians' dual roles in the Swedish context, while Chapter 5 will delve into Swedish-Assyrians' discourse on identity and their pursuit of a stronger Assyrian identity and nation while in diaspora.

Chapter 2: Methods, Reflections and Background

This chapter will begin with a discussion of the methodologies utilized for the thesis, and continue with reflections on the nature of the fieldwork done and certain issues particular to the study of this community. The chapter will conclude with a historical background on Assyrians as a folk group and their history in Sweden.

2.1 Participant Observation and Field Sites

Since my first year in Sweden as Fulbright scholar, I have attended a variety of events related to the Assyrian community at a diversity of locales, including various cultural centers, government buildings, cinemas, and private homes. I've also ended up spending a significant amount of time with individual Assyrians, taking *fika* (a coffee pause) or hanging around at their homes. One of the main yearly events that I have been to previously is the annual celebration of the Assyrian new year, known as *Akitu* (the name of an ancient spring festival) or *Kha b'Nissan* ("first of Nissan", the month of April, the day of the year it is held). The main celebration of Akitu in the Stockholm area is held in the building of the Assyrian Society in Södertälje (*Assyriska Föreningen i Södertälje),* located around of the two Syriac Orthodox cathedrals in the town. Another non--religious day observed by Assyrian is the memorial day of Naum Faiq, a critical figure in the development of Assyrian nationalism in the early 20th century. The anniversary of his death (February 5th) is commemorated with a cultural festival by the Assyrian Federation, with speakers and music. Outside of these yearly observances, I have attended a number of stand-alone events held by Assyrian organizations, including conferences, film screenings, seminars, and meetings.

Throughout the autumn 2015 semester, I also participated in an Assyrian language course at an Assyrian cultural center in Botkyrka. This center, located near Alby metro station in southern Stockholm, is one of four in Botkyrka alone. The center holds lectures, family--oriented activities, and holiday events.

The language classes were an initiative by the center to help bring Assyrians with origins in different regions closer together, as Assyrians speak two non-mutually intelligible Neo-Aramaic languages. *Turoyo* is an academic term for what Assyrians themselves call *Surayt* or *Suryoyo*, and is spoken by Assyrians with roots in Tur Abdin, Turkey (*'Turoyo'* being

derived from '*Turo'*, 'mountain'), and Hasakah and Qamishli in northern Syria. The other language is *Suret*, spoken in northern Iraq and the Urmia plain in Iran.

Taking the class was an interesting experience because I was the only non--Assyrian there, all the other participants being speakers of *Surayt* wishing to learn *Suret*. Since I speak Arabic, a Semitic language that is not very closely related but still shares the roots common to all Semitic languages, I was at least able to follow along with the basic conversational vocabulary being taught, but the class was taught with a lot of comparisons between the two languages that were completely lost on me.

Regardless of my own struggles with the language I found attending the class was a good place to speak to people since many of the students were curious about how I ended up in their cultural center or why I was interested in their language at all. People in a variety of age groups and different backgrounds attended, with some of the younger attendees being born in Sweden while other older individuals immigrated as adults. I wound up interviewing a couple of the attendees and speaking to several others in both individual and group conversations. Joining the cultural center was also helpful, as they hold different kinds of lectures and social gatherings every month. The center also frequently sends out information regarding events in other places in Botkyrka and Södertälje that could be of interest to Assyrians.

2.2 Interviews and Interview Method

In addition to the participant observation, I conducted interviews with individual Assyrians who are actively engaged with community causes and organizations. I had previously interviewed people during my Fulbright year as well, but as stated earlier the questions were often too broad. During the fall 2015 fieldwork I focused my questions on people's activism and engagement with Assyrian associations or causes.

The questions were split into three basic sections:

1. A few general demographic questions (birthplace; familial origin; age of migration to Sweden, if applicable; if they have relatives left in the Middle East or if their families are largely in diaspora)
2. Identity questions (for example, whether they see themselves primarily as Swedish, Swedish--Assyrian, or just Assyrian)

3. Activism and involvement in Assyrian organizations and causes (including how they became involved in the first place; whether their involvement with Assyrian issues impacts their broader political opinions or motivate them to become involved with Swedish politics as well). If they are in the leadership of any particular center or organization, I also asked about their organization's events, membership and activity.

During the two-month research period, I interviewed six different Swedish Assyrian individuals.

To find people to interview, I directly asked some people I already knew or had spoken to during my time in Sweden. I also made it a point to approach people at some events I attended, and further gained some interviews through the snowball method, as several interviewees offered to put me in touch with other friends of theirs. From there I set up meeting times with different people, mostly at cafes around town or at the buildings of their organization.

2.3 Reflexivity

Assyrian, Syriac, Syrianer, Aramean: On the Naming Conflict

There exists a division in the terms used for self-identification within this population that has been particularly strong in the Swedish context since the late 1970s and 1980s. In Swedish, there are two terms that commonly used to refer to this ethnic group: *Assyrier* and *Syrianer*. The former corresponds directly to the English term *Assyrian*, while the latter is a specifically Swedish creation but corresponds to either *Syriac* or *Aramean* in English.

The origins of the naming controversy are complicated and can be attributed to the intersections of national politics in the Middle East, church power plays, and identity shifts created in diaspora (for a very thorough discussion of the origins and development of the naming controversy in the Assyrian diaspora, see Atto 2011).

Members of the Syriac Orthodox Church vary in their identification as either *Syrianer* or Assyrian, while members of the Church of the East identify more uniformly as Assyrian. The history of Assyrians and their division into different churches will be addressed later in this chapter.

Although the naming controversy is still a topic of discussion, many members of this community are weary of the debate and feel that it undermines their struggle for self--determination and recognition. The issue of naming contributes to them often having their identity reduced to 'Middle Eastern Christians' in worldwide media reportage, erasing their ethnic identity and degrading their rights as indigenous people (Yousef 2016).

Although academic work using two-name or even a three-name forms exists (Assyrian/Syriac, Assyrian/Syriac/Chaldean), for the purposes of this thesis, I will use the single term 'Assyrian.' A primary reason for sticking to the singular identification is very straightforward: all the organizations described and all the interlocutors quoted in this thesis identify as Assyrian, therefore using any additional name would be inaccurate.

Several respondents have also emphasized to me that the use of multiple names for this community has led to their de-legitimization as an ethnic group with a vision for an autonomous region or even a state, and has contributed to their lack of visibility in the current political situation across the Middle East. It would be callous for me to use terms such as Assyrian/Syriac for this community given the strong emphasis that my interlocutors place on the usage of 'Assyrian' for their people.

Bias

I have spent a significant amount of time interacting with this community. As a result I would say I have a relatively large amount of internal knowledge and access to the community, despite not being Assyrian myself. However, as noted, I have worked exclusively with Assyrian-identified people, which lead me to automatically exclude a large portion of the broader population from my study. In addition, being non-Assyrian myself, most of the people I come into contact with or have a chance to interview have been individuals who frequently attend Assyrian events or are deeply engaged with the Assyrian cause, or who are heads of Assyrian centers and organizations. As a result my data may be skewed towards people who are more committed to the Assyrian cause than the average Swedish-Assyrian.

2.4 Historical Background

The following section will give a historical overview of the Assyrians, including the ancient empire from which they claim descent, as it is important for understanding Assyrians' historical claims to land and their definition as an indigenous population; the history of

violence experienced under the late Ottoman Empire and 20th century Middle Eastern regimes as well as their nationalist awakening during those times of upheaval, which will help situate their nationalist struggle and the goals for their activism; and a history of their migration and settlement in the diaspora, with a specific focus on the Swedish diasporic community, to help understand the context and their situation in diaspora.

Assyrians are a Semitic people indigenous to present-day Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Assyrian communities are now found all around the world, but large-scale Assyrian migration is relatively recent, with virtually all Assyrians living in their homelands in the Middle East as late as the end of the 19th century. Nowadays, of approximately 4 million Assyrians in the world population, it is estimated that 3 million live outside of their traditional homeland in the Middle East. The presence of Assyrian diaspora communities around the globe is the result of migration provoked by massacres, discrimination, and poor economic opportunities in the region of origin.

Figure 1: Assyrian areas in the Middle East (Source: http://www.aina.org/brief.html)

Assyrians first arrived in Sweden in 1967, and communities of varying sizes are found across central, southern, and western Sweden. Assyrians are particularly visible in the Stockholm area, where they make up a majority of the town of Södertälje, located to the south of Stockholm, and a significant portion of the Stockholm municipality of Botkyrka. Although exact population numbers are difficult to know, as Swedish data does not record ethnic identification, the estimated population is approximately 120.000. Around 25.000 of Sweden's 120.000 Assyrians live in Södertälje (per Södertälje municipality statistics), out of a population of approximately 65.000 in Södertälje total. Assyrians were initially attracted to

this town by the availability of work in Södertälje's major industrial companies, which include car manufacturer Scania and the pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca.

Assyrians are one of the more segregated communities in Sweden (Gaunt 2010), with the majority of Assyrians settling in areas with tight-knit Assyrian populations and resisting attempts by Swedish authorities to spread out their population since their initial arrival (Björklund 1981). They have been very economically successful in Sweden, especially as entrepreneurs and small business owners. Assyrians still run a significant amount of the salons, cafés, and restaurants in Stockholm, although younger generations are highly educated and entering a variety of professional fields.

2.5 A Brief History of the Assyrians, 2600 B.C.E to 1967 C.E.

Assyrians derive their name from the ancient Assyrian Empire, located in the upper Mesopotamian area between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers (Assyrian: *Beth Nahrain*, or 'home of the rivers') where the modern-day countries of Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria meet. The Assyrian Empire, named after *Ashur,* the primary god of the Assyrian pantheon, is typically divided into three different historical periods, the earliest of which began in approximately 2500 B.C.E and the last ending with the fall of the empire to the Medes, in 612 B.C.E. At the height of its power, the ancient Assyrian Empire stretched west to what is now Libya, east to Persia, and north to the Caucasus region.

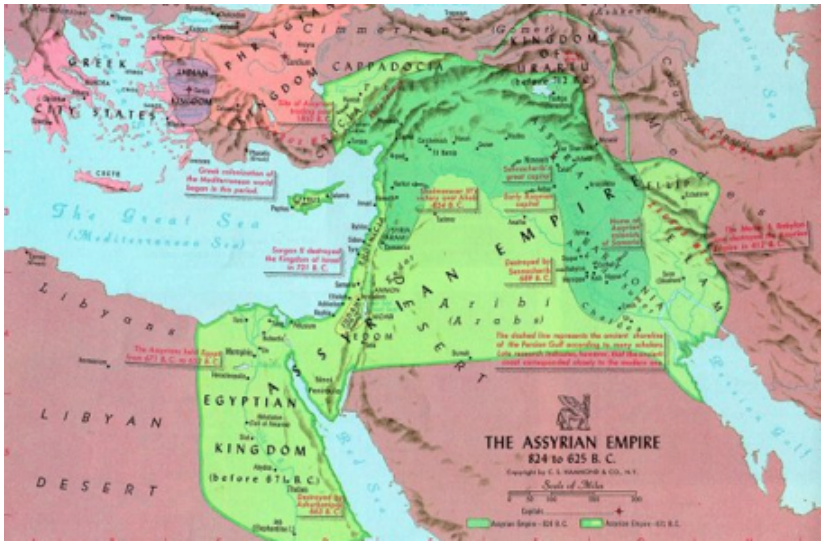

Figure 2: Assyrian Empire at its peak (source: http://www.assyrians.n.nu/10)

Assyrians were among the first peoples to convert to Christianity, beginning in the first century CE. They have subsequently split into various denominations, foremost among them the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Assyrian Church of the East, and the Chaldean Catholic Church. Adherents of the Syriac Orthodox Church were historically called *Jacobites,* and Assyrian Church of the East members *Nestorians*. *Chaldeans* differ in their acknowledgement of unity with the Assyrian population, with some accepting a shared origin with Assyrians, others claiming to be a distinct ethnic group, and yet others identifying themselves as Arab Christians. The divisions between the churches and the nexus of church and national politics remain important for understanding the development of Assyrian nationalism and the struggles of this population to unite in the face of ongoing adversity.

One of the principal markers of continuity between the Assyrian empire and modern-day Assyrians is their language. Assyrians speak Neo-Aramaic languages, modern descendants of the Semitic language that once served as the lingua franca of the Assyrian Empire. The Modern Neo-Aramaic languages comprise a language family with both a western and eastern branch, although only a few villages around Ma'aloula, Syria speak the only surviving member of the Western Neo-Aramaic branch. Assyrians speak languages from the Eastern Neo-Aramaic branch, including *Surayt (Turoyo)* in Tur Abdin and north Syria and *Sureth* or Assyrian Neo-Aramaic in Iraq, Iran, and Hakkari, Turkey. *Surayt* and *Sureth* are not mutually intelligible.

After the fall of Nineveh to the Median Empire, the core Assyrian homeland came under the control of the Iranian Sassanid Empire. The state religion of the Sassanids was Zoroastrianism, and their bitter enemy the Byzantine Empire. In the 3rd century CE, the Byzantines took up Christianity as their state religion. Assyrians, being Christians, were thus treated with suspicion by the Sassanids and sometimes accused of conspiring with the enemy. Periods of violence and repression against Assyrians broke out during wars between the two empires.

To distance themselves from the rival empire, Christians living under Sassanid rule came to favor theological thought that fell contrary to orthodox Byzantine Christianity, in an effort to "reduce the risk that the Christians would be accused of sympathy with the Byzantines" (Gaunt 2006: 7). One such development was the widespread acceptance of Nestorianism, a Christian doctrine on the nature of Jesus that was proposed by Nestorius, Patriarch of

Constantinople from 428-481. The Byzantine Council of Ephesus declared Nestorianism heretical in 431.

Patriarch Nestorius and his Christological claims, rejected by Byzantine religious officials but accepted by and encouraged among Christians under Persian Zoroastrian rule, are the origin of the historical name for adherents of the Church of the East (*Nestorians*). The Nestorian church was mostly tolerated under the Sassanids, and church-building and missionary work was permitted.

The advent of Islam and the Arab Conquest in the 7th century CE brought the fall of the Sassanid Empire to the Caliphate. Under Islamic rule, Assyrians were recognized as *dhimmi*, a status granted under Islamic law to non-Muslim *Ahl al-Kitaab* or 'People of the Book' (Jews and Christians). Being *dhimmi* placed Assyrians and other non-Muslim communities in a secondary status to Muslims and officially forbade them from some of the highest positions of public office and the military. Despite these restrictions, Assyrians held vital and elite roles in the caliphate. It was Assyrian scholars who translated great portions of Greek scientific knowledge into Syriac (classical Aramaic) and Arabic (Björklund 1981). Both the 'Nestorian' Church of the East and the Syriac Orthodox Church rose in prominence and increased their missionary work outside the empire, reaching India and China at their peak.

Assyrians remained the majority in northern Mesopotamia until the invasion of the Turco-Mongol conqueror Tamerlane in the 14th century CE. Tamerlane's violent incursions into the Assyrians' core territory had a devastating and seemingly permanent negative effect on the strength of both the Nestorian and Syriac Orthodox churches and their followers. As Gaunt (2006) states,

> "The churches never truly recovered from this blow, and they were reduced to relatively isolated toeholds struggling to avoid oblivion...It would seem that the Mongol destruction stripped the Church of unquestioned authority, and instead tribal, clan, and regional rivalry reduced the Christians to law-of-the-jungle civil war" (Gaunt 2006: 7).

While Mesopotamia was struggling to recover its strength after the devastation wrought by Tamerlane, the Ottoman Empire was rising and eventually gained ground on the border areas

of the Persian Empire where Assyrians resided. As a result Assyrians saw their population split between two major empires.

Under the Ottoman Empire, Assyrians were again classified as *dhimmi*, and incorporated into the Ottoman state system through their division into *millets*, or 'nations'. The *millet* system divided the minority Christian and Jewish populations into groups headed by their religious authorities and sultan-appointed officials of their same community. These officials and clergy had a wide array of duties, including collection of taxes and oversight on educational systems, while clerics were entitled to provide judgments in accordance with their religious law.

Assyrians in the Ottoman Empire inhabited areas that gradually came to have Kurdish majorities, due to conversion to Islam and assimilation into the majority culture. Because of the remoteness of the provinces where Assyrians resided, Ottoman state control was feeble. The relative weakness of Ottoman power resulted in many Assyrians becoming subjects of feudalist Kurdish leaders, and "with the Ottoman authorities far off, insecurity due to the more powerful Kurdish tribes was often a normal part of Christian life" (Becker 2015: 51).

The 19th century brought many changes to these regions. Western powers began to play a major part in occurrences inside the Ottoman Empire. Protestant missions from both Europe and the United States were headquartered in Assyrian-heavy areas. Missionary efforts concentrated on the Christian populations, resulting in resentment and suspicion from the Muslim majorities.

At the same time that missionary efforts increased, the Ottoman state was decaying. Liberation wars across different regions led to attempts at reform. This period of Ottoman history is known as *Tanzimat,* 'reorganization', and provoked anger from segments of the population who saw their elevated status threatened by laws that granted equal status to all Ottoman citizens. These reform attempts made east Anatolia into "a laboratory for nationalist visions of the future" (Mutlu-Numansen and Ossewaarde 2015: 429), with dark consequences for the Assyrian population.

In the rural eastern provinces, awareness of the weakness of the Ottoman state and anger towards its reforms gave rise to Kurdish separatist fervor. These separatist campaigns had

strong repercussions for the Assyrians, who were forced to take sides between their Kurdish neighbors and the Ottoman state struggling to subdue the rebellious Kurdish forces.

A majority of Assyrians stood on the Kurdish side in these conflicts. Despite their support for Kurds, the Kurdish *emirs* of Hakkari, Bedr Khan and Nurallah, turned against Assyrians in the 1840s. These attacks provoked the destruction of many Assyrian villages and the deaths of around 10.000 Assyrians. British and French pressure on the Ottoman government helped put a stop to the bloodshed, and Ottoman forces subsequently crushed the Kurdish rebellion and banished Bedr Khan from Hakkari (Donef 2012).

The Bedr Khan massacres were a watershed moment in Assyrian history. They marked a steep decline in the relationship between Assyrians and Kurds, and were the first in a series of massacres experienced by the Assyrian population at the hands of both Turkish state forces and the Kurdish population. As Britain had intervened on the Assyrians' behalf, it also "became more and more usual for the Christians, especially the Nestorians, to appeal to the representatives of Great Britain for protection, and that Britain endeavoured to intercede in favour of the Christian subjects" (Björklund 1981: 21).

Despite European entanglement, Assyrians and other mainly Christian groups continued to be subjected to violence in the following decades. In the late 19th century, approximately 25.000 Assyrians were killed in the Hamidian massacres, named after the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II, who ruled from 1876 until his death in 1918. Increasing aggression and violence towards Christian populations during the last decades of the Ottoman Empire culminated in the 1915-1918 genocide of Armenians, Pontic Greeks, and Assyrians. The Assyrian term for this period is *Seyfo*, 'sword', after the principal weapon used against them. An estimate on the exact number of fatalities is uncertain. Lundgren (2014) provides an estimate of approximately 300.000 Assyrians perished, amounting to 45% of the Assyrian population at the time. The genocide included high amounts of sexual and gender violence, including kidnappings and forced marriages of Assyrian women and girls to Kurdish perpetrators.

Besides the high amount of deaths and violence, the genocide also provoked mass flight of Assyrians. Many fled across the Ottoman border to the Urmia Plain in the Persian Empire, although further clashes and massacres against both Assyrians and Persian subjects followed them there. Some Assyrians fled as far west as Palestine, where a small community of

approximately 5.000 Syriac Orthodox Church members remains. Approximately 75.000 Assyrians escaped to northern Iraq, at that time occupied by British forces. Those Assyrians who stayed in northern Iraq through the British mandatory period (1921-1932) were later subjected to yet another massacre in 1933 in the city of Simele. Many Assyrians were thus displaced again, fleeing from northern Iraq, this time to the Khabour plain in northwestern Syria (Björklund 1981).

The insecurity and multiple displacements experienced by Assyrians during the 20th century caused many to end up stateless. In Lebanon, for example, the politics of the delicate confessional balance between Muslims and Christians made it impossible for Assyrians to attain citizenship. It was stateless Assyrians who were the first brought to Sweden following "an appeal by the United Nations refugee commissioner and the World Council of Churches" (Gaunt 2010: 5). The arrival of these Assyrians marked the birth of the Assyrian community in Sweden.

2.6 Assyrians in Sweden

The Assyrian presence in Sweden dates back to 1967, the year when 205 Assyrians arrived in a plane from Lebanon, accepted by Sweden as quota refugees due to statelessness. Assyrian migration to Sweden has continued steadily after the arrival of this first plane, with subsequent waves arriving from Turkey, Syria, and Iraq, seeking relief from poor economic conditions, religious and ethnic persecution, as well as the general instability of the Middle East which has had especially acute consequences for religious minorities (Lundgren 2011).

Although the first plane of Assyrians came from Lebanon, the wave that followed to Sweden originated in Tur 'Abdin, in southeastern Turkey. Many Assyrian individuals from this area had started moving for economic reasons from their rural provinces to larger cities in Turkey, especially to Istanbul. The impact of this internal migration on the population of Tur 'Abdin was noticeable. Björklund (1981) writes, "Many Assyrians moved to Istanbul...mainly from the town of Mardin, which later in the 1960's lost most of its *Suryoye* [emic term for Assyrian] as a result of this emigration. At the end of the 1970s...there were some 18.000 Assyrians in Istanbul" (54). Other Assyrians migrated to Syria and Lebanon to work, many without official permission. Early migrants to Europe sought work in Germany as *Gastarbeiter* (guest workers) throughout the 1960s.

The initial migration of Assyrians as labor workers to Germany and refugees to Sweden helped open the way for more Assyrians to make their way to Europe. Relatives of the initial refugees continued to arrive, and by 1974 the community "must have numbered about 1.000 with a powerful concentration in Södertälje and Stockholm" (Björklund 1981: 63). Despite official efforts to break up Assyrians into different areas, many followed their relatives to Södertälje. Rather than waiting to be taken in as quota refugees, Assyrians began to apply for passports and make their way directly to Sweden to apply for asylum. Some of these asylum-seekers had previously been in Germany, which by 1980 was no longer in need of guest workers and requested unemployed guest workers leave. Others came directly from Turkey, where the 1980 coup d'état and ongoing violence between right- and left-wing factions created an intolerable environment for many Assyrians (Atto 2011).

By 1976, Sweden's policy of wholesale refugee acceptance stopped, and Swedish authorities attempted to clamp down on the number of Assyrian asylum-seekers by introducing more selective asylum-granting procedures. Nonetheless, Assyrians continued to make their way to Sweden, as "it remained relatively easier to be granted asylum in Sweden than in the other European countries. After asylum seekers set foot on Swedish soil, the policy to send them away was again less severe than in other European countries" (Atto 2011: 185).

Assyrians have continued to pour into Sweden due to economic crises and continued instability in the Middle East. Atto (2011) identifies the critical economic situation, drought, and lack of available single men as major reasons for mass emigration in the 1980s from Syria's *Gozarto* (the Assyrian name for Al-Hasakah governorate in northeastern Syria). Since 2011, the Syrian Civil War has driven more Assyrians from their homes in Gozarto, with another wave arriving in Sweden.

Assyrians also began to arrive from Iraq in the 1980s, during the period from 1980 to 1988 when Iraq was engaged in war with neighboring Iran. After the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Assyrians were impacted by further violent events in northern Iraq, including the Anfal campaign led by Iraqi president Saddam Hussein and his regime against non-Arab minorities. The Anfal campaign is infamous for the use of chemical weapons against civilians and has been recognized as genocide by the Swedish government. Iraq was subsequently embroiled in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, which was followed by punitive international sanctions that cut deep into Iraq's economy.

In 2003, the United States occupied Iraq and toppled Saddam Hussein and his regime, creating a power vacuum inside the country that rapidly unleashed sectarian divisions and violence. Sectarian violence caused even more Assyrians to flee, as they saw themselves caught in the middle of conflicts between the larger religious and ethnic groups.

These events have had catastrophic effects on the Assyrian population in Iraq, which in 2003 was estimated to be at least 800.000 (already down from a 1980s estimate of 1.2 million). By 2011, around two-thirds of the pre-2003 Assyrian population had left Iraq. Ongoing violence as well as the 2014 ISIS occupation of Mosul, the ancient Assyrian capital in the Nineveh Plain, has meant even further displacement and exodus of Assyrians.

As the Assyrian homeland has emptied out, the number of Assyrians in Södertälje has risen. For example, in 2006, a year when brutal sectarian violence broke out in Iraq, "around 10 per cent of all refugees from Iraq did actually settle [in Södertälje]. This percentage is higher than in any other municipality and about 99 per cent of the 1,300 refugees who settled in Södertälje between May 2006 and May 2007 were Christians from Iraq" (Atto 2011: 207). The high volume of refugees received by Södertälje has received worldwide media attention, with articles focusing on the disproportionate amount of refugees settling in Södertälje and in Sweden broadly relative to the United States and other countries directly involved in the 2003 invasion: "last year [Södertälje] took in twice as many Iraqi refugees as the entire United States, almost all of them Christians fleeing the religious cleansing taking place next to Iraq's anti-American insurgency and sectarian strife" (New York Times 2007).

2.7 Development of Assyrian Nationalism

Assyrian nationalist consciousness developed during the last century of the Ottoman Empire, originating in the border regions between Ottoman territory and Qajar Persia. Assyrian nationalist ideas rose during this period as a result of the changing political environment in the Ottoman Empire as well as the influence of Western involvement in the region.

The 19th century was a time of significant instability and changes inside the Ottoman Empire. The *millet* system broke down and many ethnic groups began to mobilize and fight for liberation throughout this century, resulting in the Empire rapidly losing territory. The instability resulted in the *Tanzimat* reforms, where the Ottoman authorities attempted to

liberalize and promote an 'Ottoman' national identity which would be inclusive of all subjects regardless of religious or ethnic identification. Despite the attempts at reform and inclusivity, Assyrians, like other groups, began to undergo a nationalist awakening (Lundgren 2014, Franzen 2011).

The slow decay of the Ottoman Empire opened a space for Western involvement in the rural regions inhabited by Assyrians, with both positive and negative consequences for this folk group and other Christian populations. Western organizations, prominently religious missions, often focused on the Christian groups, seeing them as a means to promote Christianity among the Muslim population. Eventually the Western powers began utilizing the Christians' vulnerable position to push their own interests in the Middle East (Petrosian 2006: 119). The favoritism displayed by Western organizations to Christian communities provoked the distrust and resentment of surrounding Muslim communities and set the stage for later conflict and bloodshed. In the Assyrian-populated provinces,

> "the growing interest of Europeans and Americans towards Assyrians made the Kurds nervous. They had every reason to be concerned, as… Europeans promised Assyrians all kinds of support and protection trying to entice them with the security their respective countries could offer" (Petrosian 2006: 119)

The influence of missions from the United States and Europe on Assyrians was considerable. They established schools, leading to higher levels of education among Assyrians, a marked change from prior eras when it was largely clergy who had any advanced education. Western missionaries also brought different ideas regarding the role of religious practice in defining community (Becker 2015).

Negatively, the religious aspect of their work provoked splits among the Assyrians by encouraging conversion to Western branches of Christianity. The increased divisions among the group drove early Assyrian intellectuals to combat fragmentation by prioritizing efforts to unite the entire population across church lines (Makko 2010). Re-unification was attempted through encouraging the use of a single orthographic system; reviving the term 'Assyrian' to bring together all the religious identifications under a single term; and pushing for a separation of church and ethnicity. For early Assyrian nationalists such as Naum Faiq (1868-

1930), "the establishment of schools and overcoming of traditional schisms were major concerns" (Makko 2010: 6).

In addition to the missionaries' influence, the discovery of Assyrian Empire ruins and archaeological excavations during the 19th century raised global awareness of the Assyrian Empire and its achievements. Assyria and its capital, Nineveh, began to be widely represented in Western art. Statues and reliefs from the excavations of Nineveh were brought to Europe, where they became popular exhibitions in museums across the continent. The growing interest in ancient Assyria and the glory days of its empire brought pride to a group of people that had been pushed into isolated backwaters of empires since the catastrophic invasion of Tamerlane (Barryakoub 2008).

As Assyrians have often had their historical continuity questioned (Makko 2012; see also Donabed 2015 for more background on the denial of Assyrian heritage and erasure of this community in Iraq), it is important to make clear here that the development of an Assyrian nationalist ideology does not mean that Assyrian identity, or Assyrian self-understanding as a distinct ethnic group, did not exist prior to the 19th century or Western involvement in the region. As Makko states, "Assyrian identity must not be equated with nationalist thought" (Makko 2012: 305). The era brought new political thoughts and created a specific kind of Assyrian nationalist consciousness as "political activities based on nationalist ideas finally resulted in unified elite circles arguing in favor of secular identity" (Makko 2012: 305), but does not imply that Assyrians lacked knowledge of their heritage nor understood themselves as anything other than Assyrian prior to the arrival of Western missionaries.

2.8 Assyrian Political Movements and Activism Toward an Assyrian Homeland

By the early 20th century, Assyrian nationalists, educated at mission schools and deeply influenced by the different strains of thought being discussed inside and outside the Ottoman Empire in that era, were actively pushing for a reunification of the various church identifications and even for national autonomy and self-determination. In 1917, Freydun Atturaya (1891-1926) completed the Syriac-language *Urmia Manifesto of the United Free Assyria*, which laid out the goal of "establishment… of national government in the regions of Urmia, Mosul, Tur Abdin, Nisibin, Jazira, and Julamerg" (Petrosian 2006: 130).

Efforts towards Assyrian causes were derailed by Seyfo and its aftermath, as Assyrians lost "much of their social and intellectual leadership; tribal leaders in villages and towns, learned clergymen… Demographically, they lost much of their earlier significance in their ancient areas of settlement" (Makko 2010: 9).

Despite the setback that the genocide caused to Assyrian ambitions, Assyrians continued to push the national issue even after World War I, especially through appeals to the colonial powers who swept in after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. It is important to note here that after World War I, Assyrians provided 'feet on the ground' for the British Empire in the form of the Iraqi Levies. The Levies functioned as the first Iraqi military, and although they started as mixed-ethnicity they came to be dominated by Assyrians (Omissi 1989: 310). The Assyrians proved effective soldiers, but their collaboration with the colonial powers provoked anger and resentment among the Kurdish and Arab populations.

Assyrian leaders hoped that their work on behalf of the British would be eventually rewarded with an autonomous region or even a country in which Assyrians could find a safe haven (Omissi 1989). Already in 1919, an Assyro-Chaldean delegation presented a proposal for an Assyrian homeland at the Paris Peace Conference that year.

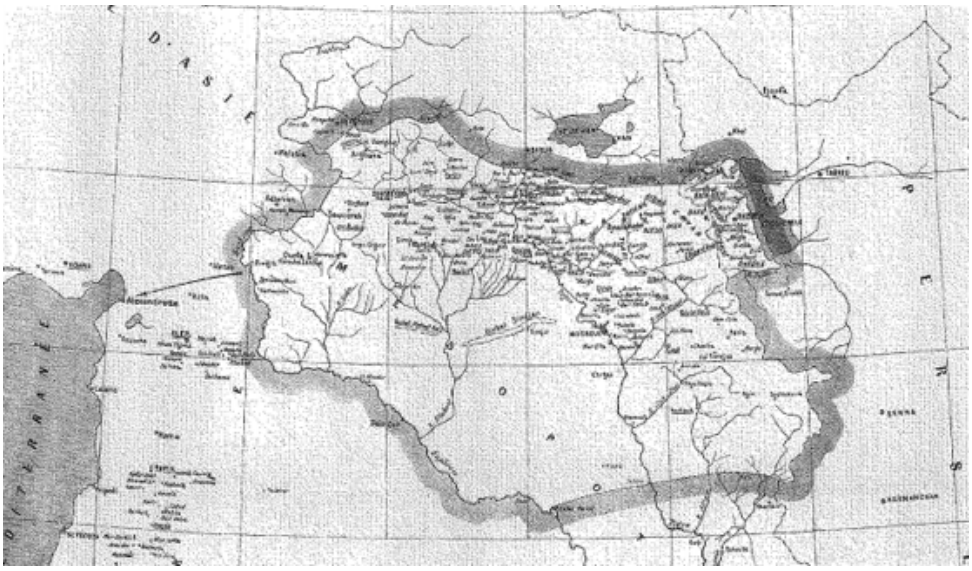

Figure 3: Proposal for Assyrian state submitted at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference (credit: Donabed 2015: 4)

After this attempt failed, others continued to push for Assyrian autonomy. Among them was Agha Petros (real name Petros Elia), a legendary Assyrian military leader active during World War I, who submitted proposals for an Assyrian territory in Hakkari to the 1923 League of Nations Peace Conference in Lausanne, Switzerland (Petrosian 2006).

Assyrian leaders such as Agha Petros had hoped to exchange the Assyrians' military efforts for the British for a safe Assyrian haven, but instead they were betrayed. By the 1930s the British Empire, whose mandate period over Iraq was coming to a close, no longer needed the Levies nor benefitted from using the question of Assyrian resettlement or independence to pressure regional leaders. Instead Britain pulled out of northern Iraq and left the Assyrians without any safe haven, surrounded by furious Iraqi Arab and Kurdish nationalists, thus setting the stage for the 1933 Simele Massacre (Donabed 2015).

Assyrians have continued to organize politically even when living under dictatorial regimes. Assyrian political organizations include the Assyrian Democratic Organization (ADO) in Syria, established in 1957, and the Assyrian Democratic Movement (known as *Zowa'a*, 'the movement') in Iraq, which was established in 1979 and is currently the only Assyrian political party in the Iraqi Parliament. Assyrian parties and groups come under fire or been altogether forbidden depending on the ruling regime, forcing them to organize underground and even take up arms in self-defense.

The following chapter will provide a literature review and overview of the theory related to this study. These concepts will include the anthropological study of diaspora itself, the contextualization of a diaspora experience, and the politics of diaspora activism towards the homeland and in cultural preservation.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Background

This chapter will take up theoretical strands that relate to this study. These include an overview of the concept of 'diaspora', its main characteristics, and its usage and study in anthropology. I will also discuss diaspora in relation to political activism, especially with regards to stateless diasporas.

3.1 Anthropology of Diaspora

The basic concept of diaspora consists of three different criteria: a dispersed population; an orientation towards and maintenance of a relationship to the homeland; and boundary-maintenance, a degree of separation between the diasporic community and the host communities (Brubaker 2005: 5-6). The archetypical example of a diaspora is the Jewish people, to whom the word 'diaspora' was first attached.

In academic research, the term has had resurgence since the 1990s, and has been stretched and modified from the basic concept outlined above to account for varied diasporic experiences (Clifford 1994; Kleist 2008). The historical understanding of diaspora includes an element of force or expulsion from the homeland. This classical understanding has changed in its use in academic studies, where the term 'diaspora' has been used to describe a variety of migrant groups who may not have the same traits as the classic diasporas. The term 'diaspora' has been stretched to include, for example, labor migrant communities, who lack "the political obligation, or the moral burden, of reconstituting a lost homeland or maintaining an endangered culture" (Safran 1991: 85). Although this broader usage of the term 'diaspora' has risked it losing its meaning, it has also made it shift from being utilized as a constricted definition describing a specific type of community to being used as an analytical tool which "tells us something about the claims and identifications made by certain groups who identify or are identified as 'a diaspora' or 'in diaspora'—that is, to the political and identity processes going on in the formation of diaspora groups" (Kleist 2008: 1130).

The Host Community

Contextualization of the diasporic experience is critical for the anthropological study of diaspora, as these communities are shaped by the specific context of the host country similarly to any immigrant or transnational experience. A country with a 'settler' or assimilationist paradigm towards immigrants, such as the United States or Canada, deals with

diaspora communities and affects them differently from host countries whose identity is more tightly connected to ethnic origin. For example, Turkish immigrants to Germany face a society that has traditionally defined itself "'organically' rather than 'functionally,' that is, whose citizenship has tended to be based on descent rather than birth (or long residence) in the country" (Safran 1991: 86) and thus may struggle to see themselves or to be seen as full German citizens. Diaspora communities in the United States may feel themselves to be 'American', but assimilation may also cause a loss of the sense of being a diaspora with roots and history outside of the host country.

Individuals in diaspora are also differently affected by their respective characteristics, for example by their gender identity. Gender differences have to be noted when discussing the variety of subjects related to diaspora, as gender subordination and gendered social expectations from the community affect people's experience as members of a diaspora community. As Clifford states, "life for women in diasporic situations can be doubly painful—struggling with the material and spiritual insecurities of exile... and with the claims of old and new patriarchies. At the same time, women in diaspora remain attached to, and empowered by, a 'home' culture and a tradition...The lived experiences of diasporic women thus involve painful difficulty in mediating discrepant worlds" (Clifford 1994: 314).

The Homeland

In the classic definition of diaspora, the homeland "forms the basis for collective memory, ethno-communal solidarity and consciousness, and molds cultural, social, political and economic lives in the diaspora" (Abdelhady 2008: 54). The community may preoccupy itself with creating, reviving, and renewing different aspects of the homeland's culture, adapting aspects or resisting changes depending on the individual host country context.

With the centering of the homeland comes an idea of a 'return', a time when the dispersed community members will go back to their ancestral home. However, despite a real feeling of longing for the homeland, the 'myth of return' may remain just that: a myth. For diaspora communities with a physical homeland, a 'return', even one genuinely longed for, may be unviable as the political or economic situation in the home country may be unbearable. And for communities without a physical nation-state, a return to the idealized homeland may be altogether impossible. Nevertheless, "the 'myth of return' can and often does survive even when the people in diaspora know only too well that return is not likely due to the political

and/or economic realities of the homeland or the host country – thus the myth comes to resemble an eschatology of identity more than a political project" (Falzon 2003: 664). The desire for return may not be a practical desire with a plan, but rather a collective orientation with significance for the anthropological study of diaspora. The myth of return, even when unrealistic, contains a "psychological aspect…, which enables the migrant to suspend his total immersion or assimilation in the host society," (Al-Rasheed 1994: 200). The 'myth of return' can "serve to solidify ethnic consciousness and solidarity when religion can no longer do so, when the cohesiveness of the local community is loosened, and when the family is threatened with disintegration" (Safran 1991: 91).

Different diasporas have varying relationships to the homeland, and to the idea of a 'return'. For Palestinians, the literal 'right of return' to Palestine has been a focal demand of Palestinian nationalist activists, and has strongly shaped the character of Palestinian politics in diaspora and resistance in the homeland: "[Palestinians] have memories of their homeland; their descendants cultivate a collective myth about it; and their ethnic communal consciousness is increasingly defined by—and their political mobilization has centered around—the desire to return to that homeland" (Safran 1991: 87). For other communities, the relationship with the homeland may be looser. Individual reasons for emigration complicate generalizations about the concept of a homeland. In the case of Iranians in Sweden, the size of the diaspora "counsels caution in ascribing one single or even one dominant orientation to enforced existence outside Iran. Much depends on the kind of life a person had before leaving the country" (Graham and Khosravi 1997: 116). Seeing the diaspora through the lens of a 'myth of return' may not be as fitting for these communities or the individuals who identify with them.

Over time, different cities outside the original homeland may come to occupy a central place in the thoughts of diaspora communities. For the paradigmatic diaspora, Jews, a Jewish homeland has not necessarily been the primary orientation point over centuries of exile. A physical Jewish nation was even taboo for many religious Jews prior to the establishment of Israel in 1948, as return to the Holy Land "before the advent of the Messiah would be considered anathema" (Safran 1991: 91). As Clifford (1994) lays out, Jews residing in the ancient and medieval worlds likely oriented themselves towards the major religious centers of the time and other cities where they maintained social and business connections. This "attachment to specific cities (sometimes superseding ties of religion and ethnicity)... casts

doubt on any definition that would ‘center’ the Jewish diaspora in a single land” (Clifford 1994: 305). Following their expulsion from Spain during the Reconquista, “among Sephardim after 1492, the longing for ‘home’ could be focused on a city in Spain at the same time as on the Holy Land." (Clifford 1994: 305).

Visits to such cultural centers can be seen as a kind of ‘pilgrimage’ for the diasporic community in that it creates a sense of community, in line with Anderson’s (1991) view of pilgrimage as an event which shapes identity and creates community for religious groups: "it is not simply that... the cities of Rome, Mecca, or Benares were the centres of sacred geographies, but that their centrality was experienced and 'realized'...by the constant flow of pilgrims moving towards them from remote and *otherwise unrelated* localities" (Anderson 1991: 54, emphasis in original). For Sindhis, “one may view the ‘pilgrimage’...to Bombay as a rite which establishes periodically the individual Sindhi a member of a ‘we’; moreover, because the average Sindhi in Bombay would...meet Sindhis coming from all over the world, it is a translocal ‘we’ that is imagined.” (Falzon 2003: 678-79). A similar sense of ‘pilgrimage’ when visiting new ‘cultural hearts’ may be experienced by diasporas for whom the homeland is inaccessible or fading as a result of political and economic factors.

Similar processes of decentralization of the homeland may occur to diaspora populations such as the Assyrians, as their populations expand and develop in places outside the Middle East, such as Södertälje. Visits to major Assyrian population centers, among them Södertälje, may come to have more cultural significance than a visit to the ancestral homeland as their population further empties out of the Middle East and settles abroad.

3.2 Diasporas and Political Activism

Political goals can be driven by the diaspora rather than by community members left in the home countries, as freer political environments can galvanize members into promoting their cause more loudly and at higher levels than they were able to in their home. Diasporic struggles for recognition of their identity or of crimes committed against them in the homeland resonates strongly in the case of the Assyrians, who have been the ones to raise the issue of recognition of genocides perpetrated against Assyrians in the governments of countries such as Sweden and the Netherlands, and who in the present day try to bring ongoing violence against their community in the Middle East into the media and international political discourse.

Identification as a diaspora can itself become a political tool in the struggle for recognition and rights, especially with the rise of identity politics, where groups may demand recognition and compensation of violence that has been perpetrated against them, "often in the name of equal opportunities or human rights" (Kleist 2008: 1135). The term diaspora can have political weight, as establishing a link to "another nation, region, continent, or world-historical force gives added weight to claims against an oppressive national hegemony" (Clifford 1994: 310). Host governments and international agencies have also developed an interest in diasporas as an actor in conflicts or political situations in the home territory, a recognition of the potential power of diasporas as agents for change.

Although diasporas can provide support for the people remaining in the homeland, tensions between the populations in diaspora and home communities are not unusual. Different understandings of the situation in the homeland, as well as social and economic status changes which these populations undergo after migration to another country, explain why "homelands do not necessarily want to welcome their diasporas back from abroad. Returnees, particularly from host countries that are more advanced than the homeland, might unsettle its political, social, and economic equilibrium" (Safran 1991: 93-94). The role of diasporas in homeland-related issues is not without controversy among scholars and larger national and international organizations, which can see them both "as dangerous groups to be combated or as constructive agents of change whose development efforts are to be supported and encouraged" (Kleist 2008: 1137). One critique of long-distance nationalist activism is that diasporas, situated far away from war and danger, have a tendency to "keep their emotional attachments to the holy homeland and make the conflicts even more protracted by not sacrificing their cause on the way to a peaceful settlement" (Baser and Swain 2010: 41), in contrast to people directly physically affected by conflict.

A response to this issue is that the patterns of political activism engaged in by the diaspora frequently differ from the political engagement of people in the homeland, "creat[ing] a softer version of the conflict dynamics back home in the host land and produce their own way of 'struggle' such as protests, public demonstrations, theatre plays, lobby activities etc." (Baser and Swain 2010: 41). Diasporas' ability to speak out more freely and apply pressure to their adoptive countries' governments can also be a useful tool for those in the homeland.

The situation with Assyrian nationalism can be seen as an example of fissures and interplay between the diaspora and the homeland. Assyrian nationalism has thrived in diaspora at times when different authorities in the Middle East have repressed nationalist ideas. Confessional divisions and fractures in the Assyrian population in the Middle East were fostered by clergy, while diaspora members have often found strength in unity across confessional differences, for example in the United States. As a result it has been significantly easier to establish a united nationalist conception while in diaspora, where members of the various groups could come together and collaborate. At home in the Middle East, "traditional denominationalism was re-fostered" (Makko 2010: 11), and efforts at unification were sabotaged.

However, despite the distance between the diaspora and the homeland, the two are not entirely isolated from one another and intensified divisions within the community in the Middle East have formed the basis for subsequent tensions in diaspora. Power struggles between the clergy and secularized elites have been particularly pronounced in the Swedish context and directly led to the creation of separate identity terms in the Swedish language (*Assyrier* and *Syrianer)* and a hard separation between the two groups. As Atto remarks, "without looking at the role of the Syriac Orthodox Church in relation to these two competing groups, it is an impossible task to understand the main clue to the 'name debate' and the split among Assyrians/Syriacs" (Atto 2011: 54). The more open context in Sweden is also partially responsible for strengthening the identity and name issue, as the space that Sweden provided for people to organize also allowed people to separate as they desired.

3.3 Integration and Assimilation

Integration and assimilation are both terms used by my respondents to describe the situation for Assyrians after migration from their traditional areas. Throughout this thesis and its ethnographic portions, these terms are used in connection with the assimilatory and 'multicultural', integration-oriented immigration paradigms utilized by different Western countries. In the assimilatory model, the state "incorporat[es] migrants into society through a one-sided process of adaptation" (Castles and Miller 2003: 250), where migrants are expected to lose their distinct identity in order to become full citizens of their new country. In contrast, the multicultural model emphasizes integration into the society as a process in which people are encouraged to retain their identities, although ultimately both strategies have as a goal "absorption into the dominant culture, so that integration policies are often simply a slower and gentler form of assimilation" (Castles and Miller: 250). The multicultural model has been

the example in Sweden starting in the 1960s and 1970s, with the state intervening in the form of policies aimed at integrating newcomers with 'equality, freedom of choice and partnership', as opposed to the "benign neglect and reliance on the integrative potential of the private sphere" (Castles and Miller 2003: 282) as practiced in, for example, the United States. The impact of the participatory approaches used by Sweden on the Assyrians will be explored in both ethnographic chapters.

The Swedish multicultural model has been subject to changes in recent decades as a result of national political shifts. In the 1990s, economic crisis, widespread populist backlash, and a new political consensus in Swedish politics brought about "a profound political-ideological review of policies on migration and migrant incorporation. A new *integration policy* was to replace the earlier *immigrant policy*" (Schierup and Ålund 2011: 49). These shifts in migration policy included an ideological change towards perceiving immigrants and immigration organizations as "market-oriented stakeholders in employment projects and local and regional partnerships for growth" (Schierup and Ålund 2011: 49), in line with a neoliberal turn in Swedish politics during the 1990s. These changes were aimed towards rectifying the continued inequalities in housing, unemployment rates, and educational outcomes between native Swedes and those of foreign background.

The following chapter will cover Assyrian organizing in Sweden, which is extensive as a result of both the unique Swedish organizational culture and Assyrians' own creative usage of this context after arrival in Sweden. It will also discuss Swedish-Assyrian political engagement in Sweden, as described and experienced by politically active Swedish-Assyrians.

Chapter 4: Swedish-Assyrian Political Engagement

> "After [the 2014 Islamic State occupation of] Mosul, I felt I want to fight for Sweden because this is my country and my new homeland, but I still have my people there. I would be a refugee today if it wasn't because of my grandparents who came [to Sweden] early. I feel I should do something. It would be a selfish act if I didn't. I want to fight for my people, and at the same time I want to fight for Sweden."
>
> 'Nineveh'

'Nineveh' is a young Swedish-Assyrian woman born in Sweden. Her words illustrate the multiple engagements many Swedish Assyrians share: a combination of concern for the Assyrians remaining in the Middle East; for the survival of a distinct Assyrian culture in an ever-growing diaspora; and an orientation towards Sweden as the new country and place of settlement for the Assyrian community. This chapter will discuss Swedish-Assyrian political mobilization.

4.1 Assyrian Organizing in Sweden

Access to higher levels of education and the political freedom available in Sweden, among other countries where Assyrians have settled, have been especially instrumental in pushing Assyrians to engage with host country politics as well as promote Assyrian causes. Although Assyrians have organized themselves and engaged politically even under very dangerous circumstances in the Middle East, and some respondents came from families which had been active with Assyrian political parties in the Middle East, for many others political engagement is a change that has occurred in the diaspora.

When Assyrians arrived in Sweden, they landed in a country with a unique commitment to community organizing and a low boundary for creating new organizations. In contrast with even other European countries, the Swedish system is unique in its dedication to *föreningar* ('associations', singular: *förening*) and the funding it provides for communities to organize themselves. One respondent joked, "Sweden has a culture of *föreningar*. You have a *förening* for everything. If you look for the *förening* of the spoons, you will find it! In Sweden, you will find it."

Assyrians have utilized this system extensively to organize themselves since early in their migration to Sweden. The Assyrian Federation of Sweden (*Assyriska Riksförbundet i Sverige*), an umbrella organization, now represents more than 30 Assyrian associations across Sweden. Most of these are cultural centers and *kulturföreningar*, with the inclusion of a couple of football organizations. Assyrians established their first football team in Sweden in 1974, Assyriska FF, which has its base in Södertälje and as of 2016, plays in the second-highest Swedish division (*Superettan)*. Assyriska FF is often considered the national football team of the Assyrian people, with Assyrians from outside Sweden visiting for the purpose of catching one of their games (Antonopoulos 2015).

The wide availability of funding for organizations has not been completely positive, as it "has also increased the competition and conflict between the Assyriska and *Syrianska* elites, especially at institutional level" (Atto 2011: 227). The space given for community members to separate and create new organizations as they see fit is a reason why the division between *Assyrier* and *Syrianer* became so strong and seemingly intractable in Sweden.

4.2 Political Aims in the Swedish Context

My respondents, as noted in the Methods chapter, are all politically engaged with Assyrian causes. All are linked to at least one Assyrian organization. Several noted that they are also independent activists.

Diasporic Engagement as a Moral Duty

Several respondents noted how in the Swedish context, they consider it a duty for Assyrians to provide a voice for their community and of specific importance to give information on the 'real Middle East' to a population that, in their eyes, lacks the knowledge and experience that Assyrians have earned through their long history in the region. The following interviewee, a Swedish-born Assyrian man, indicates very directly that it was exactly this idea that led to his political engagement:

> "My interest in politics comes from the idea that the Swedish public doesn't know… how the Middle East truly is. There's been a naive idea among Swedish politicians. They don't believe organizations like ISIS could exist, but we lived among ISIS before ISIS existed! Swedes don't know this, so many Assyrians have felt a need to go into politics and pursue our issues for the broader public."

The feeling of duty to the community mirrors Kleist's discussion on the diaspora as a 'moral community, "that can be mobilised at a transnational scale and to whom certain obligations and expectations apply" (Kleist 2008: 1133).

However, while Kleist's argument covers diaspora members' moral concern for their own community, comments from other Swedish-Assyrians make clear that the sense of duty extends to the host country as well. 'Charbel' notes that Assyrians in Sweden feel the need to tell their story with the aim of defending Sweden, sometimes from itself:

> "I would say Swedish Assyrians are extremely thankful towards the Swedish society, so it has something to do with protecting the Swedish society. Nine out of ten Assyrians would say Swedish people are naive. They're extremely naive."

The importance of presenting another view of the Middle East to the Swedish people extends beyond only providing more background information to very political, current, and pressing concerns. Major concerns included pushing for political and military aid to Assyrians and Assyrian-led organizations and militias in Syria and Iraq. The concern with funding and supporting specifically Assyrian militias is also one based in Assyrian experiences and history. As one respondent, 'Nemrod', stated, "We have to have Assyrian troops. You can't have others protect us. It hasn't worked in the past, and it won't work now either." The matter of aid for militias can be seen in Assyrian-authored pieces, for example the following excerpt from a debate article written by the *ordförande* (chairman) of the Assyrian Federation:

> "The Iraqi Army has unfortunately shown its ineptitude when it gave up practically without a struggle the city of Mosul. The Kurdish forces have not shown that they can protect Assyrian and Yazidi areas. It has increased minority distrust of the dominant groups and revitalized the demand for their own security forces… Now that Sweden provides military support in the fight against IS, a part of this should be directed towards the Nineveh Plain Protection Units and the Yazidi forces in Sinjar." (Yakoub 2015, translated from Swedish)

As with Nemrod's statement, this excerpt from Yakoub's debate article demonstrates an aspect of the Assyrian experience in the Middle East, where distrust of the state and other

large ethnic groups with national aspirations mean Assyrians and other numerically smaller and vulnerable groups, like the Yazidis, to create and fund their own protection forces.

Assyrians involved with political organizations end up critical of Swedish politicians' promises to the Assyrian community during elections: "When there's election time in Sweden, politicians almost fight to come to our associations to express their solidarity with the Assyrian people. And after the elections, you try to get some small help from them—nothing." Debate and opinion articles written by Assyrian activists point to this frustration that extends to lack of Swedish support for Assyrian militias. An Assyrian activist writes in *Aftonbladet*, one of the largest Swedish newspapers, regarding the Swedish government's decision to send money and military trainers to the Kurdish *peshmerga* in northern Iraq:

> "Although [Margot Wallström, the Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs since 2014] earlier said that Sweden will not contribute militarily, there is now a proposal to send Swedish military personnel [to Iraq]. Part of this should be directed to the NPU [Nineveh Protection Units, an Assyrian militia on the Nineveh Plain] … As a Swedish-Assyrian and active Social Democrat I feel extremely disappointed when the foreign minister says no to helping Assyrians defend themselves." (Heido 2015a, translated from Swedish)

The above excerpt highlights Swedish-Assyrian activists' combination of roles: as activists for their ethnic group and politically engaged citizens of their adoptive homeland. Heido's appeal goes beyond her own ethnic identification and concerns with her folk group, to her role as an active member of the Swedish Social Democratic party with a voice and vote in Swedish politics.

Lobbying

Assyrians and Assyrian organizations are involved in informing and lobbying on the subject of minorities in the Middle East to the Swedish government. Articles and debates published in Swedish newspapers speak to the major concerns of Assyrian, including their frustration at being labeled as 'Christians' rather than by their ethnic identity: "in both Swedish and international media it is common to insensitively and ignorantly package Assyrians and other indigenous people solely as Christian minorities…with significant and negative consequences" (Yousef 2016, translated from Swedish). The concern with being identification and recognition lines up with Kleist's (2008) analysis of the 'recognition turn',

where “groups or individuals demand rights and respect to protect or promote their community, culture and identity or react against harm… the primacy of recognition leads to the corresponding idea that misrecognition distorts identity and should be avoided or redressed” (1135).

Assyrian activists also express their frustration at what is perceived as uncritical funding of groups that threaten Assyrian survival, including support and funding for the Kurdish regimes and movements that have taken control in both northern Iraq and Syria. This interviewee, ‘Daniel’, expresses frustration at the lack of Swedish support for Assyrians and other minorities in the Middle East:

> “The Swedish government certainly doesn’t see the minorities. They don’t consider them in their policies. In international aid, they are not sending political help, or weapons, just nothing.”

These complaints are backed up by the critical tone of debate articles. The following excerpt is from a debate article arguing against Sweden’s increasing and uncritical support for the Kurdish nationalist federalist project in northern Syria, often referred to in Western media as the ‘Rojava Revolution’ (*Rojava* being the Kurdish word for ‘west’, and used as an abbreviation for ‘West Kurdistan’):

> “It is important that Sweden stands up for the Kurds' national and cultural rights and protest against Turkish actions. But Sweden also has reasons to be reserved about the Kurdish exercise of power in the autonomous region in northern Iraq and in the so-called Rojava federalist cantons in northern Syria… Human rights belong to everyone — Kurds as well as the small minorities which are being trampled by Kurdish rule” (Heido 2015b, translated from Swedish)

The issue of Swedish support for the ‘Rojava’ project is an example of Swedish Assyrians’ attempts to bring their own knowledge of the Middle East into the debate. Although Assyrians are divided on their opinion of Kurdish groups and the effects of Kurdish nationalist projects on the Assyrian population in the Middle East, Assyrians such as the activist quoted above are critical of the aims of a Kurdish nationalist project in areas with large Assyrian populations. By introducing their own experiences into the public sphere, they

hope to broaden Swedes' understanding of the Middle East and strengthen potential support for Assyrian issues in both the homeland and in Sweden.

Diasporas can also be effective in drawing international attention to situations that arise in their homeland. An example of Assyrians applying pressure on actors in the homeland to positive effect is the case of Yusuf Akbulut, a Syriac Orthodox priest who was arrested and prosecuted in Turkey in 2000 for "inciting racial hatred" after he stated his belief that Armenians, Assyrians and Greeks were subject to a genocide in 1915. Assyrian activists in Europe took up his case and lobbied their governments to look into the situation, leading parliament members from Sweden and Germany to observe at Akbulut's trial. After a yearlong trial and pressure from the European Parliament as well as human rights organizations, Akbulut was released.

The importance of international attention and pressure on the trial's outcome was noted by Assyrian activists, and "the participation of the observers was significant not only in supporting the priest's case, but also that of all Assyrians living in Turkey" (Biner 2011: 375). An activist who attended the trials further quotes a relative of Akbulut's, who remarked, "People from Europe should come here as witnesses so that we will feel safe under the scrutiny of this state. Otherwise we really do not know how the state will act against us. We do not know. What we know is that this is a cruel state. It does not heed anything but Europe" (Biner: 375). Assyrians in diaspora, seeing the priest's individual plight as more broadly representative of their community's struggle in Turkey, were key in pressuring their governments into focusing on the Akbulut case.

4.3 An Assyrian Homeland and a 'Return' to Assyria

As discussed in the historical background, Assyrians have aspired to an Assyrian state since prior to the fall of the Ottoman Empire. More recent discussions for an Assyrian region have centered on a potential autonomous province in the Nineveh Plains of northern Iraq, where Assyrians retain a significant presence.

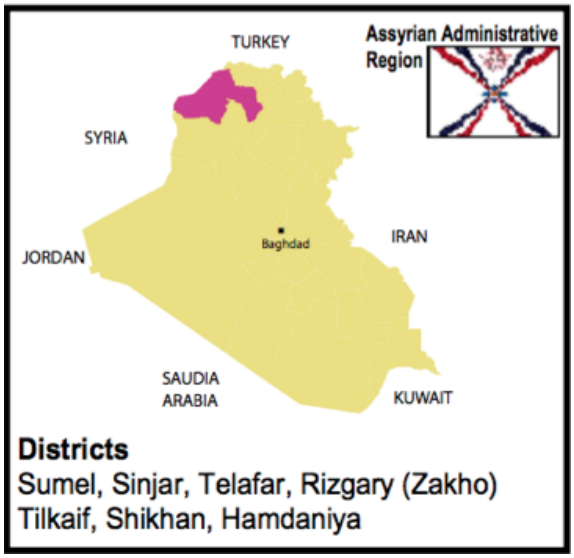

Figure 4: Proposed Assyrian autonomous region in Iraq in purple (Source: AINA, http://www.aina.org/maps/assyrianregion.htm

Respondents spoke of an autonomous region as an important step towards ensuring the safety and survival of Assyrians in the homeland. For some respondents, a physical homeland is also critical to help keep Assyrian identity alive as a whole. Some explicitly intend to return to 'Assyria', if the possibility opened up, while others are more guarded and admit that it would be difficult to adjust but would seek to invest and buy property there if possible, and hold out hope that their descendants would be able to move there. 'Maria', a Swedish-born Assyrian woman, was the most unequivocal in her desire for a future Assyrian region and her prioritizing of Assyria in her political work and as a major reason for her continued self-identification as an Assyrian:

> "[Assyria is] where we belong and that's where we have been for the last 6000 years. I would definitely go back. That's why I'm still identifying as an Assyrian, because I have hope for Assyria to be re-awakened. Otherwise I really don't see why I would still be an Assyrian. What's the purpose? … I see Assyrians as guests here in Sweden. Sweden is not ours. I see Assyria as our final destination. Maybe it won't be my destination, maybe it will be my children's or grandchildren's final destination."

Maria explicitly makes clear the centrality of the so-called 'myth of return' to her Assyrian identity and her own feelings of being a 'guest' in Sweden, despite being born and raised in Sweden. Her experiences parallel Clifford's (1994) discussion on diasporas and their inherent tensions and longings for a place they may not have direct memory of: "this sense of being a

'people' with historical roots and destinies outside the time/space of the host nation, is not separatist… diaspora communities are 'not-here' to stay. Diaspora cultures thus mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place" (Clifford 1994: 310-11).

Maria further makes critical points regarding the relationship between a diaspora and the homeland. Without the hope for an Assyrian homeland, "I really don't see why I would still be an Assyrian… what's the purpose?" In her view, the hope for and activism towards the creation of a physical homeland is a core reason to continue identifying as Assyrian, otherwise "you will assimilate in the end." Her view recalls Al-Rasheed's (1994: 200) point regarding the psychological value of the 'myth of return', which allows an individual to resist complete assimilation into their host country. Maria's responses touch on concerns particular to stateless diasporas: can there be a transformation to a diaspora-oriented identity or is assimilation ultimately inevitable without a state or autonomy, or without even a population remaining in the traditional homeland?

Maria also highlights generational differences due to the divergence in lived experience between those born in the homeland and those born in diaspora. Due to the negative experiences her family has lived through, her older relatives don't see return as a real possibility nor are they as directly concerned with ensuring a continued Assyrian presence in the Middle East as she herself is:

> "My parents now, when they see what's happening, they're not saying to stay there and fight for the Assyrian people. They are just like, 'Get out of there, it's better to live in the West and to assimilate than to live there like animals.' They're saying there's nothing left to fight for. Generation after generation has been through so much, they're just tired of it."

Other respondents noted the importance of supporting the Assyrians remaining in the homeland and their specific needs and desires. Here 'Enkido' stresses the importance of backing up what those Assyrians in the homeland specifically want:

> "The people on the ground who are living in the Middle East, whether it be in Iraq, Syria, let them decide what is best for them. And we [in the diaspora] should be

> supporting those values. What I want to say is, it's not my thing as someone who lives in Sweden to say what the people there would like."

He is critical of Assyrian political parties and groups in the diaspora who try to aggressively push their own ideas of what Assyrians in the Middle East need, and instead sees the diaspora playing a useful but strictly supportive role in the issues of the homeland while being more concerned with issues of cultural maintenance in their adoptive countries.

4.4 Discussion

This chapter has focused on the organization and political work of Swedish-Assyrians. Assyrians have been organizing in Sweden since early in their migration, utilizing Sweden's unique culture of *föreningar* to establish cultural centers, football clubs, and an umbrella federation. Swedish-Assyrians' activism and political engagement addresses diasporic concerns with cultural maintenance as well as writing about and lobbying for broader Assyrian issues, including the continued shrinkage of the Assyrian population in the Middle East due to conflict and instability and the long-standing desire for an Assyrian autonomous region. The Swedish-Assyrians interviewed utilize all layers of their identities to stand up for both their modern homeland, Sweden, and their own community.

For the Swedish-Assyrians interviewed, the political arena is a space where a diaspora can flex its dual role as citizens of the new nation and as members of a distinct folk group. The example of the Swedish Assyrians shows a diaspora community which has utilized a new country's political space to organize and attempt to make sense of themselves in a way they were unable to in their home countries due continued persecution and violence. Although literature on diaspora activism, as laid out in chapter 2, has often been negative towards the role of diasporas in homeland politics, the interlocutors quoted have a genuine concern with making positive contributions to not only their ancestral homeland and their community but also to the new country where they have become citizens. Politically active Assyrians aim to help both their new homeland as well as promote their Assyrian national aspirations and help maintain their identity, language, and culture.

Chapter 5 will expand the discussion to Swedish-Assyrians' discourse on identity; their attempts to build a nation in diaspora while strengthening new generations' and new arrivals' Swedish identity; the effects of different host nations on their community; and the

generational differences caused by lived experiences and the effects of their countries of origin as well as settlement.

Chapter 5: Identity Discourse

This chapter will bring up several topics related to Swedish-Assyrians' discourse on identity, including their nation-building in diaspora and the effects of lived experience and the host country on different Assyrian communities.

5.1 Identification and Ethnic Consciousness

Interlocutors pointed to ethnic consciousness, a basic awareness of one's indigenous roots, as being of critical importance. Being ethnically Assyrian, partaking in cultural practices or speaking the Assyrian language does not equal passion or interest in the Assyrian cause. 'Maria' remarks:

> "I would say the consciousness, just being aware that you are Assyrian, is the most important thing, because even if I knew the language and I went to church, even if I knew all of our folk dances, they wouldn't have a meaning if I didn't identify as Assyrian. If I wasn't aware of our ethnicity, it wouldn't matter."

Although interviewees agreed that maintaining and passing on the language and the various other cultural practices (food, dances, religion, etc.) to future generations is important to them, there is a need for ethnic and national consciousness in order to make these practices meaningful. Lundgren (2014) remarks on the importance of ethnic consciousness for the maintenance of diaspora identity among Assyrians, writing, "It's about identifying oneself with one's folk, having and constantly seeking knowledge of one's roots, defending Assyrian traditions and engaging oneself with the Assyrian issue" (113, translated from Swedish). Lundgren further makes explicit the comparison between the Jewish situation and Assyrians, as Jews can lack religious belief and knowledge of Jewish languages but nonetheless have a strong identity "built on the consciousness of their Jewishness, kinship with other Jews and willingness to pass on Jewish culture" (Lundgren: 112).

'Charbel', a Swedish-Assyrian man in his late 20s, explicitly identifies the Jewish people and the Jewish community in Sweden as a role model for his own community:

> "I would like our group to be more like them. Basically [Jews] are the best example of a Swedish immigrant group that has maintained their ethnic and religious identity, but

> has still adjusted extremely well to Swedish society and has also 'made it' here, socially and economically. Of course it's a group that I would look up to, and I would be happy to have my own group follow their steps."

As a group that maintained its distinct identity despite being the primordial example of a 'diaspora', the Jewish example resonates for Assyrians who are struggling with assimilation in their host countries and continued persecution in the homeland.

The need for a deliberate national consciousness is demonstrated in the following anecdote, relayed by 'Enkido', a diaspora-born Assyrian man in his early 40s with several years of political experience in Botkyrka *kommun* (municipality). He describes an encounter with a politically connected Assyrian, who in his eyes practically 'transformed' into a non-Assyrian due to his refusal to engage with potentially controversial Assyrian topics:

> "There was this Assyrian guy who was really brilliant and sharp, but to me he was Swedish… I remember when we had this issue about the Seyfo monument in Botkyrka. His father was an Assyrian patriot and politically active, but he was the opposite. I told him, "We want to do this [the memorial]." He was really sharp and he could affect some political hotshots, but he wouldn't. He said, "Should we? We live in Sweden now. Should we really open up old wounds again?" I couldn't understand him. For me he became like any other Anders or Nils."

In the case of the individual described by Enkido, being ethnically Assyrian and even being raised in a nationalist family did not mean that his political work was *for* Assyrians or Assyrian causes. In contrast, Enkido noted that he himself had entered politics with an eye towards promoting Assyrian issues, among them governmental recognition of the Seyfo: "There were other Botkyrka kommun questions I was burning for as well. But my main focus was, how do we promote the Assyrian cause?" Enkido's experiences with Assyrian, but not Assyrian-*focused*, political actors and the individual variation in engagement with diaspora causes recalls Wald's (2008) observation that "diaspora membership is always putative… individuals who share a common ethnic identity and/or national heritage cannot be assumed to attribute political weight to that tie. Politicized ethnic identity, attentiveness to homeland needs in the diaspora, is likely to differ both from one individual to another and from one diaspora community to the next" (Wald 2008: 276).

Coupled with the importance of ethnic consciousness, many noted that their self-identification and self-understanding has been a lifelong process. Depending on their environments and experiences, some had alternated between seeing themselves as fully Swedish or fully Assyrian at various points in their lives. Noting again the importance of deliberate identification and understanding of what it means to be 'Assyrian', one interviewee describes her own process and her specific search for a meaningful Assyrian identity. A Sweden-born Assyrian in her early twenties, 'Nineveh' has shifted in her orientation towards her Assyrian identity and her Swedish one throughout her life:

> "I felt a lot like an Assyrian when I was a child, but when I started secondary school I felt more like a Swede. [By my early 20s], I started to search after my real identity because I felt lost. I am a Swede, but still I'm an Assyrian, so I want[ed] to know what it means to be Assyrian."

Self-identification can be dependent on the context and on the receiver of the information. A respondent noted the challenge of explaining who Assyrians are, and of wanting to skip the unavoidable questions that follow after identifying oneself as Assyrian when traveling in countries where Assyrians are not as widely known as they are in Sweden. In addition, it was noted that in some environments, displaying a strong ethnic or nationalist identification can be a delicate subject. 'Enkido', quoted earlier regarding the importance of Assyrian consciousness, remarks on how the workplace can be a sensitive site for nationalist declarations:

> "When I'm in the Assyrian *föreningsliv* (association, association life), I want to stand up for the Assyrian issue. But when I'm with my colleagues [at work], I can't be like that, really. You need to be a little bit more careful about being so — I wouldn't say nationalistic, but it's better to say, 'Well, we are all citizens of this world, and have to have a mutual understanding…'"

5.2 Building a Nation in Diaspora

The presence of national borders around traditional Assyrian areas resulted in the development of linguistic and cultural differences that remain noticeable among Assyrians in the diaspora. These include more lighthearted differences due to the dissimilarity in lifestyle

between, for example, Assyrians who lived in rural villages and those who were from larger cities. Here ‘Enkido’ recalls how his family, originally from small villages in Tur ‘Abdin, had difficulty relating to relatives from the ‘big city’ (Qamishli, in northern Syria):

> “We had relatives in Syria who had to go to the hairdresser. That was something common for the women in Qamishli, once a week they would go to the hairdresser. This was taboo in Turkey: “You should be working! You should be saving up and storing for the winter time!” They couldn’t understand.”

‘Nineveh’ also notes the diversity in the Assyrians’ experience in the Middle East, as “Assyrians from Iraq lived with another society and government, while Assyrians from Syria were almost free, they were living ‘modern’. There were not as many rules as in Iraq. And Turkey—those are villages! It’s a big difference.” Assyrians from different areas were heavily impacted by the political context of their country and the government in control.

In diaspora, there are examples of unification of the community and of new divisions being created. Unification can be deliberate and encouraged, for example via Assyrians learning each other’s dialects. Assyrians who are very active in organizations or live in mixed areas often pick up the other dialect through exposure, but there are also attempts to organize courses and teach the dialects.

‘Nemrod’ notes that unity is a result of statehood, something that Assyrians have been unable to create due to their continued statelessness and mistreatment in the Middle East:

> “As Assyrians are stateless, we haven’t had the time to build nationhood, as you have in Sweden where 100 different languages and dialects [have been] made into one. In the old days, people from Stockholm didn’t know what people in Skåne said. But now everybody understands each other because they have been able to build a nation.”

A critical step for nation building is education, a step that Assyrians are becoming more engaged with through the opening of Assyrian-themed schools in areas with significant Assyrian populations. The first such school opened in 2014, with plans for others being made as of 2016. ‘Daniel’, the interviewee in the following quote, sees it as a step towards national unity for the younger generations, including through the importance of linguistic unity:

> "The ambition is that the kids will learn both dialects. That will be the first time because the different nations, the national borders in the Middle East, they maintained this division and as a result the two dialects went different ways. Now, in Sweden, we're trying to bring them together again."

The above respondent outlines the importance of language for Assyrians to close gaps in understanding across the Middle Eastern state frontiers that formerly divided them. In a similar vein, the autumn 2015 Assyrian course offered by an Assyrian cultural center can be interpreted as an example of an Assyrian national project. Teaching Assyrians from both sides of the Eastern-Western Assyrian divide the other's dialect potentially brings the entire group closer together by removing a communication barrier. This hope was explicitly stated by the organizer of the courses, who also made the comparison with a classic diaspora, Jewish people: "When Israel was established they [Jews] had no shared language at all, they were even more divided than Assyrians! And Hebrew was a dead language, it had to be completely brought back" (field notes).

Aside from creating unity within the community, 'Daniel' also points out the importance of education in contributing to pupils' knowledge of the Swedish language and bolstering their identity as Swedish citizens as well. Schools can serve the dual role of a site of nation-building for the Assyrian people as well as a place of integration into the broader host society:

> "Silvia: Would you send your own children [to the school]?
> Daniel: Yes, I would, but not just because it's an Assyrian school. We're working very hard to make them good schools, that people will want to send their children there not only so they'll learn the Assyrian language and our culture and history but because … you know your child will do well in high school and university. It's a Swedish school, since every school in Sweden has to follow the same curriculum. So they have to speak Swedish."

For Daniel, it's important that Assyrian-themed schools strengthen both the pupils' Assyrian and Swedish identities, and that they be good schools in their own right even outside of the additional ethnic component.

The importance of education in Assyrian nation building echoes the attempts by early Assyrian nationalists, working in the era prior to the 1915 genocide, to cross confessional and dialectal borders and promote a unified Assyrian identity. However Assyrians' presence as a diaspora community with a need to adjust to a host country means that the Assyrian nationalist component is supplemented with the skills needed to contribute to Swedish society: Swedish language ability as well as strengthening of Swedish identity.

Another aspect of creating a stronger national identity is to open it up beyond the religious boundaries. There is internal controversy, reflected in the ongoing naming problem, among this ethnic group regarding the centrality of the church and Christianity to their group. In the Middle East, where Christians are a minority in comparison to Muslims, a Christian identity helped preserve Assyrian culture and prevent assimilation into the larger groups. However, in diaspora in countries such as Sweden or the United States, where Assyrians share a religious identity with the majority population, a Christian identity will not prevent assimilation. In addition, a church-oriented identity may not resonate with secular or non-believing Assyrians, or Assyrians who may feel themselves alienated from their church due to personal characteristics, such as being LGBT. 'Nineveh' notes how a church-based identity has led Assyrians, in her example those who don't disapprove of LGBT people, to leave their Assyrian identity behind:

> "If someone asks, I'm first Assyrian and then Christian. But some say no, I'm first Christian and then Assyrian. The people who call themselves Syriac, usually they go after their priests and their bishops and the churches, and in the church, they don't teach us history. They only teach us about Christianity, which is logical! A church shouldn't teach you history about something else. They see our priests as their leaders, and they are just going after the Bible. And [regarding] homosexuality, they say, "No, it's wrong." But then some of the Assyrians will say, "Well, I don't think it's wrong, am I less Christian? Fine, then I'm not Assyrian and that's it.'"

For Nineveh, the strong linkage between Christianity and a Syriac/Assyrian identity risks pushing individuals who feel estranged from the church for personal reasons or lack of belief away from not only the church but from the entirety of what to her is a primarily ethnic identification. 'Opening up' the Assyrian identity beyond church identification is necessary,

in her view, to counterbalance the potential disaffection of individuals who are alienated from the church from their separate ethnic identity.

Strengthening the ethnic component of Assyrian identity in the face of immigration and secularization again finds some common ground in the Jewish experience. Discussing a study on Jews in the United States and their findings of continued self-identification of Jews as 'Jewish' even when non-religious, Amyot and Sigelman write, "this sense of identity represents a transformation from a predominantly religious to a predominantly ethnic understanding of what it means to be Jewish...in this newer, more 'survivalist'-oriented sense, Judaism and Jewishness are no longer as intertwined as they once were" (Amyot and Sigelman 1996: 187-188). A similar process is sought by Assyrians who prioritize their ethnic identity, with its historical background and claims to indigenous rights, over the strictly Christianity-based identity which they felt was pushed on their community in the Middle East.

5.3 Host Country Effects

Although being in diaspora can unify a population around new forms of identity or a hope of return, migration can also create new divisions. Divisions can be noted among Assyrians, as they are now affected by their adoptive nations' cultures. Several respondents remarked on the differences between themselves and their relatives or co-nationalists in other countries, including the United States. The ability of their community to retain cultural distinctiveness, including language, is affected by the host country's own ideology and history with immigration.

As the following respondent, 'Nemrod', notes, it's easier to lose Assyrian identity in the United States than in Sweden. Nemrod is born and raised in Sweden but has spent some time in the United States on exchanges with Assyrian communities there:

> "[Assyrians in the US] are more assimilated than us. The American concept is very appealing and it's like a *dammsugare* (vacuum cleaner) for collecting folks. It's an empire, and it accepts everybody, so Assyrians are as American as everybody else. It's easy to lose your language and identity."

Nemrod compares the American, 'New World' idea of immigration and the 'melting pot' with ethnicity-based Swedish identity, saying, "Here it's easier to keep a separate identity because the majority society makes up rules where we don't fit in. The society, per se, makes you Assyrian. It forces you in." Although it is worth keeping in mind that this critique of ethnicity-based rather than the more birthplace-oriented approach towards citizenship in the United States is "an arena of ideals rather than practice" as it is "an act of great amnesia [to] produce the USA as a land welcoming of all immigrants" (Kalra, Kaur and Hutnyk 2005: 110), there is nonetheless a contrast between these two different ways of dealing with immigration which reflect the patterns discussed in Safran (1991: 86) of 'organic' versus 'functional' citizenship, where immigrants to countries that have historically reckoned citizenship based on descent rather than birthplace have found it more difficult to be considered 'real' citizens of that nation, even when they bear its passport or other markers of legal citizenship.

The new society's system has a deep impact on how and where Assyrians organize, and the importance given to the church as a core site of Assyrian identity:

> "We were visiting our relatives [in the United States] and really, the people my age and younger, they were more religious than my own father has ever been. Really, very strict. But I think it's the American way. You work hard, five or six days a week, and you have this day when you go to church, it's a family day… The only day when they were connecting with other people within the community was Sunday. That's the only day they can integrate and communicate."

Enkido, the above interviewee, remarked that the organization of Assyrians in Sweden into many secular organizations is a stark contrast to what he has seen on his visits to relatives who have settled in the United States. Sweden's impact on Assyrians, as noted by this respondent, extends to increased secularization among the community. Although many Swedish Assyrians remain observant Christians, the American relatives he visited may depend more on the church for socialization with fellow community members and for leisure activities, thus ensuring the maintenance of a church-oriented identity when contrasted with the availability of non-religious cultural organizations for Swedish Assyrians. The differing levels of secularity and religiosity among Assyrians residing in different countries, as well as the culture of the country of residence, may also partially account for differences in the

acceptance of homosexuality among Assyrian communities. As ‘Charbel’ notes, “If you see how Assyrians in America are towards LGBT people, I would say they’re more conservative”, another host country effect and marked difference among different diaspora Assyrian groups.

5.4 Generational Differences

> “[Assyrians] were forced to focus only on churches and they couldn’t be nationalistic, they couldn’t emphasize their ethnicity. If they emphasized [their religion], they could live in peace, but whenever they would get nationalistic it became risky… Many would give up their ethnicity and their awareness of their roots just to survive.”
>
> ‘Maria’

Maria speaks of her community’s coping mechanisms when living in several countries in the Middle East, where Assyrians have been forced to play down or even surrender their identity so as to avoid persecution and violence. Several respondents agreed that members of the older generation don’t prioritize the Assyrian identity, with some older relatives preferring instead to identify solely by their Christian religious identification. This lack of ethnic identification was due to both a lack of historical education and the lingering presence of a *millet*-like system in the Middle East, as minorities continue to be identified primarily by their religious identity.

Being raised in authoritarian regimes made it challenging for older Assyrians to change their views, as limited freedom of expression and especially lack of access to alternative media in earlier eras lead people to believe more wholeheartedly in government narratives. Enkido speaks of his experience with relatives and family friends who were raised under various regimes:

> “I know for sure as well, if you’re raised in Syria… it comes with the milk of the mother, they nurture you that Israel is to blame for everything. This is the Syrian [state] official line. If anything happens, if I stumble and break a leg, it was Israel, of course… [Assyrians] were nurtured from the different official lines. And back in the 1970s, they didn’t have this widespread media with different views on the same issue. So it was the official line, every day. And in the end, you believe it. Or you have to believe it. You cannot do anything else.”

The often-steep consequences for political engagement in the Middle East meant that many Assyrians avoided politics altogether, or on the other hand became deeply committed to politics. 'Charbel', born in Sweden to Iraqi Assyrian parents, remarks on the sharp differences between the different halves of his family regarding political engagement:

> "It was two folded. On the one hand large parts of my family had no clue about politics. They were raised with Ba'athism, basically … a dictatorial socialism where they would just pay people to stay home and not be active in society in any sense. If you look at the Assyrian group, especially the ones from Syria and Iraq that experienced Ba'athism, large portions of the group were afraid to be politically active and large parts would say they were apolitical. But then you have the group of people who were exactly the opposite, who decided to fight that, and who were active in the Assyrian movement. So you have the people who were extremely engaged and took very big risks, and then you have the people who weren't."

This interlocutor noted a tendency towards the extreme in regards to political engagement among his relatives, with half of his family being deeply engaged with Assyrian nationalist politics and with *Zowa'a*, the largest Assyrian political party in Iraq, and the other half being essentially apolitical and engaging very little with the political sphere.

Even in diaspora, political activism remains something that older generations may be uncomfortable with, seeing it as a threat to their family's safety as it had often been in the Middle East:

> "My mother doesn't look positively upon my activities and engagement in the political issues. She sees it as something negative, something dangerous. You can be hurt by Kurds, Turks, etc. … [She says], 'why don't you come to church with me instead?"

This interviewee's mother, a devout Syriac Orthodox Christian who does not identify herself as 'Assyrian' (preferring to identify herself solely as a Christian), remains wary of her son's activism despite having lived decades in Sweden.

Other interlocutors also point out the difficulties of integrating into Swedish society as the number of immigrants has greatly increased over the past couple of decades. 'Maria' contrasts the situation for her own family, which arrived during one of the early waves of Assyrian migration to Sweden, to those arriving now:

> "I would say it was better when Assyrians first came to Sweden, in the 1970s, 1980s. They weren't comfortable, they didn't know the system, they felt like they needed to work. But it feels like more and more people come here and they get comfortable. Many think, 'Oh we go [to Sweden], our relatives can support us.' It's different when it comes to integration. It's the whole society that is having this effect; it's not just the people. It's the whole society that is changing, and the society is adapting to the immigrants."

Increasing numbers of immigrants, among them Assyrians, in a town such as Södertälje has made it more challenging for newer arrivals to learn Swedish or adapt into the society. Aside from the diminishing resources allotted to individuals due to the glut of people arriving, higher numbers of people from the same country or community makes it easier for people to function in their own language rather than learn the new country's language or work in places that serve their own community rather than the broader society. The situation for new arrivals to a country is also dependent on the host society's own policies and regulations. 'Maria' continues,

> "It's very hard to adjust… It creates subcultures, sub-societies. But it also has a lot to do with the policies in Sweden. In Sweden you get to choose where you want to live, and of course everybody goes to where they know people, where the majority of their family is, where people speak their language."

The impact of the host country and its practices is noticeable in the changing experiences of Assyrian migrants to Sweden. This interviewee sees a negative trend of lower integration and Swedish language skills among Assyrians due to Sweden's '*EBO-lagen'* ('*lagen om eget boende'*, 'law on personal accommodation'), a policy that permits asylum-seekers to decide for themselves where to live as opposed to the state deciding where they should reside. Maria is not alone in pointing out the trend of segregation due to housing policies. As Castles and Miller (2003) outlined, "Sweden's special public housing schemes for immigrants have led to

a high degree of ethnic concentration and separation from the Swedish population" (234). The result of the housing segregation leads to higher levels of poverty and youth employment, as "the interplay between spatial segregation, marginalisation in the labour market and public stigmatisation seems to generate a vicious circle. The number of people between 18 and 64 years of age who receive long-term income support is much higher in these areas; between 8–21 per cent in 2006, compared to the Swedish average of 1.5 per cent" (Schierup and Ålund 2011: 52).

Contrary to harming continued Assyrian identity, interlocutors noted the importance of trying to learn about Sweden and its culture and becoming 'fluent' in both cultures. For Nineveh, it is important to become familiar with Swedish culture and the local language:

> "Some of them [new arrivals] come to Södertälje, where the majority is Assyrian. They go to Södertälje and maybe they don't integrate. There are a lot of Assyrians who are living in their own bubble here in Sweden, and almost never communicate in Swedish which I think is very bad. You don't have to have Swedish friends if you don't want to, but I think it's important to at least get out and just learn the language and the culture. I think it's a fantastic culture here. It doesn't mean that you have to forget your Assyrian culture."

Nineveh sees learning the Swedish language and understanding Sweden and its culture as compatible with maintaining one's Assyrian culture, not as something that would lead to identity loss. Her remarks are the mirror image of what Castles and Miller outline as the ethos of the 'multicultural model' of immigration, such as the one historically followed by the Swedish state. Such models have as a "common thread [...] an acceptance of the cultural diversity and social changes wrought by immigration…the diversity produced by immigration is seen as an enrichment rather than as a threat to the predominant culture" (2003: 281). Her voice reflects this ethos back towards the majority culture: opening yourself up to the other group does not tear down your own culture, but rather it enriches it, although for both the host community and the diaspora there is continued wrestling with the boundaries between successful integration and the fear of losing one's culture.

5.5 Discussion

This chapter has built on the previous chapter's examination of Swedish-Assyrian political engagement by looking at the discourse surrounding identity and Assyrian nation-building in diaspora. As with the previous chapter, it used ethnographic data to address several subjects relevant to the Swedish Assyrian community, focusing on the process of maintaining and building up an identity and a nation in diaspora.

A main aspect which interlocutors addressed as being of importance for the maintenance of identity is ethnic and national consciousness. Without it, some interlocutors argued, the rituals of culture become meaningless. In addition, being politically active and Assyrian does not mean being politically active *for* Assyria or Assyrian causes. Politicization of an ethnic identity is individual and cannot be generalized.

The chapter also focused on the process of 'building a nation' while in diaspora. Part of this process is bridging the gaps between Assyrians with roots in different Middle Eastern countries. Differences in dialect and culture can be traversed in diaspora more easily than across national boundaries in the Middle East. However, new divisions and differences are also being created, as Assyrians are now similarly affected by the cultures of their countries of settlement. In the United States, where several of the interviewees had relatives or Assyrian contacts, Assyrians lose their language and distinctiveness more rapidly as a result of the more open concept of American identity rather than the ethnicity-based Swedish identity. They may also maintain a church-oriented identity due to the continued importance of the church as a social space in contrast to Sweden, where many Assyrians have access to non-church-affiliated cultural centers.

In the Swedish context, there are also issues caused by the continued migration into Sweden of large numbers of Assyrians fleeing from conflicts in the Middle East. Earlier Assyrian migrants found themselves obligated to familiarize themselves with the broader Swedish society and quickly learn the language in order to access the job market, while more recent migrants settle in areas with large populations of their own people, making it harder for them to learn Swedish, make contact with the larger Swedish community, or enter the job market. Several interlocutors saw these changes as a detriment to their community, and noted how Swedish and Assyrian cultures can coexist or even complement one another, rather than one culture being irrevocably lost by cultural exchange.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This thesis has sought to answer two research questions through ethnographic data from the Assyrian community in Sweden: how does a diaspora engage politically within a host nation; and how does a stateless diaspora maintain its culture and help contribute to its own nation-building while in diaspora. Assyrians have had a presence in Sweden, especially in the broader Stockholm area, for nearly fifty years and over that time have become an example of a diaspora community that has utilized the political space available in their new country to organize and promote their interests and culture. The space provided by the Swedish political and organizational sphere has not been unproblematic for the Assyrian community, as power struggles among different elites and clans, tensions between traditional church leadership and secular nationalists, and different understandings of origin and history have led to splits in the group (seen in the division between *Assyrier* and *Syrianer*). Despite these issues and internal conflicts, the political space available in diaspora has also allowed Assyrian activists to further develop and promote Assyrian nationalist ideas.

The thesis began with a summary of the thesis focus and methods, as well as an overview of the literature on the anthropological study of diaspora and basic concepts related to diaspora and its experiences. It also provided historical background on the Assyrians, their migration to Sweden, and the development of Assyrian nationalist thought as well as its early expressions in the Middle East.

The ethnographic chapters use material from interviews with Swedish-Assyrians to illustrate various aspects of the discourse, activism and political engagement of this community. As a group with both intimate ties to a homeland and a feeling of belonging in the new nation, Swedish-Assyrians wrestle with concerns related to integration and assimilation. Although there is a desire to maintain their culture and language, interlocutors were also critical of the decline in integration they perceive due to the high number of immigrants arriving in Sweden.

For politically engaged interviewees, there is mobilization of both their role as members of the Assyrian ethnic group as well as their position as Swedish citizens. Some interviewees noted that it was Assyrian causes that had driven them to engage in politics, while others had initially become active over issues they saw in Sweden. Interlocutors also noted a desire to

deepen Swedish knowledge of the Middle East. To this end I included media material as debate articles and opinion pieces are a tool used by activists to insert an Assyrian voice into political debates.

Related to anthropological discussions on the importance of the homeland to the diasporic imaginary, the ethnography also touches on the subject of an Assyrian homeland and how interviewees view it. The ethnography also discusses the effects of the host community on the diaspora, another subject of importance in the study of diaspora, as Assyrians have been affected by the differences in the cultures of the countries to which they have moved. Interlocutors themselves noted the differences between Assyrians in Sweden and those in the United States, two countries with quite different histories of immigration and dissimilar concepts of national identity, as well as varying levels of religiosity and availability of non-church affiliated cultural organizations.

Future works on this community could look at the transnational aspects in diaspora. As Assyrians are scattered over many different countries, there are also international Assyrian organizations and examples of collaboration across national lines. There are examples of transnational Assyrian organizations being formed even presently, including an Assyrian Confederation of Europe that was established in April 2016 at the European Parliament and has representatives from Assyrian federations of various European countries (Sweden, Germany, and Belgium as of the time of writing). These transnational organizations provide a further example of Assyrian organizing and political activism at even higher levels of government. These organizations also create further opportunities for the development of Assyrian nationalist thought across the diaspora and maintenance of Assyrian identity, as the shared language and culture among Assyrians living in different host nations is the Assyrian language and various aspects of Assyrian culture.

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