**Advances in Assyrian Language Development and Education in Iran and Ottoman Turkey (1835-1918)**

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**Introduction:**

The first modern Assyrian schools were established in the Urmia region of Iran on 18 January 1836 by foreign missionaries. Prior to that, only males with ecclesiastical ranks were able to read or write, with the exception of one or two women from privileged families. The education was rudimentary, and consisted almost exclusively of instruction in classical Syriac religious texts to boys who would later grow to serve the Church. While modern Assyrian had been in use to write some religious poetry since the 1500s, it was never a widespread language of literature or communication until the arrival of the missions. By 1914, there were an estimated 627 educational institutions (including schools, seminaries and colleges) in Iran and the Ottoman Empire either run by Assyrian Churches and individuals or attended by Assyrian students, where either Classical Syriac or Neo-Aramaic (in some cases both) were part of the teaching curricula. These had a total enrollment of about 21,000 students, representing an average of 9% of the total school-age Assyrian population of the time. Significantly, some 57% of these educational institutions and 43% of all enrolled students were located in Iran.

**Learning and Schools among the Eastern Assyrians:**

On the eve of the First World War, the Assyrians in the Urmia region boasted some 348 primary and high schools, as well as 4 colleges and seminaries, operated by Presbyterian, Catholic, Anglican, Russian Orthodox, Lutheran and other missions, as well as private individuals. Since there was a total of about 200 Assyrian villages in the region at this time, that means that some villages possessed more than one school. In these institutions, a standardised form of the local dialects of modern Assyrian was taught alongside other core subjects and foreign languages and, in many cases, in addition to Classical Syriac. The total enrollment of the schools around 1914 is estimated at 9,100. With an estimated population of between 78,000 and 92,000 Assyrians in the Urmia region in 1914, this means that there was an average of one school for every 67 to 78 school-aged Assyrian children. Therefore, between 30 and 34% of Assyrian children in the region would have attended school and had, at least, an elementary education. In many cases, after learning to read and write, the Assyrian children also began to teach their parents to do so. In 1908, the rate of literacy among both the Assyrian male and female population of the Urmia region was estimated at 80%. According to Dr. Arianne Ishaya: “This is a remarkably high rate of literacy for the time, even by the standards of an urbanized center in the West, let alone a rural area in the Middle East. At the time, there were more Assyrian physicians in Urmia than all of Iran; Assyrian professionals under the supervision of the foreign missionaries staffed all missionary schools, newspapers and hospitals” (Ishaya, 2002).

The first of these elementary village schools were established by the American Presbyterian Mission in 1836. On 12 March 1838, they also opened the first primary schools for girls. In 1839, we find the first inscription in modern Assyrian carved onto a tombstone from the region. Also that year, the Mission opened a men’s college to which a medical department, the first in the history of modern Iran, was added a year later. It should be noted that many of the subjects taught in this college, including anatomy, were taught in modern Assyrian. On 7 November 1840, they established the first Assyrian printing press in Urmia. Subsequently, on 13 March the following year, a small part of scripture was published which is also, incidentally, the first book to ever be printed in modern Assyrian. That same year, they opened a seminary for women. By 1844 the Gospels had been translated and published in modern Assyrian and in 1846 the entire New Testament was translated by Dr. Perkins into the vernacular for the first time, followed by the Old Testament in 1852. By 1877, some 21 million pages of Christian literature, as well as teaching materials and scientific publications, were printed in modern Assyrian and classical Syriac by the American Mission Press.

In addition to the schools, print media also ensured the preservation and widespread usage of the modern Assyrian language in the Urmia region. On 1 November 1849, the American Presbyterian Mission began to publish the newspaper *Zahrire d-Bahra* (Rays of Light), which remained in circulation for nearly seven decades between 1849 and 1918. This was, incidentally, the first periodical to be printed in Iran. Apart from the American Mission Press, printing houses were also run in the region by the Catholic, Anglican and Russian missions. By 1914, four newspapers were distributed from Urmia. Apart from *Zahrire d-Bahra*, the other three newspapers included *Qala d-Shrara* (Voice of Truth) published by the French Lazarist Mission since 1897, *Urmi Orthodoksayta* (Orthodox Urmi) published by the Russian Orthodox Mission since 1904, and *Kokhva* (The Star) published by a group of secular nationalists since 1906.

By 1895, the American Presbyterian Mission ran 117 elementary schools with 2,410 students, 3 high schools with 390 students, and a college that boasted academic, industrial, theological and medical departments. In 1889 the college had 151 college students, of which 18 graduated, and by 1895 a total of 160 teachers and preachers had graduated from there. While these educational institutions were open to all people, regardless of religious affiliation, some 10,000 local Assyrians had converted to Protestantism by 1914. In addition to their school system, this mission also ran a network of Sabbath schools in the 36 churches belonging to their 119 congregations across the region, which had a total of 5,440 literate scholars in 1893. This Mission also opened 5 schools in the Hakkari region and one in Bohtan, both in the Ottoman Empire, with between 120 and 180 students.

The Chaldean Catholics, with the help of the French Lazarist Mission, began opening schools in the Urmia region in 1840 and, by 1914, they ran a total of 55 schools with around 1,245 students. They also opened seminaries at Khosrawa (1846) and Urmia (1848) which had a combined enrolment of about 32 students. The Archbishop of Canterbury’s Assyrian Mission, run by the Anglican Church, began operating in Urmia in 1885 with the stated purpose of helping save the Church of the East from extinction through educating its younger generations and preventing their conversion to other Churches. By 1891, they had opened 78 elementary schools with 2,410 students, 5 high schools with 230 students and a college with 76 students. By the time they ceased operations in 1914, they had also established around 47 schools in the Ottoman provinces of Hakkari and Van, with a combined enrollment of between 1,000 and 1,100 students. With the onset of the First World War and success of the Russian Orthodox Mission, it is presumed that all of this Mission’s schools were taken over by local Assyrians. The Russian Orthodox Mission in Urmia had begun opening schools among the Assyrian communities there in 1903 and, by 1906, it ran a total of 74 schools with 1,640 students, alongside a population of 32,000 converts. The Russian Orthodox Church also maintained schools among Assyrian émigré communities in a village near the Turkish city of Kars and the Caucasian provinces of Tiflis and Erivan (present-day Georgia and Armenia). In addition to these, there were another 20 schools run by other missions or private individuals, with a total of 500 students, in 1906. These included 4 German Lutheran schools operational since 1881, one Swedish Lutheran school opened in the 1880s, 7 Norwegian Lutheran schools operational since 1888, and possibly two Baptist schools opened after 1892. Eventually, in 1908/9, an independent Assyrian national school was also established.

The Chaldean Catholic Church had already established some schools in Baghdad, Mosul and Diyarbakir during the 1700s, but its educational efforts did not begin to spread to rural communities until the unification of the patriarchates of Diyarbakir and Alqosh in 1830. By 1914, this Church had the most widespread educational system with the highest number of schools and students, 179 and between 7,250 and 7,500 respectively. This was due to the fact that this Church was strongly supported by the Dominican and Capuchin Missions in the Ottoman Empire and Lazarist Mission in Iran, as well as French diplomats in both countries. Apart from the schools in Urmia, the Chaldean Catholic Church ran some 16 schools in Hakkari (with about 360 students), 4 around Van (about 90 students), 20 and one seminary in Mosul and the Nineveh Plain (about 1,675 students), 26 in the districts of Dohuk, Zakho, Amedia and Aqra (about 1,000 students), 20 in Jazirah and Bohtan (about 1,000 students), 10 in and around Diyarbakir (about 530 students), 7 in the regions of Erbil and Kirkuk (about 460 students), 6 in Baghdad and southern Iraq (about 400 students), 4 in Mardin and Tur-‘Abdin (about 240 students), 4 in other cities of Iran (about 90 students), and another 4 in other parts of the Ottoman Empire (about 80 students). All of these schools provided instruction in Classical Syriac, but only those in the Nineveh Plain or Bohtan would have additionally taught some modern Assyrian. In addition to the schools, they also possessed a printing press in Mosul which published liturgical books, mostly in Classical Syriac, as well as some dictionaries and grammars.

**Learning and Schools among the Western Assyrians:**

In the 1840s, the Syriac Orthodox Church began its own education system, which later produced Assyrian thinkers and national leaders such as Prof. Ashur Yusuf, Naum Faik, Capt. Abraham Yusuf, Sanharib Balley, David Barsoum Perley, Farid Elias Nuzha and others. According to American Anglican missionary Horatio Southgate (1844), the story of the establishment of Syriac Orthodox schools is as follows:

“When the Patriarch [Ignatius Elias II, 1838-1847] was in Constantinople in 1838, the Armenian Patriarch [Stepanos III, 1831-1839] expostulated with him on the state of the nation, and among other things said to him, that **a people without schools must inevitably decline**. The remark sunk deep into the mind of the Patriarch, and was never forgotten. On his journey home, he visited most of the places where Syrians are to be found, and in every place established a school. They are of course on a very humble scale.”

Southgate (1856: 202)

The Armenians already had a head-start on the Assyrian patriarch; they established their first schools in the Ottoman Empire in the 1790s and, by 1914, there were over 1,996 Armenian schools and colleges with 173,022 pupils. The Syriac Orthodox Church, on the other hand, had a modest network of about 40 schools around the start of the First World War, more than half of which were in the region of Mardin and Tur-‘Abdin, and many of which were run from monasteries. This was still a very low number, since there were only between 2,300 and 2,700 students, most of whom were boys. Girls’ schools only existed in cities such as Diyarbakir and Mardin.

By 1899, Syriac Orthodox immigrants in New Jersey established the Assyrian National School Association, later called the Assyrian Orphanage and School Association of America (AOSA). This organisation initially sent funds to support the schools that were being established by the Syriac Orthodox Patriarchate in the villages and towns of northern Mesopotamia. It later funded, ran and owned a school for Assyrian orphans in the Turkish city of Adana, which was transferred to Beirut in 1923. This organisation still maintains an office in Paramus, NJ and helps fund the school in Beirut, as well as other schools and orphanages run by the Syriac Orthodox Church.

The Syriac Catholics also began their educational system in the 1840s. By the start of the First World War, they possessed a total of about 37 schools concentrated in the areas of Mardin and Tur-‘Abdin, Mosul and the Nineveh Plain, as well as in Levantine Syria. These had an estimated 2,000 students. The curricula of the Syriac Orthodox and Catholic Churches at this time included the teaching of Classical Syriac only, since the spoken dialects of modern Assyrian were restricted to the rural areas of Tur-‘Abdin and the Nineveh Plain, and they had not developed a written standard. The schools belonging to Western Assyrian Protestants will not be discussed because their sole language of instruction was Arabic.

**Conclusions:**

As we can observe, both Eastern and Western Assyrians had a significant number of schools, the largest number of which were established in the districts of Urmia and Salmas in Iran. Additionally, most of these schools were run by Assyrian Churches as well as foreign missions. They also, for the most part, taught Christian religion along with some basic subjects such as arithmetic, etc. Most of these schools taught the classical Syriac language as a liturgical language and, unfortunately, it was only the Eastern Assyrians who taught their own vernacular, along with secular, modern subjects of higher learning. Furthermore, this was only started with the help of American missionaries. However it may be, these first Assyrian schools, colleges and printing presses were the reason not only for the development, spread and preservation of their language, but they also led to the birth of a modern literary corpus, as well as the establishment of nationalist ideologies. In conclusion, Assyrians today need to learn from their example if they wish to preserve their existence either in their ancestral homeland, or in the diaspora. More specifically, Assyrians need secular national schools, outside the circle of religiosity and sectarianism.

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