

## **IRAQI ASSYRIANS IN LONDON: BEYOND THE 'IMMIGRANT/REFUGEE' DIVIDE**

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### *Introduction*

THE Assyrians are a minority group in Iraq by virtue of their Christian faith and language. While some have lived in Iraq since ancient times, the majority arrived as refugees from south-east Turkey during the First World War. They were welcomed by the British mandatory authorities who recruited them into local levies established to protect the British presence in Iraq. The Assyrian military association with Britain distanced the Assyrians from the local Arab population. When Britain ended its military presence in Iraq in the 1950s, the levies were disbanded and many Assyrians migrated to Britain in search of new economic opportunities. The settlement of this pioneer Assyrian community in London was the product of both the group's contact with Britain and its uneasy and sometimes arduous existence in Iraq since the country's independence. In the 1980s and the early 1990s the community expanded due to the arrival of refugees fleeing the Iran-Iraq War and the Gulf War.

With the arrival of Assyrian refugees in the 1980s the pioneer immigrants began to define themselves as a community of refugees rather than as immigrants whose emigration in the 1950s and 1960s was motivated by a desire to improve their economic situation. Their collective memory focuses on the early refugee experience of their parents who abandoned their villages in Turkey and moved to Iraq during the First World War. This past experience, and the memory attached to it, are fused with the recent experience of Assyrian refugees from Iraq seeking

asylum in Britain. Their memory solidifies the identity of the community, which is now projected as a refugee identity. Drawing on field research among the Assyrian community in Ealing and upon case-studies of immigrants, this article explores this shift of definition in the community in London.<sup>1</sup>

Many sociological studies have stressed the distinction between 'immigrants' and 'refugees' (e.g. Anwar 1979, Robinson 1986). The former are described as people who voluntarily leave their country of origin in pursuit of economic opportunities, the latter as people whose migration is forced and, in most cases, caused by political events such as warfare, violence or civil disorder. Such classifications, although often challenged as inadequate by sociologists, have been used by governments and policymakers to include or exclude both potential immigrants and genuine refugees.<sup>2</sup> This study avoids such classifications altogether, since they are more likely to lead to stereotypes with serious consequences for the people under investigation. Moreover, as this article will show, there are immigrants, such as the Assyrians in London, who cannot be placed easily into any one category. Instead of entering a futile debate about whether Assyrians are economic immigrants or genuine refugees, my intention is to show that such definitions are themselves subject to change and manipulation by investigating how the community is defined by its own members.

### *Who are the Assyrians?*

Before the First World War, Assyrians inhabited the Hakkiari mountains between Lake Van, in present-day Turkey, and Lake Urmia, in Persia, commonly known as Kurdistan. Some of their villages were also located within the northern

1. Initial contact with Assyrians in London was made in 1990–1 through their community associations, clubs and church. Research was delayed in January 1991 because of the Gulf War and resumed in 1992 (March–September).

2. Governments usually rely on the definition of refugee contained in the 1951 United Nations Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. These refer to any person, who, 'owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unwilling to return to it' (UN 1951, Article 1 [2]). While this definition is restrictive, governments continue to reserve the right to interpret it as they wish depending on their willingness to grant or refuse refugee status. In recent years, many potential refugees have been refused asylum on the basis that they are genuine economic migrants who present themselves to immigration officers under the guise of being refugees. The distinction between 'immigrants' and 'refugees' has proved to be useful in enforcing state control and excluding the movement of people between countries.

boundaries of modern Iraq—a territory they shared with the Kurds and other minorities and which was once part of the Ottoman Empire.

Isolated in their villages in the rugged mountains of Kurdistan, this Christian community followed the Assyrian Ancient Church of the East, previously known as the Nestorian Church.<sup>3</sup> Their church liturgy was in Syriac-Aramaic, which is maintained to the present day. The community, however, spoke a dialect which they claimed was related to this ancient language. Both language and religion separated the Assyrians from the dominant local Muslim populations, i.e. the Kurds, Turks, Arabs, and Persians.

The Assyrians of the Hakkari mountains and northern Iraq were recognized by the Ottoman Empire as a distinct religious *millet*. Under the *millet* system, they enjoyed internal autonomy, having control over their property, education, and social affairs.<sup>4</sup> The head of the community, the Assyrian patriarch, was chosen by themselves and approved by the Ottoman sultan. The patriarch represented his group and dealt with religious and secular matters. In addition to being the head of the Assyrian Ancient Church of the East, the patriarch also dealt with Assyrian relations with the Ottoman Empire and their neighbours, mainly the Kurds.

The First World War led to the displacement of Assyrians in south-east Turkey. As a Christian minority among a predominantly Muslim population, they always looked towards Western powers and missionaries to free them from their second-class status in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>5</sup> They declared war against the Ottomans when Russia promised the Assyrians their support. Assembling the villagers in the Hakkari mountains, the patriarch marched them towards northern Persia (Urmia) where Russian help was expected. The Russian revolution in 1917, however, led to the withdrawal of Russia from the war, and the displaced Assyrians found themselves without support. Prevented from returning to their

3. The Nestorian Church originated from the Nestorian controversy which revolved around the nature of Christ. According to the doctrine of Nestorius, the fourth-century bishop of Constantinople, Christ had a dual nature, one human and one divine. Nestorius was condemned by the Council of Ephesus in 431, those who refused to acknowledge his condemnation being referred to as Nestorians. For more details on the Nestorian Church, which became known as the Assyrian Ancient Church of the East, see Atiya 1968, Betts 1975, and Arberry 1969.

4. The *millet* system was a bureaucratic arrangement that applied to the non-Muslim communities of the Ottoman Empire such as the Jews and Christians. While these communities were required to recognize the authority of the Ottoman sultan, they were given internal autonomy with respect to their family, inheritance law, education and social affairs in general. For more details on how the system worked among the different religious groups, see Valensi 1986.

5. Throughout the nineteenth century Assyrians maintained contact with Western missionaries in the hope that they would grant them protection. Their relations with the Church of England were particularly useful as they paved the way for future contacts with Britain. On Assyrian relations with the Church of England, see Coakley 1992.

villages by the Ottomans they started looking for an alternative sponsor to enable them to continue the fight against the Ottomans.

British troops had already freed the territory of Iraq from Ottoman domination by this time and were marching northwards towards Turkey. Their officers made contact with the Assyrians, now in Persia, with the intention of recruiting them to help in the war. The Assyrians responded favourably as the British promised to return them to their homeland after the war. Famine conditions in Persia also compelled many to search for a secure location, and almost fifty thousand Assyrians marched toward British headquarters in northern Iraq. Many failed to reach their destination, perishing on the road. Those who made it, however, were placed in refugee camps (*baquba*) set up by the British authorities to accommodate them. After the war, they looked to the British authorities to fulfil their promise and return them to their villages in the territories of the defeated Ottoman Empire. Assyrian leaders travelled to the peace conference in Paris to put their demands for 'an Assyrian state under the protection of some mandatory power in order that the Assyrian people might be freed from the repetition of the former barbarities to which they have been subjected for centuries' (Joseph 1961: 154).

Britain felt responsible for their fate and was ready to support their resettlement in their homeland. A plan to assemble and march them to their villages in Kurdistan was put forward, and by 1920 6,000 armed Assyrian men were ready to move north (Omissi 1989: 312). The plan failed, however, due to lack of co-ordination and Kurdish opposition to their return. They soon found themselves back in the refugee camps in Iraq, and the British authorities, now the mandatory power in Iraq, found themselves with the problem of the Assyrians unresolved. An easy option was to recruit them into the Iraqi levies while waiting to be repatriated. Assyrians began to be listed as a gendarmerie force to protect their own refugees and also to defend the Mosul frontier in the north. By 1928, the levies were entirely Assyrian (Stafford 1935). Recruitment was made easier by the famine conditions which prevailed in the refugee camps, a form of economic enlistment impossible to resist (Omissi 1989: 312). Although the repatriation of Assyrians was discussed at many international conferences following the war, these attempts were not successful.<sup>6</sup> The refugees remained in Iraq as Turkey refused to allow them to return to their villages. They were moved to Habaniyya, a British Royal Air Force base, where the British began to use the Assyrian levies to suppress Arab and Kurdish revolts.<sup>7</sup>

6. At the Lausanne Conference, Lord Curzon put forward their claims hoping the Turkish authorities would guarantee the Assyrian language, schools, customs and religion. These requests were also repeated at the League of Nations. The Turks, however, remained suspicious of any plan to repatriate the Assyrians to their homeland or to assemble them in villages near their southern borders. See Omissi 1989 and Dadesho 1987.

7. In 1941 the British used the Assyrian levies to crush the Arab revolt of Rashid Ali-Al-Gailani, the Iraqi prime minister.

Instead of encouraging Assyrians to take up full settlement and integrate in Iraq, the British created a distance between them and the local population. As a minority allied to the British, the Assyrians were regarded by Arab nationalists as an obstacle and a threat to independence as they were repeatedly used to suppress Arab uprisings against the British. In 1933, a group of armed Assyrians went to Syria to seek support from the French mandatory authorities. The French, after consultation with the British, ordered them to return to Iraq. On their way back, however, they were met by the Iraqi army which opened fire on them and killed nearly three hundred Assyrians near Simle (Omissi 1989: 316). Following the massacre, the Assyrian patriarch was expelled to Cyprus with the approval of the British authorities (*ibid.*: 316–17).

Assyrians continued to serve in the levies under British control until the mid-1950s, when they were disbanded after Britain turned over its military base to the Iraqi army. Assyrians living at the base moved to a new settlement south of Baghdad, where they were employed in the new oil refinery installations. Others moved elsewhere in Iraq in search of employment. Today, the Christian community in Iraq is estimated by the British Refugee Council (1989) to be about 700,000. A lower estimate gives a figure of 500,000, 82,000 of whom are believed to be Assyrians (Norris and Tylor 1992). Other Assyrian communities are to be found in Iran, Turkey, Syria, and Lebanon. Over the past forty years, Assyrians have established small colonies outside their homeland. The exodus to the West started in the 1950s, and they are now found in North America, Australia and Europe. The London Assyrian community consists of those who came from Iraq after the withdrawal of British troops in 1955. Its size is estimated at between 3,000 and 4,000 individuals.<sup>8</sup>

### *Migration to London*

Although many Assyrians found jobs in the expanding Iraqi economy and accepted Iraqi citizenship, some saw no future for themselves in Iraq after the country gained its independence because their military association with Britain alienated them from the local population. Consequently, many regarded emigration as the only option as all plans to return them to their native villages had failed.

Assyrian migration to London occurred in three phases. The first phase of settlement in the 1950s and 1960s was an exploratory phase. Initially, young Assyrian men began to arrive on their own. In this respect, their early migration

8. There are no accurate statistics regarding the size of the Assyrian community in London or elsewhere in Britain. This figure is an estimate from the Assyrian Cultural and Advice Centre (personal communication).

resembled that of many other migrants to Britain.<sup>9</sup> Some reported that they had been to England for a short visit before they decided to migrate. They had 'passports', i.e. a 'British Subject' document issued by the British authorities in Iraq in recognition of their services or marriage to British citizens. They found employment in the local post offices, police force, and civil service. Many were employed by the Home Office as clerks, interpreters, and office workers. Assyrians of this generation spoke English as a result of their work in the levies, and they regarded their migration to Britain as a continuation of their association with this country.

As soon as they found secure jobs, they sent for their wives and children and later distant relatives. This represented the second phase in Assyrian migration. During this second phase not more than twenty-five households were established in the London Borough of Ealing.<sup>10</sup> Almost all came from Habaniyya, where refugees had been settled by the British during the mandate period. Family reunions crystallized in the 1970s when immigration controls were imposed. The only way of settling in Britain was through application to the Home Office for family reunification.<sup>11</sup> Some Assyrians were successful in bringing as many as a dozen relatives to join them in London. This phase of migration led to the establishment of a viable community concentrated in Ealing. Chain migration, whereby immigrants were able to send for their relatives, meant that almost every Assyrian in London was able to bring a relative to the city. Each in turn sent for their families.

Assyrian migration entered its third phase in the 1980s. The beginning of the Iran–Iraq War in the early 1980s and the Gulf War in 1991 led many Assyrians to seek refuge in Britain. Immediately upon arrival they applied for asylum on the grounds that they had been persecuted and deprived of their rights as a minority group in Iraq. Consequently, the Assyrian community in London grew. But the status of these newcomers differed from that of the initial pioneer immigrants and their immediate followers. The majority of these late-comers arrived as refugees. According to one Assyrian source, almost three hundred Assyrians applied for refugee status in 1991, most of whom had settled families already living in London. They relied on family networks for information regarding immigration

9. The first Asian immigrants were single men who came looking for new economic opportunities, as were other immigrants from the Middle East such as the Yemeni Arabs. On the latter, see Halliday 1992.

10. The Assyrian residential concentration in Ealing dates back to the 1940s and 1950s, when the expelled patriarch lived in St Steven Avenue. The area around his house is regarded as a special location which continues to attract new immigrants.

11. This refers to the 1962 Immigrants Act, which introduced the voucher system whereby already settled immigrants could apply to the Home Office to bring their relatives and families to Britain. For more details on how this system worked for Asian immigrants, see Anwar 1979.

procedures, housing benefits and employment, and they found accommodation with relatives upon arrival.

Because of the three phases of migration, the Assyrian community in London consists of a mixture of immigrants and refugees. This is not unique, as many immigrant groups in London expanded as a result of the arrival of refugees.<sup>12</sup> In the case of Assyrians, the established immigrants responded by welcoming the refugees, providing shelter and various other forms of support. This was a function of kinship loyalties and a feeling of responsibility towards not only relatives but also members of an ethnic group. The immigrants felt responsible towards the refugees, who were treated as co-ethnics, sharing a common origin, culture, religion and language. Above all, the new refugees were perceived as representing continuity with the Assyrian past. Their recent upheaval and flight activated among the early immigrants their memories of having been refugees themselves, which their parents experienced as they abandoned their villages in south-east Turkey and moved to Iraq during the First World War.

### *Collective Memory and Being Refugees*

In recent years, Assyrian discourse has centred on a reconstruction of the past in the context of their migration and settlement in London. Their collective memory functions as evidence for membership of a distinct ethnic group and creates communal bonds between Assyrian immigrants who see themselves as participants, not only in past historical events, but also in a common destiny. Memory is profoundly influenced by discourses and experiences in the present. This makes it a very complicated construction and an active process (Collard 1989: 103) and also implies that a changing present entails a process whereby people are constantly engaged in selecting, forgetting, or creating new collective memories to suit their present circumstances. In other words, collective memory is not static but responds to changing realities and interests. Assyrians respond to their changing circumstances by reconstructing the events which led to their migration. The early immigrants responded to the arrival of Assyrian refugees from Iraq by recollecting their own memory of being refugees—their displacement from their native villages in Turkey and their settlement in refugee camps set up by the British mandatory authority in Iraq during and after the First World War.

Having been a refugee is an experience deeply rooted in Assyrian memory. None of the first-generation Assyrian immigrants, now in their sixties and seventies, lived in the camps but they must have been born when the camp population was taken to settle in the British Royal Air Force base. The oldest

12. The Asian community, for example, expanded as a result of the arrival of Asian refugees from East Africa. See Robinson 1986.

Assyrian interviewed was born in 1922 in Urmia (Iran), where she lived with her family until she migrated to Britain in 1947. Nevertheless, Assyrians have a collective memory relating to the experience of having been refugees, which they must have inherited from their parents. This experience is mentioned not only by the older generation but also by the younger generation of Assyrian immigrants. Mr J, who came to London in the 1960s, describes how his mother and her family suffered when she joined the march to Iraq in 1917:

The Turks destroyed our villages in the mountains. They had no belongings. Everything was gone. They could not take with them whatever remained of their belongings. They left on foot. Some people had donkeys and other animals. Some relatives died during the journey. They did not have any food. Some people left their sick children because they could not carry them. It was like paradise when they arrived at Baquba. They were given food and shelter in tents. Later the men found jobs in the levies so that they could feed their children.

Another Assyrian of the same age-group remembers the refugee experience of his family:

My family came from the Hakkiari mountains. They walked to Iraq during the war. When they arrived there, they were taken to Baquba camp. The children were ill and malnourished. Many families saw their children and relatives die because of the cholera epidemic. My father was recruited into the British levies. He accepted because he could not tolerate staying at the camp. He needed to feed his family.

The suffering and upheaval which this memory establishes seems to be shared by everybody. It has become a common collective cause selected from Assyrian history and 'reinvented'. The memory of suffering in refugee camps has two dimensions. First, it is an internal mechanism directed towards solidifying community boundaries by creating communal experiences of hardship and shared suffering. It invokes the image of a threatened minority whose survival is dependent on the solidarity of community members. This memory carries a message to the Assyrian immigrant community. Displacement and dispersal are recurrent in Assyrian history; therefore, without community solidarity the group risks losing its common identity and distinctiveness as an ethnic and minority group. This selection and reinvention of history is thus an exercise in the construction of identity.

This memory can also be interpreted with reference to the arrival of refugees in recent years. The memory of a previous refugee experience at the turn of the century is combined with the stories of recent flight and uprooting. This shared memory fuses past and present experiences and establishes continuity at the level of identity. Early immigrants and recent refugees become part of a collectivity with a common memory of suffering. While the former inherited the memory of the experience of being refugees from the previous generation, the latter are

themselves refugees. In many respects, this memory reduces the distance which separates the early immigrants from their refugee co-ethnics. If both groups share a common experience marked by upheaval, then the social and economic boundaries between immigrants and refugees might become less rigid. The earlier immigrants are better established, most of them owning their own houses and having stable jobs, whereas the refugees arrived with few belongings and a need for a long period of time to become able to support themselves. The shared memory of being refugees bridged the gap between the two groups.

Secondly, the memory of having been a refugee is a response to immediate concerns stemming from one's presence in Britain. Assyrians in London try to create for themselves an ethnic niche in a country where various indigenous and immigrant communities search for economic, social and legal recognition. While Assyrian memory solidifies internal community boundaries, it simultaneously projects an image of persecution and a history of suffering on to the host society, thus pleading for understanding, sympathy and tolerance from it.

Assyrian shared memory is a response to new circumstances brought about by the recent instability and war in Iraq. Although the immigrant community here is not directly affected by this instability, it reacts to these changes by reinventing past experiences which are framed in such a way as to establish continuity with the past. The following three cases are discussed in detail to show how Assyrian immigrants are today redefining their status in London as a community of refugees. They have been chosen because they exemplify what immigrants in general are expressing in their discourse and projections about themselves.<sup>13</sup>

#### Case 1: Mrs V

Mrs V was born in Habaniyya (Iraq) in 1943. Her parents came to Iraq from the Hakkari mountains in Turkey in 1914 and were among the Assyrian refugees who left their villages after the First World War had started. Her parents stayed at the refugee camp until her father found work with the British mandatory authorities, working in the levies until they were disbanded. In 1955 her family moved to Baghdad, where her father became an established businessman. She describes herself as a middle-class woman. She went to Baghdad University, where she obtained a BA in English Literature and in 1976 won a scholarship from the Iraqi government to do postgraduate studies in London. She arrived here with her husband, both on student visas.

After she had finished her studies, she and her husband decided to remain in London. They both found jobs as interpreters and were able to pay back their scholarship money, which was requested by the government from those who failed

13. The three individuals discussed are identified by letters which bear no relation to their real names. Some details have also been changed to protect their identity.

to return to Iraq to work there. Mrs V is now settled in Ealing and holds a British passport. She has been able to bring her mother and aunt to live with her.

Today Mrs V's household consists of herself, her husband, her mother and her two young cousins, whom she regards as her own children. Her cousins are in their early thirties and came to London in 1982–3—at the height of the Iran–Iraq War—to continue their higher education as Mrs V had done. When they had finished, Mrs V encouraged the two young men to apply for asylum so that they could remain in London. Her argument on their behalf centres on the fact that had her cousins returned to Iraq, they would have been recruited to the Iraqi army to fight in the war. Assyrians, she argues, need not be involved in a war fought by Muslims; their rights as a minority group in Iraq are not respected; and they have always been a persecuted minority deprived of full citizen rights. There are no prospects for her cousins in the country, and she adds that they will never be able to get good jobs and that their future promotion will always be blocked by various forms of discrimination. Her two cousins applied to the Home Office for refugee status but were refused because their cases were not considered genuine, as they had not personally been subjected to any form of torture or persecution (criteria used by the Home Office to establish refugee status). Instead, her cousins were granted exceptional leave to remain in the UK on a yearly basis until the situation in Iraq changes.

The arrival of Mrs V's cousins, their unsuccessful application for asylum and their precarious and insecure immigration status activates a process whereby Mrs V redefines herself and other Assyrians in Britain as a community of refugees. The initial circumstances of her migration, however, by no means put her in the category of a forced migrant or persecuted refugee. She came here as a student on an Iraqi scholarship and continued to live in this country as an immigrant who was later naturalized. That she is now a British citizen does not deter her from claiming that Assyrians like herself are refugees. The question is why Mrs V and many other Assyrians are redefining their status. During the interview session, she made elaborate references to how Assyrians are badly treated in Iraq—a situation that does not attract media attention. Unlike the Kurds, whose plight is publicized in the news, Mrs V claims that Assyrians, especially those living in northern Iraq, are the target of similar persecution. Their language is not respected and their cultural distinctiveness is not acknowledged by the authorities in the country. Mrs V concludes that Assyrians migrate because they want to escape their second-class status in a country where minorities are not respected. She asserts her own refugee identity and refuses to regard herself as an immigrant in Britain. According to her, she is not an immigrant like Pakistanis, Bangladeshis or Afro-Caribbeans and prefers to create a distance between herself and many immigrants in this country. Her main argument centres on the fact that Assyrians are a minority in Iraq. When they migrate, they want to escape the disadvantages that this entails. She sums up her argument as follows: 'We are not immigrants here, our ancestors were refugees, and here we are refugees.' This is a clear assertion of the refugee identity that many Assyrians project today in Britain.

Case 2: Mr E

Mr E is in his late forties. Prior to his emigration, he worked as an administrator in Baghdad. The circumstances of his migration differ slightly from those of Mrs V. A relative who had been settled in London for some time found him a job in 1970 and was able to send for him. He arrived as an economic migrant with a work permit which tied him to his job. After his initial contract, he succeeded in renewing his visa and work permit, as he found a more promising job as an account manager. When he fulfilled the initial residence requirements, he was granted the status of permanent resident in the mid-1970s. Mr E, like Mrs V, is now a British citizen. He owns his own business, which until the outbreak of the Gulf War in 1991 specialized in trade with Iraq. Mr E was successful because he was able to combine his expertise in business matters in this country with his knowledge of Iraq and his contacts there. After the Gulf War, he moved into trade with other Arab countries by drawing on his fluent Arabic.

Since his settlement in London, Mr E has been able to bring fourteen relatives to join him. Some came under the family reunion scheme, whereas others came on visas and work permits tied to specific jobs. Helping other Assyrians to emigrate is an aspect of Mr E's responsibility, not only towards his immediate and distant relatives, but also towards other Assyrians. He realises that tighter immigration controls in recent years mean that many Assyrians will be left in Iraq, separated from their relatives in Britain. The Gulf War resulted in the flight of many Assyrians to neighbouring countries, mainly Turkey, Jordan, and Iran. Together with a group of other Assyrians, Mr E has formed a committee to bring the scattered Assyrian refugees to a secure country where they can be granted asylum. He has been successful in contacting a handful of refugees in Turkey and Jordan and arranging the necessary applications on their behalf. This involvement of Mr E's has led him to reconsider how he defines his own status and identity in London. His recent reflections on his own migration and the circumstances that led to it are shaped by his present concerns. The invention of his refugee identity is a reaction to the flight of Assyrians, the war conditions in Iraq in the 1990s, and the minority status of Assyrians in the country. Moreover, this invention is also a response to the situation in Britain, where refugees are generally accepted only with reluctance. By invoking a refugee identity, Mr E implicitly is asking the British authorities to recognize the plight of his Assyrian brothers who, at present, are stranded in Middle Eastern countries. Although his migration in the 1970s was strictly driven by economic considerations, i.e. a desire to improve his financial prospects, he reflects on the motives which led him to emigrate:

We did not have freedom of expression in Iraq, and we Assyrians were not respected as human beings. We lacked recognition of our language and culture. We did not belong to the country and its religion. We were stuck between Arabs and Kurds, Shia and Sunnis. We came to Iraq as refugees and we leave as refugees.

Mr E's last statement contradicts the previously mentioned circumstances of his migration. His claim to be a refugee does not correspond with the actual motives he originally described to account for his emigration. Initially he emphasized how he had a comfortable job in Iraq before he came to Britain. Later he revealed that he wanted to be a successful businessman who would profit from his association with Britain and Iraq. This materialized in founding his trading company. In Mr E's discourse, however, a refugee is not necessarily a person who is subjected to direct persecution. According to him, Assyrians are refugees in Britain because they migrate to escape discrimination which they may or may not be subjected to as individuals. Projecting an identity in terms of refugee status is assisted by the fact that, unlike some immigrants in this country who come from the majority population of their homelands, Assyrians are a minority in Iraq.

### Case 3: Mr Y

Mr Y is 46 and was born in Habaniyya, where his father worked as a levy officer. When the levies were disbanded, his father came to London after twenty-six years of service 'so that he could collect his pension from the British government'. By 1970, Mr Y's parents, sister, and two brothers were living in London. He, however, decided to remain in Iraq, as he had a job in the Iraqi army and felt no need to migrate.

According to Mr Y, his superiors in the Iraqi army regarded him with suspicion because all the members of his immediate family were outside the country. He felt that this delayed his promotion and hindered his future success within the army, and so he left the army in 1968 to work as a lorry driver. Meanwhile, his brothers in London had found him a job in a chandelier factory where many Assyrian immigrants were already working. They immediately sent for him to join them and he travelled from Iraq on an Iraqi passport. When Mr Y was asked about the reasons why he accepted the offer to emigrate, he explained that he had no family left in Iraq. Consequently, he felt isolated and wanted to be with his relatives. His migrant status was cleared, and five years later he became a British citizen.

Since his early settlement in London, Mr Y has joined one of the Assyrian political parties in exile, which is banned in Iraq because it calls for the establishment of a separate and autonomous Assyrian enclave in the northern parts of the country. Mr Y has become very politicized and begun to voice his objections to the minority status of Assyrians. He objects to Assyrians being called a minority in Iraq. In his own words: 'Assyrians are the original inhabitants of the land.' He explains that his migration, like that of many other Assyrians, was a forced migration. Assyrians, according to Mr Y, do not choose to leave Iraq; rather, they are driven from the country by the regime's suppression of minority rights, cultures, and languages. He adds: 'I came to London to join my

family. The Home Office regarded me as an immigrant, but in fact I was a refugee.'

Mr Y's refugee identity is a consequence of his more recent political involvement. The beginning of the Gulf War in 1991 raised his hopes and those of many Assyrians of similar political persuasion. As the collapse of the present Iraqi regime seemed imminent at the time, Mr Y opted for a self-definition in terms of refugee status; he was no longer the immigrant who came to London twenty years earlier in search of new economic opportunities and family reunion. While the two other individuals have no strong political views or commitments, Mr Y is typical of those immigrants whose self-definition is directly motivated by their political agenda. His political activities, which centre around the idea of a return to a lost homeland, would have been rendered meaningless had he continued to be satisfied with his status as an immigrant. By claiming to be a refugee, Mr Y and many other politicized Assyrians give meaning to their political behaviour by starting from the most fundamental levels—that of the self and the community as a whole. If all Assyrian immigrants define themselves as refugees, then the question of returning to an Assyrian autonomous homeland is not only a dream entertained by detached immigrants, who may feel nostalgic about their country of origin and may anyway entertain a myth of return, but is a commitment to which all Assyrians must subscribe.

### *The Meaning of Refugee Identity*

The three cases mentioned above describe how three Assyrian immigrants with different experiences of migration invoke a refugee identity in the 1990s. The student who came to study in Britain with the authorization of Iraq, the successful entrepreneur who acted as a middleman between Iraq and Britain, and the politicized Assyrian who entertains the idea of an autonomous Assyrian enclave in Iraq are all committed to defining themselves as refugees in this country. They are typical of the Assyrian community in London. The reasons for their migration, their economic circumstances, and the details of their life-histories are similar to those of the majority of Assyrian immigrants who came to this country in the 1960s and 1970s. The arrival of Assyrian refugees in the 1980s triggered a process among them whereby they abandoned their perception of themselves as immigrants in favour of a definition which embodies images of being a persecuted minority whose members are forced to leave Iraq under various pressures. The Gulf War endowed this definition with credibility as the political climate in Britain shifted towards accepting this readily available formulation. As the media concentrated on portraying images of displaced Iraqis fleeing the country to secure safe havens, Assyrian immigrants in London responded by redefining themselves as refugees. Their collective memory of an earlier refugee experience during the

First World War played an important role in providing continuity with a distant past. Assyrians began to believe that 'history repeats itself'. In this respect, the immigrants are trapped between two refugee experiences: that of their parents who fled south-east Turkey to Iraq, and that of the recent refugees from Iraq. Their response is to claim that they themselves are refugees.

The meaning of refugee identity to Assyrian immigrants does not correspond to that of someone who is physically displaced, personally tortured, and expelled from his or her country. In their discourse, being a refugee is a state whereby a member of a minority group like themselves migrate either in search of better economic circumstances, or because of direct and indirect discrimination. The crucial element in this definition is minority status, regardless of whether this minority is discriminated against politically, culturally, religiously or economically. Perceived discrimination is what matters rather than actual acts of violence directed towards the individual or collectivity. The definition of the community in terms of refugee status justifies migration, rationalizes it, and makes it more comprehensible.

Whether they call themselves immigrants or refugees, the heart of the matter remains that Assyrians are increasingly alienated from their country of origin and aspire to have their minority rights respected in Iraq. Their definitions are responses to changing circumstances in the home country brought about by political instability and war, and to a changing situation in the host society where it has become more acceptable for Iraqis living in London to call themselves refugees. This new definition fits in with and, in many respects, justifies the dominant political climate of hostility towards the present Iraqi regime. As long as this regime continues to produce 'refugees', its dismantling becomes not only acceptable, but also urgently required by people with various political interests.

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