Studia Religiologica 54 (1) 2021, s. 63–80
https://doi.org/10.4467/20844077SR.21.005.13929
www.ejournals.eu/Studia-Religiologica

Assyrians Without Borders: Middle Eastern Christians Towards a New Form of Citizenship in Sweden

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Abstract

This article presents a case study of a Swedish-based NGO, Assyrians Without Borders (AWB), whose priority objective is to help Middle Eastern Christians, mainly Assyrians/Syriacs, in need in their homeland. The paper argues that Assyrians/Syriacs in Sweden have developed three forms of citizenship – religious, political and democratic. All three forms are transnational and have the potential to challenge the idea of national citizenship as being the dominant model of citizenship. Participating in AWB is understood as practising democratic citizenship, a concept seen as the Swedish ideal of model citizenship. The paper claims that AWB empowers its members and helps them to construct a mutually reinforcing dual Assyrian-Swedish identity.

Keywords: Assyrians Without Borders, Middle Eastern Christians, Assyrians, Syriacs, Syriac Orthodox Church, Sweden, citizenship, NGO
Słowa kluczowe: Asyryjczycy bez Granic, bliskowschodni chrześcijanie, Asyryjczycy, Syriacy, Syryjski Kościół Ortodoksyjny, obywatelstwo, NGO

Recent events in Iraq and Syria have had a dramatic impact upon the situation of minority communities. In Syria, conflict has led to hundreds of thousands of people fleeing their homes, including Assyrians especially from their heartland of north-east Syria. In Iraq, the aftermath of the overthrow of the Baath regime in 2003 has resulted in a huge deterioration in security and has arguably halved the number of indigenous Christians residing in Iraq. This decrease was heightened by the occupation of Mosul by the militant group Islamic State (ISIS), which caused a humanitarian crisis. After

the territorial defeat of ISIS in spring 2019, some Assyrian Christians have returned to their hometowns, but they still face threats.[1]

These developments influenced the Assyrian diaspora. Since ISIS's attacks in June 2014, the revenues of Assyrians Without Borders (AWB), a Swedish-based and registered non-profit organization founded by Middle Eastern Christians, have tripled and many more volunteers have shown an interest in becoming involved with AWB. AWB aims to help Assyrians (this term also includes Syriacs and Chaldeans) in need in their homelands (Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria) as well as Lebanon.[2] Its funding comes from private donors and subsidies of NGOs/organizations; indeed, 90 percent of sponsors are Assyrians themselves.

Following Fiona B. Adamson's argument that migrant communities mobilize to affect change in their "homelands," I perceive Assyrians in Sweden as a migration-based transnational community who remain strongly influenced by their continuing ties to their home countries.[3] On the one hand, the concept of 'home' helps Assyrians maintain a dense social network and articulate social, cultural, and political identity within a new context. On the other hand, the Assyrian diaspora was produced by economic dislocation, political repression, and violent conflicts in their home states. Thus, the relationship of this transnational community with its "home" is ambivalent and is "defined by a desire for transformation, contestation, and political change."[4] To achieve the last of these, Assyrians – like many other minority groups – often use the "mobilization for home" strategy.[5]

AWB is a typical example of a "mobilization for home" strategy. What is interesting about this organization, though, is that it is the first aid organization in Sweden with Assyrians in the Middle East as a target group to be a member of the Svensk Insamlingskontroll (SFI – Swedish Fundraising Control) – an organization that scrutinizes the finances and activities of Swedish NGOs. Contrary to other organizations that target Assyrians, it identifies itself as a Swedish organization, not an Assyrian one. By choosing such an identification, it can be seen as bridging Assyrian and Swedish identities and developing a new form of citizenship.

While some studies have drawn attention to the role of NGOs in transnational citizenship formation,[6] other forms of citizenship have rarely been studied in relation to NGOs. Inspired by Wayne Hudson, Jean-Marie Heydt, and Justin Beaumont and Paul

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[1] Assyrian Confederation of Europe, *2018 Human Rights Report. Struggling to Breathe: the Systematic Repression of Assyrians*, https://unpo.org/article/21448 [access: 15.10.2019].

[2] There is extensive debate regarding the terminology referring to Assyrians and related communities. See N. Atto, *Hostages in the Homeland, Orphans in the Diaspora: Identity Discourses Among the Assyrian/Syriac Elites in the European Diaspora*, Leiden 2011, pp. 323–468.

[3] F.B. Adamson, *Mobilizing for the Transformation of Home: Politicized Identities and Transnational Practices*, [in:] *New Approaches to Migration? Transnational Communities and the Transformation of Home*, N. Al-Ali, Kh. Koser (eds.), London 2002, pp. 155–168.

[4] *Ibidem*, p. 155.

[5] *Ibidem*.

[6] S. Witteborn, *The Role of Transnational NGOs in Promoting Global Citizenship and Globalizing Communication Practices*, "Language and Intercultural Communication" 2010, vol. 10, no. 4, pp. 358–372.

Cloke, who use these three terms individually, I propose a division between religious, political, and democratic citizenship.[7] I am especially interested in the form of citizenship produced by AWB, which I characterize as "democratic" as it empowers both youth and females and values consensus and transparency. However, it also contains elements of the other two forms of citizenship previously initiated by Assyrians in Sweden. One is connected to the church, which attempts to play the same role in the diaspora as it used to have in the homeland: to satisfy both the spiritual and material needs of its followers. In this way, it fosters a form of citizenship in which religion, or more precisely Christianity, is the primary signifier. This contrasts with the Assyrian secular organizations founded in Sweden, which focus on the interests of a specific ethnic group, thus encouraging a more political form of citizenship. All three models – religious, political, and democratic – are transnational in character, and thus to some degree all challenge the notion of national citizenship. Giving examples of these three kinds of practicing citizenship, I argue that the AWB approach makes use of the national citizenship model to legitimize the transnational model.

This paper is based on findings from fieldwork carried out in Sweden throughout 2014.[8] Sweden hosts more than 150,000 Middle Eastern Christians of Assyrian origin, who have come from Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon since the late 1960s as asylum seekers or labor migrants. They are adherents of different churches, predominantly the Syriac Orthodox Church, but also the Assyrian Church of the East, Chaldean Catholic Church, and Protestant Churches. Södertälje, an industrial city about 30 kilometers southwest of Stockholm, is their unofficial capital – with approximately 30,000 people they constitute almost one third of its population and own several church buildings as well as organizational facilities.[9] However, Assyrians live in all major Swedish cities such as Stockholm, Norrköping, Västerås, Örebro, and Göteborg. AWB draw their supporters and donors from all of these cities.

The aim of the paper is to explore how AWB enables, challenges and influences its members in relation to their community. It is important to clarify that it is not my intention to evaluate the effects of AWB's programs. I perceive participation in AWB as an alternative or supplement to the two other forms of citizenship – religious and political. In the following sections, I outline my methodology, provide an overview of the Swedish immigration and citizenship context and introduce our case study community. I explore how religious and political citizenships are practiced among Assyrians/Syriacs in Sweden to allow a comparison to be made with the democratic

[7] W. Hudson, *Religious Citizenship*, "The Australian Journal of Politics and History" 2003, no. 49, pp. 425–429; J.-M. Heydt, *Education for Democratic Citizenship: Words and Actions – A Survey of NGOs*, Strasbourg 2001; J. Beaumont, P. Cloke (eds.), *Faith-Based Organisations and Exclusion in European Cities*, Bristol 2012.

[8] The project Defining and Identifying Middle Eastern Christian Communities in Europe (DIMECCE) has received funding from the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme for research, technological development, and demonstration under grant agreement no 291827, https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/dimecce/.

[9] L. Paulsen Galal, A. Hunter, F. McCallum, S. Lei Sparre, M. Wozniak-Bobinska, *Middle Eastern Christian Spaces in Europe: Multi-Sited and Super-Diverse*, "Journal of Religion in Europe" 2016, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 1–25.

citizenship produced by AWB. The case study of AWB allows me to explore its role in constructing Assyrian identity through the "mobilization for home" strategy, how it seeks to foster democratic liberal values, the influence of political or religious citizenship on AWB, and its identification with Swedish society, thus demonstrating both transnational and national features.

Methodology

The paper is based on websites and other written information from AWB, but foremostly on fieldwork conducted in Stockholm and Södertälje from March to October 2014 as part of a collaborative project on Middle Eastern Christians in Europe. During this period, I conducted forty semi-structured interviews with active community members, including five representatives of AWB (one man and four women). These community members identified themselves as Assyrians (ten men and eight women), Syriacs/Arameans (twelve men) and Chaldeans (seven men and three women). Their ages ranged from 21 to 71, and interviewees include both first- and second-generation immigrants.

In addition to qualitative research, from December 2013 to September 2014, I attained 224 responses from Assyrians/Syriacs in Sweden through an electronic survey. 55.5 percent of respondents were men and 44.5 percent were women, with an average age of 30.5. With methodological limitations associated with non-random sampling, non-coverage, and non-response errors that inhibit valid inferences to the general population, the online survey is treated as a complementary source of information due to its constraints. The online data collection can be employed when indicative rather than generalizable data is needed.[10]

While I am an "outsider" (neither Assyrian nor Swedish), I had a research assistant[11] who is an "insider" – a member of the studied group with a position of responsibility within AWB. Thus, I was aware of ethical and methodological challenges that such a situation would pose. It is impossible for an "insider" to achieve complete objectivity and a detached point of view. Yet, being an "outsider" may create other dangers, in the possibility of missing some nuances or misinterpreting situations. I have tried to combine "insider" and "outsider" perspectives to overcome the disadvantages of both positions, bearing in mind that what is crucial is how the researchers give meaning to their empirical data.

[10] S. Kalogeraki, *On the Benefits and Constraints of the Web-Based Illicit Drug Survey*, "The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences" 2012, vol. 6, no. 5, p. 239.

[11] I am deeply grateful to Danielle Barsoum Malki for helping me during the whole project and especially for providing valuable material for this article.

Immigration and citizenship in Sweden

Contemporary Sweden can be perceived as a multicultural society. Post-war immigration to Sweden started with labor immigration from Nordic and other European countries from the 1940s until the 1960s. It was a response to rapid industrialization, stopping when economic growth ended in the early 1970s. Since then, refugees have dominated the migration inflow. Consequently, immigration patterns by country of birth have changed, with an increasing number of immigrants arriving from non-Western countries. By 2018, 19.3 percent of its inhabitants were foreign-born.[12] Over the last few decades, Sweden has liberalized its citizenship policy, and now has an official integration policy and Minister for Integration. Dual citizenship has been allowed since 2001.[13] In 2016, Sweden tightened its immigration policy as a consequence of the 2015 refugee crisis.[14] Today almost all foreign-born groups, and in particular newly arrived refugees, have lower employment rates than Swedish-born workers.[15] The reasons for this gap are diverse: differences in educational levels, language barriers, economic restructuring, and various types of discrimination.[16]

This represents a dilemma for a country often extolled as one of the most equal and progressive countries in the world.[17] Sweden has long understood citizenship as being based upon responsibilities rather than rights. This approach aims to create citizens who feel responsible for others as well as attached to a common European and national space. According to this national self-image, Sweden is perceived as being at the forefront of modernity, and democracy is synonymous with specifically Swedish traditions and values, such as understanding, compassion, objectivity, and open approaches. Still, this system is not free from hierarchies based on ethnicity and race. Immigrants have been viewed as individuals who are required to partake in integration policies in order to ensure their incorporation into society.[18] It can be argued that assimilation is now making a comeback as an explicitly articulated concept in Swedish politics after a long period of "excommunication." For example, assimilation is one of the key objectives of the right-wing populist party Sweden Democrats, which

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[12] Statistics Sweden, *Swedish and Foreign-Born Population by Region, Age and Sex. Year 2000–2018*, http://www.statistikdatabasen.scb.se/pxweb/en/ssd/START__BE__BE0101__BE0101E/InrUtrFoddaRegAlKon/table/tableViewLayout1/ [access: 10.06.2019].

[13] Swedish Migration Agency, *Becoming a Swedish Citizen*, https://www.migrationsverket.se/English/Private-individuals/Becoming-a-Swedish-citizen.html [access: 20.06.2017].

[14] A. Skodo, *Sweden: By Turns Welcoming and Restrictive in Its Immigration Policy*, Migration Policy Institute, https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/sweden-turns-welcoming-and-restrictive-its-immigration-policy [access: 8.12.2018].

[15] P. Bevelander, *The Immigration and Integration Experience: The Case of Sweden*, [in:] *Immigration Worldwide*, U. Segal, N. Mayadas, D. Elliott (eds.), Oxford 2009.

[16] A. Pred, *Even in Sweden: Racisms, Racialized Spaces, and the Popular Geographical Imagination*, Berkeley–Los Angeles 2000.

[17] M. Ahlberg, *Sustainable Development in Sweden – a Success Story*, "L'Europe en Formation" 2009, no. 352, pp. 157–179.

[18] M. Dahlstedt, *Active Citizenship and Governing Multi-Ethnic Sweden. Conference Presentation: Changing Notions of Citizenship: Past, Present and Future*, Stockholm 2011.

is increasing its share of the electoral vote.[19] Our case study community – Assyrians/Syriacs – will now be explored in relation to the Swedish immigration and citizenship context.

Assyrians/Syriacs in Sweden

Assyrians/Syriacs (*Assyrier/Syrianer*) form the largest Middle Eastern Christian community in Sweden and have been studied by Swedish scholars since the late 1970s.[20] The double name reflects a name conflict which started in the 1970s and caused a split into two subgroups. Scholars have characterized this division as the Assyrian modernist and secularist interpretation in competition with the Syriac traditionalist and religious understanding of the community. The term "Assyrians" recognizes ancient Assyrian descent and the heritage of the Assyrian Empire, while the terms "Syriacs" and "Arameans" reject such links but instead stress the importance of the Christian faith, the Syriac Orthodox Church, and Aramaic-speaking forefathers.[21]

This conflict over name and identity is expressed on many levels in the Swedish context: there are two Syriac Orthodox bishops in Södertälje,[22] two national federations (Assyrian and Syriac), three TV stations (Suroyo TV, Assyria TV and Suryoyo SAT), three football clubs (Assyriska FF, Syrianska FC and Södertälje Football Club), as well as separate women's and youth federations and local associations/social clubs. Many Swedish restaurants, shops and hair salons are owned by Assyrians/Syriacs. These places provide employment for entire families, and the money earned serves broader needs as prosperous immigrants send money back to their countries of origin. Due to the generally good economic status and political visibility on the local, regional and national levels (Assyrians/Syriacs won 5 out of 349 seats in the 2014 parliamentary elections), the community is considered by the Swedish authorities to be one of the most successful immigrant groups in Sweden.[23] The types of citizenship practiced by Assyrian/Syriacs will now be explored.

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[19] J. Rydgren, S. van der Malden, *The Radical Right and the End of Swedish Exceptionalism*, "European Political Science" 2019, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 439–455.

[20] U. Björklund, *North to Another Country: The Formation of a Suryoyo Community in Sweden*, Stockholm 1981; Ö.A. Cetrez, *Meaning-Making Variations in Acculturation and Ritualization: A Multi-Generational Study of Suroyo Migrants in Sweden*, Uppsala 2005.

[21] D. Gaunt, *Identity Conflicts Among Oriental Christian in Sweden*, "Sens Public" 2010, no. 4, http://www.sens-public.org/articles/767/ [access: 4.10.2017].

[22] His Eminence Mor Julius Abdulahad Gallo Shabo can be considered the bishop of the Assyrian faction, and His Eminence Mor Dioskoros Benyamen Atas as the bishop of the Syriac faction. About forty Assyrian/Syriac churches in Sweden are divided almost equally between their archdioceses.

[23] M. el-Shafey, *Swedish-Assyrian MP Says Integration Is the Key*, https://thearabweekly.com/swedish-assyrian-mp-says-integration-key [access: 20.01.2019].

Religious citizenship

As a community where religion is a distinct identity marker, Assyrians/Syriacs have to navigate a highly secularized Swedish society.[24] Although an estimated 59 percent of Swedish citizens are members of the Church of Sweden, membership has decreased steadily since it separated from the state in 2000.[25] Religiosity plays a very limited role among Swedes. Less than 4 percent of the Church of Sweden membership attends public worship during an average week; about 2 percent are regular attendees.[26] Several studies indicate that immigrants are more religious than populations in Western European countries, and religiosity of immigrants mainly has the function of a buffer and a "balm to the soul" as it assists them in finding familiarity in a new environment.[27]

In his study of three generations of the Assyrian population in Sweden, Cetrez discovered that although religious values and practices decline from the first to the third generation, religion is still dominant in the worldview of many community members, thus acting as a system of meaning.[28] This was confirmed by our research. 26 percent of survey respondents declared that they attend church each Sunday, and 55 percent occasionally. Several interviewees demonstrated a deep attachment to the Syriac Orthodox Church. This was especially visible among members of the Syriac faction, among whom "being Syriac is synonymous with being religious," as stated by a Syriac male in his 30s.

The churches were centers for Assyrian/Syriac life in the homeland for centuries, with priests who had a dual role as both spiritual and political leaders, often negotiating on behalf of their communities. Many Assyrian/Syriac priests in Sweden still believe that churches should satisfy not only the needs of their parishioners but also try to assist co-believers abroad:

> We don't have other places, it's our center. The church is the Assyrians' home, we help each other. Those who need money, shelter – they find them here. It's word-of-mouth. We don't just help each other here but we also help outside when it's necessary, like after what happened in Syria. (Cleric, Assyrian Church of the East)

Assyrian/Syriac politicians seldom undermine the prominent role of the church, with most of them seeing it as natural and positive, particularly regarding new immigrants:

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[24] R.F. Tomasson, *How Sweden Became So Secular*, "Scandinavian Studies" 2002, vol. 74, no. 2, pp. 61–88.

[25] US Department of State, *2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Sweden*, https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/sweden/ [access: 10.01.2019].

[26] R.F. Tomasson, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

[27] T. García-Muñoz, Sh. Neuman, *Is Religiosity of Immigrants a Bridge or a Buffer in the Process of Integration? A Comparative Study of Europe and the United States*, IZA Discussion Paper No. 6384, 2012, http://ftp.iza.org/dp6384.pdf.

[28] Ö.A. Cetrez, *The Next Generation of Assyrians in Sweden: Religiosity as a Functioning System of Meaning within the Process of Acculturation*, "Mental Health, Religion & Culture" 2011, vol. 14, no. 5, pp. 473–487.

> The churches can help those newly arrived in their contact with the authorities and in other ways. In many countries, when Syriac people have a difficult time, they go to the church and they seek support and security there. That is also happening in Iraq. So it's very natural behavior. And that's what we also feel here. (Syriac politician, 30s)

The Christian religion motivates Assyrians/Syriacs to give to charity. Visiting Assyrian/Syriac churches in Sweden, I saw collection boxes for "victims in Syria and Iraq," and it was clear that parishioners donate to their community in the Middle East. According to the DIMECCE survey, 16 percent of respondents donate through their local church regularly and 52 percent occasionally. A Syriac Orthodox deacon and member of the Syriac Orthodox Youth Organisation (SOUF) describes the engagement of his organization in charity in a spiritual context, stressing the mission of representing the Church:

> Sometimes we do charity work, some of us went to India a few years ago… We've done the same in Syria, in Turkey – Tur Abdin, and Lebanon. If someone goes to *Sham* [the Levant], where his or her parents lived, they teach English, provide food, whatever is needed. We do all kinds of work. The important thing is that in everything we do, we do it in the name of the Church – as its representatives. (Syriac male, 30s)

Later on, he gives an example of SOUF sponsoring the renovation of a Syriac Orthodox church in Azeh in Turkey. The choice of the building is not a random one – the purpose is to keep Christianity in the homeland alive and attract visitors from abroad. For these interviewees, their religious identity is prioritized over national belonging, although they are certainly compatible. Generally, in the case of the Assyrian community, the secular and sacred realms cannot be isolated – religion plays too important a role in the political and social life of this group. The Syriac Orthodox Church remains not only a channel of meditation for a relationship with the transcendent, but also a source of activism.

Political citizenship

From the perspective of the Swedish state, religion is a private matter and thus the Syriac Orthodox Church is not considered to be the only body binding Assyrians/Syriacs together. That is why, in the early years of settlement, Swedish authorities prioritized secular institutions over churches as the representatives of Assyrians/Syriacs. On realizing the prominent communal role played by church leaders, the authorities started inviting clergy and church board members to meetings. Nevertheless, secular Swedish discourse has influenced the relationship between the Syriac Orthodox Church and Assyrian/Syriac secular institutions.[29]

The latter have developed their own agendas – Assyrian and Syriac. The Assyrian Federation in Sweden was founded by members of the Assyrian Democratic

[29] N. Atto, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

Organization (ADO),[30] although they kept a low profile due to their illegal status in Syria (they did not register in Sweden until the 1990s). The main goal of the Assyrian Federation has been the creation of national awareness among the people and gaining recognition from outside in order to survive. In the late 1970s, opposition to the Assyrian movement resulted in the creation of an antagonistic group of Syriacs, who were closely related to the Syriac Orthodox Church and defined themselves in more denominational categories. They also became political, working to (re)create Syriac/Aramean identity and building parallel institutions such as the Syriac Federation in Sweden with related member organizations. The conflict between Assyrians and Syriacs reached its height around 1990, but then began to deescalate as people tired of fruitless debates on the issue.[31]

Both federations mainly focus on local affairs, and although they help Assyrians/Syriacs in the countries of origin, they are criticized by some community members for helping too little, for example by not supporting the creation of Assyrian autonomy in the form of a so-called safe haven in the Nineveh Plain in Iraq.[32] An Assyrian/Syriac politician and board member of Suryoyo TV who does not want to be identified as belonging to either of the two factions said in 2014:

> In Syria, in Gozarto[33] region, different denominations have joined together. But until now any attempt of joining forces (both military or politically) in our homelands has faced obstacles from our parties in the diaspora. People here, instead of saying "we are with you," are talking about which name to use. (Assyrian/Syriac male, 40s)

Apart from this one interviewee, all other informants were willing to indicate what side they identified with, although many clearly consider disunity and the "name conflict" to be one of the biggest challenges for the community not only in Sweden but globally. Internal conflicts hamper Assyrian/Syriac attempts to gain more international recognition:

> The problem is they are not working together. Our big challenge is that we are a minority, that we are not even accepted as a minority in many countries. They barely speak of us in Turkey. Like next year [2015] it will be the 100th anniversary of Sayfo[34] and we are still not recognized. (Syriac man, 30s)

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[30] The Assyrian Democratic Organisation (ADO), founded in Syria in 1957, is the largest Assyrian political organization in Syria and Europe. Its aim is to safeguard the existence of the Assyrian people and the realization of their national aspirations in the historical homeland. For more information, see Assyrian Democratic Organisation, http://ado-sverige.org/ [access: 20.10.2019].

[31] N. Atto, *op. cit.*, p. 323–392.

[32] One third of DIMECCE survey respondents declared that they would consider returning to their homeland – Iraq, Turkey, or Syria – if the region was safe.

[33] Gozarto is Aramaic name of Al-Hasakah Governorate (formerly known as the Al-Jazira Province) in north-eastern Syria.

[34] The name given to the mass slaughter of the Assyrian/Syriac population of the Ottoman Empire during the First World War, which took place alongside the Armenian and Greek genocides. For more information, see D. Gaunt, N. Atto, S.O. Barthoma (eds.), *Let Them Not Return: Sayfo – The Genocide Against the Assyrian, Syriac, and Chaldean Christians in the Ottoman Empire*, Oxford 2017.

Another objection is that these federations and their member organizations are dominated by the same people, often older men, who belong to powerful and wealthy extended families and wish to retain their dominance over the community.[35] Moreover, the organizations are not seen as transparent by ordinary people, especially those of younger generations. Some leaders in their 30s speak about the difficulties in overcoming the generational gap, which is sometimes matched by a gender gap.[36] While Assyrian/Syriac immigrants in the 1960–1970s seldom had high school education and most women, especially from Turkey, were illiterate at that time, young Assyrians/Syriacs born and raised in Sweden were given the opportunity to receive an education. An Assyrian politician elected to the Swedish Parliament comments on the lack of Assyrian women in Swedish politics, which he attributes to the traditional upbringing at home:

> We need to have more young leaders; we need to have more people in politics. For example, I don't know a single Assyrian girl in Swedish politics. They're not encouraged at home; their parents don't know how to teach them. Assyrian kids are usually raised in a conservative household. They look very modern but in reality they are restricted in many ways. It is a cultural clash between their homes and their lives.

Apart from youth organizations, other community groups are dominated by people over fifty years old. One explanation for this is that these organizations were created to help Assyrians/Syriacs establish themselves in Sweden, and since the new generation is generally very well integrated, young people simply do not need these organizations. Another reason could be generational tensions. Older Assyrian/Syriac men born in the Middle East, and especially those who have positions in organizations, are used to being obeyed and respected and they might disapprove of young people's ideas and behavior.

For all of the above reasons, the federations and their member organizations face similar problems regarding the recruitment and training of young members who could replace their older peers in the future and continue their work. Interestingly, young leaders of two rival federations – the Assyrian Federation and the Syriac Federation in Sweden – are no less political than their predecessors. On the contrary, they work hard to impose two different self-identifications on the people, either Assyrian-Swedish or Syriac/Aramean-Swedish. While the new national belonging remains Swedish, ethnic identities are based on ties with the "imagined" homelands of "Assyria" and "Aram Nahrin."[37]

These mainstream approaches of citizenship participation are now being joined by a third new approach – democratic citizenship – as will be seen through the case study of AWB. AWB differs from the organizations discussed above in that it is influenced by discourses and practices of human rights and international development

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[35] Such extended families are called *ashirto* by Assyrians/Syriacs in Sweden. See N. Atto, *op. cit.*, pp. 375–379.

[36] See more: M. Woźniak-Bobińska, *Intergenerational Relations: Exploring Ambivalence within Assyrian/Syriac Families in Sweden*, "Parole de l'Orient" 2019, vol. 45, pp. 393–417.

[37] B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 1983.

aid. Citizenship shaped by participation in AWB is both a continuation and disruption of previous forms. AWB, although democratic and liberal in its presumptions, still has to navigate within a field dominated mainly by organizations fostering religious and political forms of citizenship among Assyrians/Syriacs in Sweden. Therefore, although AWB aims to practice democratic citizenship, the other forms are also present.

AWB – Origins and development

The idea of founding AWB was born during the summer of 2006, when a group of young Assyrians between the ages of nineteen and thirty, all born in Sweden, visited Tur Abdin in south-eastern Turkey. Their aim was to learn about their roots and origins. However, they became inspired to act after witnessing both the poverty and political, cultural, and religious discrimination experienced by Middle Eastern Christians. A year later, in 2007, they founded Assyrians Without Borders, with the objective of transferring not only resources but also know-how from diasporic Assyrians to their brethren in the homeland. As a former president of AWB recollects, the ethnic character of the organization was visible from the beginning: "It was first you might say an organization 'from us to us,' from Assyrians to Assyrians" (Assyrian male, 30s). Most AWB members are young people – in their 20s or 30s. This means a lack of the generational tensions which appear to hinder other Assyrian/Syriac organizations. They are all educated in Sweden, bilingual, computer literate, and adept in modern technologies and new means of communication. In 2008, the AWB website, originally in Swedish only, was translated into English. The goal was to extend the organization's reach in fundraising activities beyond Sweden.[38]

In 2009, AWB started a Facebook page which is regularly updated. Both the official website and Facebook page help to attract volunteers and donors raise the profile of the organization. Modern technologies are also deployed to administer AWB. Although the organization has a physical address in Sweden, members seldom meet in person but instead exchange emails or talk via Skype. They have subgroups responsible for different aspects, and board members meet in person every three months.

However, the organization faces several challenges, mostly connected to its limited human and financial resources. As it is entirely voluntary work, it appeals mostly to young single people with no family obligations. The most common reason for leaving the organization is having too many professional and family duties. What attracts new volunteers is specifically the profile of AWB and its focus on the homeland:

> I wasn't interested in these family [Assyrian] organizations here in Sweden. Ok, they do a good job, each of them, but I didn't have the time to take part in their activities. But when I learnt that AWB is an organization that works with the people there, in our homeland, in our native homeland, helping directly, then I felt, okay, for this I can find time. (Assyrian female, 30s)

[38] AINA, *Swedish-Based Assyrians Without Borders Expanding*, http://www.aina.org/news/2008110412229.htm [access: 8.02.2017].

Working for this type of homeland-oriented NGO thus provides satisfaction:

> There are so many things that are good: the happiness, the response we get back from the people we helped. People who don't have enough clean water to drink, don't have gas, food, medicines. Over there [in the Middle East] everything is about money. So, when we give the scholarships it's so nice to know that we can help somebody to fulfil their dreams… that's number one for me. (Assyrian female, 20s)

However, homeland orientation also strengthens ethnic identity and nationalism. Similarly to Kurdish nationalism in the diaspora as described by Adamson,[39] Assyrian nationalism is actively constituted by AWB's use of communal symbols,[40] as well as by how their activists identify and operate. Thus, although it is not its main aim, AWB has been producing and sustaining an alternative "imagined community,"[41] beyond that defined by either Sweden or the states from which they emigrated (Syria, Turkey, and Iraq). Communication technology has made it possible for AWB members and supporters to pool their assets and take advantage of various resources and opportunity structures that exist between Sweden and Middle Eastern countries.[42]

AWB – Fostering international development and democratic values

As indicated above, 90 percent of AWB donors are of Assyrian origin. Nevertheless, they needed persuasion that AWB was a trustworthy organization. In response, AWB has adopted a professional approach with annual reports available to download from the organization's website which outline AWB's activities in Syria, Turkey, Iraq, and Lebanon. The range of these activities is broad, including supporting the right to education through transportation to schools, educational programs, and scholarships for university students who want to stay and study in the Middle East; rural development such as building wells and buying electric generators; gender equality; and assistance in refugee crises including providing food, medicine, and hygiene products.

AWB representatives stress that a crucial distinction between their organization and others founded by Assyrians in Sweden is that AWB has a so-called 90-account that requires them to operate under strict rules. Their budget is not only audited by an authorized accountant, but also by the SFI (Swedish Fundraising Control), which ensures money collected from the donors goes to the declared purposes. Moreover, SFI does not allow excessive spending on advertising: at least 75 percent of

[39] F.B. Adamson, *op. cit.*

[40] For example, the AWB website has the organization's name written in Aramaic script and a typical homeland landscape.

[41] B. Anderson, *op. cit.*

[42] F.B. Adamson, *op. cit.*

all collected money must go directly to charitable purposes.[43] Thus, AWB can stress its cost-effectiveness.[44]

Sweden ranks as one of the world's most gender-egalitarian countries,[45] thus it is perhaps unsurprising that this aspect of "Swedish values" is also emphasized by AWB. In promoting gender equality, AWB presidents have been both men and women, and among members there are slightly more women than men. This makes the organization substantially different compared to the male-dominated churches, male politicians, and male leadership of the other associations. Although women are members of Assyrian/Syriac federations, they do not play leading roles and there does not appear to be a gender balance in positions of responsibility. AWB involves women in decision-making processes and gives them significant responsibilities. The board elected in April 2015 consisted of seven young people of Middle Eastern background and one ethnic Swede. Five board members were women and three were men.[46] It is likely that this board's gender ratio would have been harder to achieve if AWB members were raised in the Middle East and thus not exposed to the Swedish norm that men and women are equal and deserve equal respect and remuneration. For example, a male member of AWB stated:

> I think that gender roles are something that Swedish people are trying to erase more and more, and I'd like to think that I agree with that… I wash clothes, I clean the house, I take care of my wife as much as I would want her to take care of me. It's not necessarily erasing gender roles, it's more of a common respect for each other. (Assyrian male, 30s)

The democratic character of AWB is most visible when some internal splits occur, which is stressed by a female board member in her 30s:

> As a board we have our meetings and discuss a lot of things in a democratic way. So if you think this way or that way, we always listen to each other, [thinking] what's best for AWB.

The influence of religious and political citizenship on AWB

While AWB may be understood as a new form of communal organization, it is still influenced by the other forms of citizenship discussed earlier – religious and political. Given that religious affiliation is a key identity marker of the group, it is unsurprising that many AWB members categorize themselves as religious and are proud of their Syriac Orthodox faith. For example, the President of AWB recounted:

> I know that there are some who are afraid [to reveal their faith] but I always say that I am a Christian, I am a believer… [When I started school, Swedish children] asked me "Do you

[43] AINA, *Organization Seeks to Help Assyrians in the Middle East*, http://www.aina.org/news/20091026195449.htm [access: 8.02.2017].

[44] *Ibidem.*

[45] Sweden is ranked 4th out of 153 countries according to the "Global Gender Gap Index 2020."

[46] *Assyrians Without Borders Facebook Homepage*, https://www.facebook.com/AssyriansWithoutBorders/ [access: 15.11.2019].

> really believe?". Although I had a cross, they kept asking me "Do you believe? How could you believe?". I think that it is very typical here in Sweden, not to believe. (Assyrian female, 30s)

Religiously, most AWB members are Syriac Orthodox, although there are some who belong to the Assyrian Church of the East and the Church of Sweden.[47] While faith is not equally important to all AWB members (some of them perceive participation in religious rituals as less a spiritual occasion and more a means to maintain their tradition and culture), they do use Syriac Orthodox Church premises to advertise their projects. This makes sense given that the majority of Assyrian/Syriac activities take place in churches, and they are particularly good places to reach members of the older generation, who may not use the Internet regularly or speak Swedish fluently. However, the choice of churches used by AWB tend to be those associated with the "Assyrian" branch of the community such as St Jacob of Nsibin Syriac Orthodox Cathedral in Södertälje or St Peter's Church in Hallonbergen, which is part of Mor Julius Abdulahad Gallo Shabo's archdiocese. An alliance with the Assyrian side is even more visible when viewing AWB's Facebook page, where one can find a map of the Assyrian Empire (824–625 BC), a photograph of an Akitu (Assyrian New Year) poster for the year 6769 [2019], and news of a Christmas workshop for children organized by the Assyrian Federation in Södertälje on 1 December 2019.[48]

Therefore, AWB has been affected by the split within the community. The choice of "Assyrian" in its name is not random. Although AWB describes itself as "an independent humanitarian agency working for the Assyrians (also called Syriacs and Chaldeans) in their native homeland in Middle East,"[49] thus mentioning all three major identifications and treating them as synonyms, on an everyday basis it uses the name Assyrian. It also maintains relations with the Assyrian Federation in Sweden, by advertising its activities in buildings belonging to the federation and on portals that also use Assyrian in their name, such as the Assyrian International News Agency (AINA). Unlike political movements such as ADO, AWB does not openly declare that it wants Assyrian autonomy in the Middle East. It has a more limited aim – to help Assyrians in Syria, Iraq, Turkey, and Lebanon to live safer and better lives. However, its website does include statements from political actors who support creating a protected military zone for Christians in Iraq.[50] Thus, AWB appears to support a political transformation of the "Assyrian homeland," and part of their strategy includes coalition-building with other types of advocacy networks.[51]

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[47] *Ibidem.*

[48] *Ibidem.*

[49] *Ibidem.*

[50] Like Sara Skyttedal, who chaired the Young Christian Democrats between 2013 and 2016 and was elected Member of the European Parliament in 2019. *Assyrians Without Borders*, http://assyrierutangranser.se/ [access: 10.02.2019].

[51] F.B. Adamson, *op. cit.*

The impact of AWB's Swedish identification on its members and supporters

As discussed above, the combination of youth leadership of AWB and its willingness to perceive itself as a Swedish organization focusing upon a particular community makes it stand out from other communal organizations. AWB is especially keen on receiving the support of wider Swedish society by drawing their attention to the issue of discrimination against Assyrians in their lands of origin. One of the ways to achieve this goal was a decision of the AWB board to stop defining itself as an Assyrian organization, which it had from the beginning, and instead present itself as a Swedish organization. This sense of reassurance conveyed by validation from the Swedish state is reflected by the generally positive attitude of Assyrian citizens towards Sweden, especially when contrasted with their views on their countries of origin.[52] According to the DIMECCE survey, 81 percent of Assyrians feel positive or very positive towards Sweden, compared with 30 percent who feel the same about their countries of origin. On the other hand, less than 1 percent of Assyrians have a very negative view of the Swedish state, contrasted with 23 percent of those who have feel that way about their countries of origin.

When examining the profile of AWB members, they would appear to be well-integrated – most of them identify themselves as Assyrians and Swedes, and they attribute positive characteristics to both these identifications.[53] They have Swedish friends whom they meet at school or work, and they know the Swedish language and traditions. This is to a large extent generational. Their parents who immigrated to Sweden as adults were unable to learn perfect Swedish and acquire all the cultural codes. Hence, they can also identify as Assyrian and Swedish, although their perception of Sweden can be quite different:

> My parents would probably see Swedish society as a foreign society where they have to live and where they are given a false picture of democracy because they do not have so much to say… My picture of Sweden is that it is a free democratic country because I am able to say what I like and stand for my opinions even though my ideas are not always applied. (Assyrian male, 30s)

There is no data to ascertain whether an organization such as AWB helps incorporate younger Assyrians into Swedish values and practices through civil society activism, or whether it attracts those who already ascribe to these ideals. However, it would appear that there is certainly a connection between AWB's focus on Assyrians in the Middle East and its ability to achieve its objectives through acting as a Swedish NGO that allows it to gain support and members from the younger generations. Thus, AWB allows members to practice their Swedish citizenship while maintaining and developing transnational ties based upon their ethnic identity.

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[52] *Ibidem.*

[53] More about identifications of Assyrians in Sweden, see M. Woźniak-Bobińska, *Modern Assyrian/Syriac Diaspora in Sweden*, Łódź 2020, pp. 203–210.

Conclusions

The above discussion has shown that there is an active civil society within the Assyrian/Syriac community in Sweden. All forms of Assyrian/Syriac citizenship discussed in this article are transnational. However, the AWB model differs from the religious and political approaches as it legitimizes the transnational model by using the national model. Religious citizenship is based upon the religious identity of Assyrians/Syriacs. While this identity has noticeably weakened in the Swedish diaspora, especially among the youngest generation, it should not be underestimated. Many older and almost all newly arrived Assyrians/Syriacs practice this kind of citizenship. They trust the church, perceive it as a stronghold of their identity, and wish to preserve its role in the diaspora. However, this attitude potentially clashes with the Swedish state's understanding of the public role of religion and can lead to the perception that Orthodox conservative values are an obstacle to integration into Swedish society.

Assyrian and Syriac political citizenships both aim at transforming ethnic identity into a national one. While Assyrian and Syriac federations seem to be more capable than churches of operating in the Swedish milieu, they face challenges regarding transparency, gender equality, and the generational gap. Moreover, they have problems with attracting sufficient numbers of young Swedish-born Assyrians/Syriacs.

Participation in Assyrians Without Borders is an example of the practice of democratic citizenship which has emerged in the diaspora in Sweden in the twenty-first century. While it is grounded in Assyrian/Syriac political citizenship as it focuses on the rights and needs of a particular ethnic group, it is distinct from the approaches of other communal organizations. Abstaining from open support for Assyrian autonomy in Iraq and defining Assyrians as an ethnic rather than a religious group, AWB tries to avoid entering debates regarding the religious and ethnic aspects of Assyrian/Syriac identity. Instead, it focuses on the responsibility of all in society to aid those who are suffering, in this particular case a persecuted minority. Through efforts to attain financial transparency, develop project plans, and work with Swedish and international partners, AWB performs its activities similarly to other NGOs based and regulated in Sweden. Furthermore, by attracting younger members and giving women positions of responsibility, AWB also empowers its members and encompasses the Swedish ideal of promoting gender equality. In conclusion, AWB allows young Assyrian/Syriacs in Sweden to relate to their dual identities as Assyrian/Syriacs and Swedes by assisting their community in the Middle East through means that are clearly recognized as "Swedish," thus demonstrating that migrant organizations can allow participants to exercise democratic citizenship.

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