



MAR SHIMUN: AN INJUSTICE CORRECTED

LAUDS BAKR AND REVOLUTIONARY GOV'T FOR RESTORING HIS IRAQI CITIZENSHIP

*'BAGHDAD OBSERVER' INTERVIEWS A
40-YEAR-IN-EXILE PATRIARCH*

**CALLS MARCH 11 MANIFESTO A
GREAT ACT OF STATESMANSHIP**

SPEAKS OF HIS PLANS AFTER CONCLUSION OF HIS FORMAL VISIT

HIS HOLINESS MAR ESHAI SHIMUN XXIII, CATHOLICOS PATRIARCH OF THE CHURCH OF THE EAST, WHO RETURNED TO HIS BELOVED HOMETLAND OF IRAQ RECENTLY AFTER SPENDING 37 YEARS IN EXILE, IN AN EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH "THE BAGHDAD OBSERVER" HAILED THE STEP TAKEN BY THE REVOLUTIONARY GOVERNMENT OF IRAQ IN RESTORING TO HIS HOLINESS THE IRAQI CITIZENSHIP WHICH WAS STRIPPED OF HIM BY THE MONARCHIC REGIME.

At the onset of the question-and-answer interview, His Holiness was very pleased to answer the following questions put to him:

After 40 years in exile Your Holiness stepped on the soil of revolutionary Iraq on a beautiful sunny day. How did you feel when your eyes fell on the big crowd of people thronged on the airport balcony ecstatically applauding. How do you compare this picture with that of tumultuous ovation given by the masses when you appeared with President Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr on the balcony of the Presidential Palace?

The great spontaneous reception which was accorded us by the thousands of Iraqi Assyrians was the release of a tension which had been building up for a period of thirtyseven years. This was further evidence during the church service and by the emotional outburst from the thousands of Assyrians as we left the church. The tumultuous applause at the Presidential Palace constituted the climax of this historic occasion in the history of the Assyrian community and the Church of the East. It was an uncontrolled expression of gratitude by the great multitude to His Excellency Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr, President of the Republic of Iraq,

and to the Iraqi government for its vision and courage in correcting an injustice perpetrated and maintained for so long in our politically-motivated exile from Iraq.

What are your impressions of President Bakr after your first meeting with the revolutionary leader?

We found the President an unassuming and modest person — a characteristic of all truly great men.

Undoubtedly your return to Iraq after the government restored to your Holiness the citizenship has reverberated a wave of mass support by the Assyrians for the revolutionary government. Do Your Holiness have anything to say about this?

We have appreciated the restoration of our citizenship as a noble gesture on the part of the Iraqi Government, and we know that this has been appreciated by all the Assyrians not only of Iraq but throughout the world.

All the sectors of the Iraqi people have hailed the March 11 Manifesto setting the Kurdish issue as a courageous step for consolidating the home front. What are your comments with regard to this move, taking into consideration that the Assyrians inhabit a number of villages in the northern part of the homeland.

We believe that the March 11 Manifesto settling the Kurdish issue is hailed not only by the Iraqi people but by all those who love peace and value progress as a great act of statesmanship on the part of the present Iraqi Government.

We pray to God that this country reaches a high standard of development and progress so that it takes its place in high international councils to bring peace to the whole world. The step taken by the Government in resolving the Kurdish issue is a great statesmanship. Our feelings towards Iraq have always been to see that this country score great successes — this has been always our prayer.

To what extent will the Assyrians contribute to the consolidation of the national front to prepare the country in facing Zionist and imperialist challenges?

As we reiterated in our short speech to the thousands of Assyrians who came to welcome us that it is their duty to serve their country, Iraq with all devotion and loyalty, and if it be necessary to give their lives in defence of their land, needless to say that the Assyrians have always been a loyal and law-abiding people.

In reply to another question, His Holiness said that the Church of the East has no correlation with the Eastern Church under Archbishop Athenagoras of the Constantinople. He said they are of the Byzantine Empire. When asked that when Archbishop Athenagoras met Pope Paul couple of years ago and it was reported that they agreed that the eastern churches should celebrate Christmas and Easter on the same dates as Catholics and the Westerns are celebrating, His Holiness replied:

“There is no relation between this decision and our church. In our case, when we changed to the Western calendar, it was purely an internal matter concerning our church. Great majority of our church members have continuously written to us asking for the change. Not only members, but bishops and priests for years have been writing to us on this subject. They explained that they work in places where Christmas and Easter are observed in line with the Western calendar and were unable to attend church when observing according to Eastern calendar due to the fact that such dates were not considered official holidays.

“Anyhow, no one knows the exact date of Christ's birth, it is only a guess”.

How did you find Baghdad after an absence of 40 years?

We have not yet had the opportunity to see much of Baghdad, but of the little that we have already seen, great changes are evident.

What are your immediate plans after the conclusion of your formal visit?

Our plans after the conclusion of our formal visit to Iraq is to return to the United States for the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of our consecration to the Apostolic Patriarchal See of

the Church of the East. A great banquet in honour of the occasion will be given in June by the Church in the United States in the City of Chicago. The Church of the East universally will also participate in the occasion.

His Holiness said that about 1,500 religious dignitaries, prominent personalities and other guests are attending the occasion. When asked whether any personalities are coming from the Middle East, His Holiness said invitations have been sent to President Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr, President Nuriddin al-Attasi of Syria and President Charles Helou of Lebanon.

His Holiness is the third in the succession of patriarchs who have remained the longest period in office. The first Patriarch with the longest period in office was Mar Papa Bar Gaggai (247-326)—he remained in office 79 years after his consecration in the Third Century. The second was Mar Elia Shimun XII (1600-1653) who lived 53 years after his consecration. The present Patriarch has 50 years to his credit since his consecration at the age of 12.

Could Your Holiness address a word to the Iraqi people?

It is our earnest prayer to the Almighty God, the Creator and Father of all men, that He may bless the inhabitants of this land, irrespective of race or religion, and that the Church of the East, may once again through its spiritual Children the Assyrian People, make its contribution to the progress of Iraq as it did in centuries past, and that names such as that of Hunain Ibn Iskhaq, may once again illuminate the pages of the Arab and the Muslim history.

His Holiness Mar Eshai Shimun is the 23rd Catholicos Patriarch in the apostolic succession of

the catholicos patriarchs of the Church of the East descending from the Shimun family. He was consecrated in Baquba, Diyala Liwa, Iraq, in 1918 at the age of 12 following the passing away of his predecessor, Mar Polos Shimun XXII.

After completing his preliminary studies in Iraq, he travelled to England where he continued his studies at Canterbury and at Western House Cambridge. On completion of his studies in the United Kingdom, he went to the United States of America where he studied theology and philosophy. Most of the time H. H. accomplished his studies by himself.

Most Reverend Mar Narsai Bishop of Lebanon representing the Church of the East, accompanied His Holiness from Beirut. Church of the East. bishop in Syria and other bishops representing the church will visit His Holiness during his stay in Baghdad.

Throughout the two-hour interview, which was conducted by the Baghdad Observer Foreign News Editor Shimshon Kasso, His Holiness was full of cheerfulness and always answered a question pleasingly.

His Holiness valued the role of the press in promoting fraternity and amity among all the peoples of the world irrespective of race, religion or creed.

Present with His Holiness at the interview, held in his private room at the Green Palace-Saadoun Park. Baghdad were:

Rev. David H. David, who accompanied the Patriarch from the United States; Rev. Athanasus, Sayid Aziz Polous and Sayid Richard de Kalieta.

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PHONE No. 24

FATIMA NATHA RICE & SAW MILLS,

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