

**THE CHALDEANS:
POLITICS AND IDENTITY IN IRAQ AND
THE AMERICAN DIASPORA**

Yasmeen Hanoosh
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Reviewed by Amy Fallas

Yasmeen Hanoosh's debut monograph interrogates the transnational dynamics of Iraq's Catholic Syriac Christian community from debates over its appellations in the Middle East during the nineteenth century to its diasporic dimensions in the United States today. *The Chaldeans: Politics and Identity in Iraq and the American Diaspora* is an ambitious work that not only demonstrates command of the historiographies on minorities in the Middle East, Eastern Christianity, and modern Iraq, but also contributes new insights into ethnographies that examine configurations of race, religion, and citizenship in the diaspora. Indeed, this long-awaited book traverses various literatures and methodologies to "cast a panoramic view on the community's historically shifting political and ethnic profile" in a way that "transcends the nation-centric models of belonging and consequently bridges the divide between Church histories, native historiographies, migration studies, and diaspora studies" (2-3).

Throughout eight chapters, *The Chaldeans* teases out the entangled, politicized, and sensitive communal dynamics that shape Chaldean

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identity. Chapter one outlines the historical trajectory of efforts to draw intra-communal distinctions between Chaldeans and Assyrians, another Iraqi Christian community with broader regional ties, and illustrates the complexities in delineating appellations attributed to each respective community. The politics of naming are especially salient in the historical development of Syriac Christianity in Ottoman Mesopotamia, as Western missionaries and archeologists laid claims to these communities in efforts to define, assimilate, or convert them. While both modern-day Chaldeans and Assyrians trace their ecclesiastical origins to the Church of the East prior to the schism of 1552, early monikers such as “the Nestorians” defined these Eastern Christians by their designation as heretics following the Council of Ephesus in 431. In the early modern period, the Chaldean Catholic Church entered into communion with the Roman Catholic Church. The Assyrian Church developed independently, while adhering to the Church of the East’s Christology.

Chapters two and three provide a rigorous treatment of Chaldean experience in the Ottoman and post-Ottoman state formation process in modern-day Iraq during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These chapters attend especially to the interventions of missionaries, archeologists, and other colonial actors in the construction of modern Chaldean and Assyrian identities. Building on the scholarship of Ussama Makdisi, Heather Sharkey, and Adam Becker, Hanoosh describes a competitive proselytizing landscape fueled by the political and financial capital of empires as U.S., British, and French missionaries vied for the souls of Eastern Christians. Colonial expertise and Protestant missionary activity collectively generated bodies of knowledge mapped by and through museum interpretation, literature, linguistics, and biblical archeology that collapsed understandings of antiquity onto modern Chaldeans and Assyrian identities.

One of Hanoosh’s most compelling arguments is how Chaldean and Assyrian claims to antiquity emerged in response to imperial expertise and missionary encounters during the modern period. Members from these Eastern Christian communities who studied in Anglo-American Protestant schools or worked alongside burgeoning archeological missions contributed to accounts that permeated “mid-nineteenth century European novels, missionary reports, and travelogues, depicting these ‘rediscovered’ ancient Christians in their time-preserved oriental settings” (44). Framing

these Christian communities as descendants of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires was part and parcel of a “Western ancient-modern gaze” (69) that interpreted these churches, languages, and practices to meet these historical antecedents. Indeed, this exchange was so profound that by the beginning of the twentieth century, Assyrians and Chaldeans began to develop genealogies to connect to the lineage of King Nebuchadnezzar.

Into the twentieth century, these discourses become more pronounced in the transition between the colonial to the post-colonial state. Hanoosh demonstrates how the period between the 1920s to the 1970s was characterized by a growing rift between Chaldeans and Assyrians over the question of national belonging and the forms of political inclusion or exclusion they experienced. In particular, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire following World War I affected the two communities in different ways. Whereas Assyrians found themselves located across newly drawn British colonial boundaries in the aftermath of the traumatic mass slaughter under the Young Turks, Chaldeans in the Nineveh Plains and major urban areas in what would become mandate Iraq did not experience similar widespread displacement or dispossession. Hanoosh argues that these experiences contributed to the divergence between how the two communities approached their political involvement and priorities during the twentieth century in Iraq and beyond.

These communities were also among the migrants who undertook transcontinental journeys from the Middle East to the Western Hemisphere starting at the end of the nineteenth century. Building on scholarship about Middle East migration by Akram Khater, Sarah Gualtieri, and Stacy Fahrenthold, the author demonstrates how these patterns of movement coincided with political developments both in Iraq and the United States that rendered contemporary Chaldean identity “inextricable from the transnational formulations of the twentieth century” (120). Shifting citizenship requirements, racial formulations, and assimilationist anxieties prompted Chaldeans in the United States to adopt various strategies for survival. Hanoosh shows that Chaldeans first developed close ties with Arabic-speaking Catholic Maronites in Detroit instead of Assyrians in Chicago demonstrating that by the 1940s “Chaldean immigrants were more at home with their Arab cultural and linguistic identity than their Syriac religious identity” (114). While Chaldeans initially found kinship among other Arab

diasporic communities, this dynamic would change as they gradually moved away from association with Arab identity in the subsequent waves of migration between the 1940s and 1960s.

Moving on to her fieldwork on Chaldean communities in Michigan, Hanoosh offers her readers provocative insight into the transnational dynamics of Chaldean communal identities. Using the prism of kinship ties, she shows that the family not only became an important site for cultivating Chaldean identity and values in the homeland but also provided the infrastructure for developing communal and economic ties in the American diaspora. Ethnic economies developed around marriage practices, Chaldean-owned business, and “ethnicity-based umbrella organizations” (133). According to Hanoosh, these ethnic organizations became resource centers for the “maintenance of religious identity, the preservation of the Chaldean language, ethnic solidarity and the provision of legal assistance in matters such as establishing a Christian settlement in Iraq and helping Chaldean refugees immigrate to America” (136). These projects served as intermediaries between the homeland and the diaspora and reinforced important features of Chaldeanness not just as a religious identity but especially as an ethnic one.

Chapter seven provides case studies that examine the impact of U.S. intervention in Iraq since 1980 and unpacks the politics of persecution in the aftermath of Iraqi destabilization. Hanoosh emphasizes how the U.S. foreign policy establishment and their affiliates propagate discourses of sectarian conflict and specifically violence and persecution against Christians in post-2003 Iraq. While acknowledging how these discourses find resonance among Chaldeans in the diaspora, the author highlights how expressions of support for U.S. policies “consistently augment sectarian violence against minorities at home instead of curbing it” (172). These alliances on the basis of assumed common cause between Chaldeans who have experienced horrific violence in Iraq with U.S. policymakers have resulted in detrimental outcomes for Chaldeans in Iraq and the United States.

One example Hanoosh provides is how Chaldean organizations in the Detroit metropolitan area collectively campaigned for U.S. presidential candidate Donald Trump in 2016 on the basis of his anti-Muslim agenda and pro-Christian rhetoric. The support of Maycomb County, and its large concentration of Chaldeans, was significant to Trump’s Michigan win. Yet

the author's research demonstrates that the Chaldean community from Detroit suffered from Trump's policies shortly following his election to the presidency. Due to Trump's executive orders and rapidly changing migration policies, Iraqis were subject to deportation orders and most of those who were detained by ICE for deportation from three Michigan counties were Chaldean. In the aftermath of 9/11 and the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, Chaldeans have distanced themselves from affiliation with Arab or Muslim categories but, as Hanoosh finds, these efforts at categorical separation rarely prevent their misidentification as Muslim Arabs from the Middle East.

Hanoosh's impressive methodological engagement with anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies underscores how the broad scope of her research required a multiplicity of approaches for interpretation. The first half of the book provides much needed historical context and could have been strengthened by inclusion of primary sources from repositories such as the Presbyterian Historical Society, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions Archive, or the Missionary Research Library Archives at Columbia to enhance her analysis of missionary influence. In addition to enriching the historical analysis with archival material, these sources provide valuable information on the exchange between Eastern Christians and their Western co-religionists that reinforce many of Hanoosh's arguments about colonial influence, claims to antiquity, and communal distinctions promulgated through missionary networks. The second half of the monograph pivots to the author's fieldwork conducted between 2004 and 2018 and demonstrates a wealth of insights, interpretations, and contributions attending specifically to the intra-communal dynamics of Chaldeans in southeast Michigan. Collectively, *The Chaldeans* is an interdisciplinary tour de force drawing from rich scholarship and contributing new insights into various fields, including: race and ethnicity studies, modern Middle East history, U.S. immigration history, and Eastern Christianity studies.