

## 2020 International Mediterranean Conference: "Exchanges, Conflicts and Coexistence in the Central Mediterranean"

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**Title:** Ethnogenesis and Schismogenesis of Syriac Orthodox Christians

### **Abstract:**

The Diasporic condition of Syriac Orthodox Christians since the late Ottoman period has never come to an end, as Christians in Eastern Mediterranean regions have been driven away from their homelands. Their immigration to Europe via the Central Mediterranean region, as well as the immigration to other continents, makes them dispersed to different countries. The communities in their homeland have been shrinking, and their diasporic population has dispersed to different parts of the world. They have been maintaining contacts with family and community members living in different countries by constructing transcontinental electronic and digital networks of these Christians via social media. The usage of such advanced communication technology inspires them to reunify the diasporic Christians spread across the state boundaries. Many Syriac Orthodox Christians in diaspora found a new home in countries where Christian population occupies the majority in society. These immigrant Christians have faced an identity crisis, as their religious identity is not sufficient to characterise their community's distinctiveness and claim their communal rights in society. In their homeland, their religious identity has functioned as a tool for separating them from and negotiating with other groups, many of whom are Muslims. Diasporic Syrians no longer in such a social environment and need to find an alternative way of presenting self. They attempt to invent a metonymic representation of ancestral culture and tradition and emphasise their ethnic identity. Their identity relies on the historical evidence that their group has maintained Syriac/Aramaic, an ancient language of the area between the Tigris and Euphrates (Beth Nahrain) as their liturgical language. By creating a myth of their shared "origin," they present them as an ethnoreligious group. By appealing to their primordial sentiments, the information disseminated via the internet seems to have brought dramatic reconfiguration of their community.

In this process of pursuing their ethnopolitical strategies, Syriac emigrants intervene in the politics of their homeland, i.e. Syria, where the old political structure has destroyed, and where processes for creating a new social order are undergoing. Although they attempt to claim their indigeneity in Syria, there is no unified view of how to present themselves. Some describe them as Assyrian ethnic group, and others classify them as Arameans. Some stress their ethnic identity rather than the religious one. Others emphasise their denominational religious identity. Such divisions among the Syriac Orthodox Christians make their position in north-eastern Syria more complicated and weakened. The Syriac Orthodox Christians in the north-eastern political periphery of Syria, face geographical isolation, religious persecution, and displacement. Church authorities, who exercised power as representatives of the community, and their religious identity as one of the Christian communities in Syria no longer guarantee their position and existence in Syrian society. Such uncertainty encourages them to pursue ethnopolitical strategies. The proliferation of indefinite forms of identities splits and realigns the Christian community.

One of the reasons that Syriac emigrants interfere with the affairs in north-eastern Syria is that they seek a place where a cultural memory of Syrians attaches. Syriac emigrants, their younger generation, in particular, have little personal memory of connecting them to their communal homeland. North-eastern Syria, which is a part of their homeland, has mnemonic energy which makes them evoke images of their distant past and serves as an intermediary which connects the community's past with its present. Engaging in Syrian affairs means to immerse them into such a place, which attaches to their ancestors. By doing so, diasporic Syrians, who have nurtured the collective framework of ethnoreligious identities through digital networks, apply the image of their imagined homeland into practical regional affairs. Their movement of ethnogenesis accelerates the situation of splitting and realigning their community.