

The Assyrian Statehood: Yesterday's Denial and Today's Moral Obligation

By Fred Aprim
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As WWI came to an end, preparations began to settle all disputes between the winning Allied Powers and the losing Central Powers. At the 1919 Paris Peace Conference, under Article 22 of the League of Nations Covenant, Iraq was formally made a Class "A" mandate country entrusted to Britain. This award was completed during the April 18-27, 1920, San Remo Conference in Italy. Here the British continued to show the Assyrians that they were going to keep their promise they have made to the Assyrians, who served the Allies throughout the Great War, including the issue of a homeland. Even when the new Arab country under the name of Iraq was established in 1921, with borders almost identical to those of today with minor adjustments made in the next few years, the thought of a betrayal did not trigger the Assyrians' mind. But it would become clear in 1932 when the mandate was terminated and Iraq was admitted to the League of Nations that the policy of the Colonial Britain has been anything but honorable, as admitted by many British officials. Most recently, Mr. Jack Straw, United Kingdom's Foreign Minister, in an interview with a British magazine spoke of quite serious mistakes made, especially during the last decades of the empire. Straw blamed many territorial disputes on the illogical borders created by colonial powers. He added: "*The odd lines for Iraq's borders were drawn by Brits.*" [BBC News, Friday, 15 November, 2002, under header "**British Empire blamed for modern conflicts**"]

Those Assyrians, who were driven from their homes in Hakkari, Turkey, and Urmia, Iran, to help the Allies, were now kept in refugee camps and were told to await the negotiations of peace between Britain and Iraq from one side and Turkey from the other. That peace process took some four long years. When all was set and done, the report of the League of Nations special Commission to Mosul gave Hakkari region to Turkey in exchange for a territory in north of Mosul that was to become an autonomous home for the Assyrians. [Dr. David B. Perley, "**The Middle East in the Post-War World National and Religious Minorities: The Assyrians**", paper presented at New York University-School of Education on June 6, 1947] The Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups attested to this when it wrote that the Assyrians fought on the Allied side and against the Turks during WWI. The Assyrians were led to believe that their efforts would win them the homeland they wanted for so long. The Mosul Commission appointed in 1924 by the League of Nations advised that the Assyrians be settled in a homogenous bloc in Mosul with a measure of local autonomy. [Stephan Thernstrom, editor, "**Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups**", Harvard University Press, p. 161]

The participation of Assyrians in WWI came after certain events that took place in the Middle East. First, simultaneously with the outbreak of WWI, the Turks attacked the Assyrian villages of Albaq and Gawar in southeast Turkey and thousands were massacred. Hormizd d' Mar Shimun, the Patriarch's brother, who was studying in Constantinople at the time, was imprisoned, transferred to Mosul, and then executed. The Allied Governments asked for the Assyrians' help, and the Assyrians obliged because the Assyrians could not stand the Turkish Army on their own; they had no other alternative specially when they needed military and financial assistance.

The Assyrians had assurances of freedom, peace, and brighter future. These assurances came through various meetings with officials representing the Allies. First, Patriarch Mar Benyamin Shimun traveled to Tiflis to meet with the Russian Grand Duke Nicholai Nichalovich, the Commander-in-Chief of the Western Armies on the Turkish-Russian frontiers. Then the Patriarch continued on into the heart of Russia to meet with the Russian Czar. Through these meetings and others like that meeting with the Russian Council in Urmia, the Assyrians were given such assurances.

In the very late parts of 1917, Captain Gracey, a well-known British Officer during and after WWI, met the Assyrians in Urmia, Iran. He stated at a gathering attended by Rev. Dr. John Shedd, the American Vice-Council in Urmia, and the British army officer, the official mouthpiece of the British Government: "...*Let the hopes of a glorious future make you patient and persevering to the end. Remember, we are fighting for*

your freedom; and you must also continue to contribute toward that final goal.” [Rev. Joel E. Werda, “The Flickering Light of Asia”, first edition 1924, second edition 1990, Chicago, p. 88]

There are two important testimonial letters that back up this fact:

Letter No. 1

Docteur Paul Caujole,

3, rue Lemoine,

Boulogne-sur-Seine. (Seine)

Boulogne, Dated 19th January 1934

“In reply to your letter of 18th January, 1934. I have precisely preserved, as a souvenir, the Conference to which you allude without, of course, being able to state the date.

The Conference was held in Urumia in December 1917 or early in January 1918.

I was invited to the Conference in question and took part in it as did Mr. Nikitine, the Russian Vice-Consul in Urumia.

Captain Gracey who was acting under the orders of the Intelligence Service came specially for the purpose from Van, his headquarters, to encourage the Assyrians to organize their resistance of the Turks.

In the name of England, he undertook to furnish immediately funds necessary for the payment of the troops and Non-commissioned officers. For the future, he promised the proclamation of the Independence of the Assyrian people.”

Sd. Paul Caujole,

Ex-Médecin-Chef de l’ Ambulance

Française du Caucase.

Letter No. 2

Basile Nikitine,

Ancien Consul.

29 rue George-Sand, Paris (16). Dated January 31st, 1934.

“I certify that Captain Gracy, committed for Armenia and Kurdistan, of the British Military Mission, attached to the General Staff of the Caucasian army, came from Van at the end of the year 1917 and held in Urumia a special meeting of the Assyrian and foreign representatives and invited the Assyrian people to take up arms. He solemnly promised them financial and political assistance of his Government, both during the War and after the final regulation of the peace.

Requested by Captain Gracey, I attended the meeting in my capacity as Russian Consul and together with the other Foreign Representatives, I declared that if the Assyrians took up arms against the enemies, they could count after the war on making them obtain their independence which they would have well merited.”

Sd. Basile Nikitine

[Annemasse (Mar Eshai Shimun), “The Assyrian Tragedy”, 1934, pp. 15-16]

After the Great War came to an end and the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 began its deliberations, several Assyrian deputations put their claims in front of the Conference for the Assyrian self-ruled region (Assyrian State). Certain Assyrian groups included the regions of northern Iraq, northwestern Iran, Southeastern Turkey and a strip all the way to the Mediterranean Sea, as part of this new Assyrian State. **[Joseph Yacoub, Prof. Of Political Science at the Catholic University, Lyon, France, “The Assyrian Question”, Chicago, 1986, p. 8]** This reference of Prof. Yacoub of course is to the claim of the Assyrians of the USA presented by Rev. Joel E. Werda, who sailed to Paris and presented the Assyrian case before the conference of the preliminaries of peace. The Assyrian State territorial boundaries in this Assyrian Claim was defined as the area below the lower Zab in the south; up to and including Diyar-Bakir in the north; and from the Euphrates in the west to the Armenian Mountains to the east, with an access to the sea. **[Rev. Joel E. Werda, “The Flickering Light of Asia”, first edition 1924, second edition 1990, Chicago, p. 205]**

The Assyrians were making their argument on another front. In July 1920, the French authorities in Syria (acting as the protector of the Catholics) approached Malik Kambar Warda, one of the Assyrian leaders during WWI. Later, Malik Kambar, accompanied by the Patriarch of the Chaldean Catholic Church, met with General Gouru, the Chief of Staff of the French Forces in the Middle East. General Gouru handed Malik Kambar a letter from the French Prime Minister about an autonomous Assyrian state in the Upper al-Jazeera, northeastern Syria. Many components of this project came to be established like an Assyrian flag, and an army, but it seems that the British Government influenced the French to abandon the project around 1922. **[Sam Parhad, “Beyond the Call of Duty: The Biography of Malik Kambar of Jeelu”, Metropolitan Press, USA, 1986, p. 25-28]** It was obvious too that it was the British again who caused this project and the Assyrian Ghab settlement project in northern Lebanon to fail, since the British wanted to use the Assyrians in the oil-rich Iraq.

Other Assyrians pursuing an autonomous Assyrian State was Agha Potrus. Despite much controversy around Agha Potrus, his efforts in this regard are undisputed. In confidential letters between the periods April 1921 and March 1922, the offices of the High Commissioner, Baghdad, the Director of Repatriation, Mosul, and the Divisional Advisor, Mosul, these officials discussed Agha Potrus’ proposal for an Assyrian state, a complete proposal that was accompanied with a map. **[Yusuf Malek (of the Iraqi Civil Service 1917-1930) “The British Betrayal of the Assyrians”, Chicago, 1935, pp. 312-313]**

Agha Potrus at the Lausanne Conference 1923 submitted the request for an Assyrian autonomous state bordered around the Mosul Province and as follows:

The southern line: north of the 36th latitude,

The Eastern line: The Zab River where it flows into the Tigris River and through the city of Rawandoz all the way to Iran,

The western line: The 42nd longitude,

The northern line: The region of Van, Turkey.

[Ninos Nirari, “Agha Potrus”, Chicago, 1989, p. 179]

As the above suggestion failed to gain approval, Agha Potrus tried again desperately; this time he submitted another letter to the British authorities, dated October 26, 1923. Agha Potrus’ suggestion for the Assyrian enclave this time was the land between the Rivers Tigris and Zab, and Mount Sinjar **[Ninos Nirari, “Agha Potrus”, Chicago, 1989, p. 191]**

Agha Potrus proposed Assyrian State covers in reality the Assyrian Christian historical homelands, lands that have been inhabited by the Assyrian Christians, including Nestorians, Chaldeans, and Jacobites, for 2000 years. The well-known Father Jacques Rhétoré (1841-1921) comprehensively described the region of the Assyrian Christians and visited all their churches and monasteries as he journeyed the region in 1891. The Assyrians, according to Rhétoré were stated to have lived in an area confined generally within these boundaries:

North: the area under an imaginary line from Lake Van to Lake Urmia.

West: a line just west of the 42nd longitude near Seert, where the rivers Tigris and Bitlis meet.

South: the 36th latitude.

East: the Great Zab.

[Dr. J. C. J. Sanders, “Assyrian-Chaldean Christians in Eastern Turkey and Iran: Their last homeland re-charted”, The Netherlands, 1997, p. 31]

The massacres of the Assyrians in 1842-1847 and World War I genocide have taught the Assyrians a hard lesson. When the Special Commission conducted a voting among the population of Mosul regarding whether they preferred to be under a Turk or Arab rule, the Assyrians were one of the main reasons why Mosul was rewarded to Iraq because the Assyrians have refused to be under Turkish rule. Having failed to resolve the Mosul Province (Vilayet) issue at the Treaty of Lausanne (November 1922 - July 1923), British and Turkish delegates met in a Conference at Constantinople May 19, 1924. The British delegation under Sir Percy Cox (former high commissioner in Iraq) insisted on the inseparability of Mosul from Iraq and asked yet to attach the Hakkari Vilayet to Mosul too. The Assyrians were laying claims at this time for this whole region to be as a buffer zone between Turkey and Iraq. **[Harry N. Howard, “The Partition of Turkey: A Diplomatic History 1913-1923”, University of Oklahoma Press, 1931, p. 337]** During the proceedings of the conference, Fathi Beg, the Turks chief negotiator, stated that no cession of land to the Assyrians was necessary as they could still live in peace in Turkey! To this Sir Percy Cox replied that Fathi Beg's assertion did not square with the Assyrians' own views and that they had the most vivid memory of the treatment they have suffered in the past at the hands of the Turks. In a letter from Dr. Rev. W. A. Wigram to the editor of “The Near East and India”, wrote that if the British were not going to return the Assyrians to their original homes, then the Assyrians were to be provided with, and as Lord Curzon put it in the House of Lords on 17-12-1919, “*either an enclave, or arrangements for a safe and decent existence.*” The League of Nations promised the Assyrians “*all their rights, including autonomy...*” as the reward for assigning Mosul to Iraq (Turko-Iraq frontier. C. 400. M. 147. 1925. VII. P. 90) **[Yusuf Malek (of the Iraqi Civil Service 1917-1930) “The British Betrayal of the Assyrians”, Chicago, 1935, p. 327]**

The Iraq Levies, which was a British Force first comprising mainly of Arabs, Kurds and Turkomans, did not impress the British, later this force became predominantly Assyrian, who practiced great discipline. This force had helped to bring stability to the newly born state of Iraq. The levy flushed north of Iraq region from the sporadic Kurdish insurrection and the expulsion of the Turkish irregulars in 1923. For these reasons, among others, the Iraqi Government pledged assurances to provide lands for the Assyrians in north Iraq. Sir Henry Dobbs, His Britannic Majesty's Government representative in Iraq, quoted one of these assurances, which appeared in the Letters of Gertrude Bell, under statement by Sir Henry Dobbs. The letter says:

“...In order to reassure them (the Assyrians) as to their future, two successive Iraqi cabinets, those of Jafar Pasha and Yasin Pasha, officially pledged the Government of Iraq to provide lands in Iraq for those Assyrians who might be dispossessed of their original homes by the decision of the League of Nations and to devise a system of administration for them which would ensure to them the utmost possible freedom from interference. It can hardly be doubted that this liberal attitude on the part of the Government of Iraq had its influence on the deliberations of the Frontier Commission.” **[Lady Bell, “The Letters of Gertrude Bell”, Vol. II, New York, 1927, p. 552]** Read also, Annemasse (Mar Eshai Shimun), “**The Assyrian Tragedy**”, 1934, pp. 18-19.

The disputed Iraqi-Turkish frontiers (known as the Mosul Province Dispute) prompted the League of Nations to send a Commission of Enquiry to the region in 1925. The Commission submitted its report to the League and here is an abstract from the report:

“It is not within our competence to enumerate all the conditions which would have to be imposed on the Sovereign State for the protection of these minorities. We feel it our duty, however, to point out that the Assyrians should be guaranteed the re-establishment of the ancient privileges, which they possessed in

practice, if not officially, before the war. Whichever may be the Sovereign State, it ought to grant these Assyrians a certain local autonomy, recognizing their right to appoint their own officials and contenting itself with a tribute from them, paid through the agency of their Patriarch ... The status of minorities would necessarily have to be adapted to the special conditions of the country; we think, however, that the arrangements made for the benefit of minorities might remain a dead letter if no effective supervision were exercised locally." [League of Nations document C. 400. m. 147. 1925. VII. P. 90] Read also **Annemasse (Mar Eshai Shimun), "The Assyrian Tragedy", 1934, p. 19**

Finally, Mosul was awarded to Iraq in December 16, 1925, and the Assyrians waited for the League's commission recommendations and the British promises to be delivered, but the British delayed.

In September 1929, the British Government announced its intentions to end its mandate over Iraq in 1932 and facilitate the entrance of Iraq into the League of Nations without addressing the Assyrian issue thoroughly. This meant to the Assyrians the end of their semi autonomy they have enjoyed in the past few years in northern Iraq. In June 1932, the Assyrians presented a petition to Sir F. H. Humphrys, British High Commissioner, who forwarded it to the British Secretary of State and the British Government. The Assyrian petitions asked to settle the Assyrians in a compacted community in a sub-division of the Mosul Province. The British Government rejected this stating that Iraq does not have a free space whereon the Assyrians could be settled as an autonomous community. [**Annemasse (Mar Eshai Shimun), "The Assyrian Tragedy", 1934, pp. 33-34**]

In fact the League of Nations received many petitions from several Assyrian groups demanding autonomy, each group with its own underlined specified region. In December 1932, the Council of the League of Nations assigned five of its members to investigate the petitions but they rejected the Assyrians' demands. [**Joseph Yacoub, Prof. Of Political Science at the Catholic University, Lyon, France, "The Assyrian Question", Chicago, 1986, p. 122**] The Assyrians indicated several times that they would not be treated fairly by the Iraqi government, but to no avail. Only months after the end of the British mandate and the admittance of Iraq in to the League of Nations in 1932 the Assyrians' fears became a reality. The Iraqi Army brutally and in cold blood massacred some 3000 unarmed Assyrians, including elderly, women, and children in Semile and other neighboring villages in August 1933. The massacre was accompanied by grand looting of Assyrian villages by Arab and Kurdish tribes that continued for days while the Patriarch was under detention in Baghdad and after the massacre He and His entire family were exiled to Cyprus.

The petition of the Rev. Shlaimun Abraham and other Assyrian National Committeemen, signed in September 1st, 1933, and sent to The Consul General, (Great Britain), New York, had underlined the Assyrian region. In that petition the Assyrians demanded their homeland to be comprised of the regions of Amadia, Zakho, Dohuk, and Aqra, and to be known as New Assyria. [**Yusuf Malek (of the Iraqi Civil Service 1917-1930) "The British Betrayal of the Assyrians", Chicago, 1935, p. 357**] The above petition was based on the pattern of the Assyrian settlements after the closure of the Mindan refugee Camp near Mosul in 1921.

Stafford tells us that the Assyrian refugee settlement distribution in north of Iraq at that time was as follows:

In north of Amadia 6,950; in Amadia itself 1,100; and in Dohuk, Zakho, Aqra, and Sheikhan 7,450 Assyrian refugees were settled.

[**Lt.-Col. R. S. Stafford, "The Tragedy of the Assyrians", London, 1935, p. 45**]

On October 8, 1933, the Mar Eshai Shimun submitted his report to the League of Nations. In it He stated:

"If it should be possible at this late date to form, as suggested by Lord Curzon Dec. 17, 1919, a "*Kurdish-Assyrian enclave in the north of the Wilayet of Mosul under special administration, where Kurds and Assyrians might dwell together we would accept that solution.*" [**Annemasse (Mar Eshai Shimun), "The Assyrian Tragedy", 1934, p. 70**]

The 1933 Semile massacre suppressed the Assyrian spirit. The Assyrians withdrew to isolation for the next half a century but have some social freedom especially in Habbaniya, west of Baghdad, where they concentrated because of the continuous presence of the British Royal Air Force Base. The Assyrians tempted to establish a political organization in the mid 1940s, known as “Khait Khait Allap” but the British undermined their efforts. In 1955 the Levy Force was dismantled and the Assyrians began with time to move out from Habbaniya into Baghdad and other cities in north of Iraq, specially the oil rich Kirkuk.

In most recent years, the Assyrian national dream have begun to rise, although somehow quietly, and references to an Assyrian State brought to surface again. In the Assyrian National Manifesto of 1983, by the Bet Nahrain Democratic Party, the Assyrian autonomous state was defined either as the province of Mosul or the province of Dohuk. [**Dr. Sargon Dadesh, “The Assyrian National Question”, Modesto, California, 1987, p. 275**]

There is, generally speaking, a niche in the Arab and Kurd’s psyche, which has much to do with enforcing ideology through sheer power, and unless that is controlled, democracy will never blossom in the Middle East in general and Iraq in particular. The civilized world have an obligation towards the Assyrians, just as the Allied Powers helped other new nations to be established since peace was signed post WWI and until today.

Bearing in mind that Iraq became a member in the League of Nations on 3 October 1932, conditioned through its solemn Declaration of 30 May 1932, to providing strict protection to its ethnic minorities. Article 5 of the Iraqi Constitution read: *“Iraqi nationals who belong to racial, religious or linguistic minorities will enjoy the same treatment and security in law and in fact as other Iraqi nationals. In particular, they shall have an equal right to maintain, manage and control at their own expense, or to establish in the future, charitable, religious and social institutions, schools and other educational establishments, with the right to use their own language and to exercise their religion freely therein.”*

[Iraq Declaration of 30 May 1932, A.17.1932.VII (VII.Political.1932.VII.9), 16 August 1932]

And bearing in mind that Iraq, on 21 December 1945, joined the United Nations while it was still a Member of the League of Nations, and that it has neither then nor since sought or obtained a change or lifting of any of the formal conditions attached to its Declaration of 30 May 1932, thus the protection of Iraq’s ethnic people continue to be an obligation to the Charter of the United Nations.

and bearing in mind that the Assembly of the League of Nations, on 18 April 1946, adopted its last Resolution providing for the transfer to the United Nations of rights and obligations which were attributed to the League of Nations in treaties, mandates and declarations, and that article 37 of the Statute of the International Court of Justice provides for its jurisdiction in corresponding matters previously submitted to the Permanent Court of International Justice;

Therefore, the United Nations have a moral obligation to undo the mistakes of its predecessor, the League of Nations, because:

a) The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted and proclaimed by the United Nations’ General Assembly Resolution 217 A (III) of 10 December 1948, has not been exercised by the various Iraqi governments, as thousands of Assyrians have been executed, assassinated, imprisoned, tortured, deported, and displaced.

b) The Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious or Linguistic Minorities, adopted by the General Assembly Resolution 47/135 of 18 December 1992, has not been implemented by the various Iraqi governments, as Assyrian schools have been closed and Syriac language prohibited from being taught, and the Assyrian ethnicity suppressed, undermined, and flat out rejected. (Iraqi governments have forced the Assyrians to register only as Arabs or Kurds in the Iraqi National Census of 1977 and 1987).

Therefore, the United Nations must take, under the articles of both the above Declarations, the necessary measures to protect the ethnic Assyrian Christians in Iraq. An Assyrian enclave, accordingly, in northern

Iraq in the region of Mosul must be set up to protect the Assyrians. The Assyrians respect the unity of the State of Iraq and would prefer at least a governing system that allows them to govern themselves, the only system that can guarantee them all the articles of the United Nations Declarations.

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