

The Assyrians in Persia 1919

The attached U.S Department of State document highlights the dependence of Assyrian refugees on American relief funds. Before the conclusion of the First World War, many Assyrians had escaped from Persia and the Ottoman Empire to avoid reprisals with many of them ending up in the Baqubah refugee camp just outside Baghdad. This camp was under British control. The Assyrians appealed to the US for repatriation back to their homes and to make sure that "British and Persian authorities [provided them] resources ...for their immediate sustenance and rehabilitation." ¹

The Urmia Assyrian Central Committee was established just prior to the Russian army withdrawal in NW Persia in 1917. A meeting was held on November 25, 1917 at the Assyrian Central Council in Urmia presided over by the Assyrian Patriarch Binjamin Shimon with representatives of the mountain and Urmian Assyrians including Armenians in attendance. The Patriarch revealed to the delegates of his conversation with Russian General Simeonof. "It is necessary to assemble a regular and legal army made up of four thousand men. However this proposition should proceed rather quickly, so that we will not lose our opportunity."

After four hours of careful deliberation between the Assyrian and Armenian representatives, agreement was reached to increase the size of the army force. Prior to the break-up of the meeting, the Patriarch made it clear that an increase in the size of the army would require the approval of the Persian Government. He continued "our intention is to establish legal battalions for the protection of all people of the country and its borders from any outside enemies. The prospective battalions will maintain tranquility among all the inhabitants of Urmi and Salamas."

The Persian Government supported this plan and consented to the formation of an Assyrian army. This made it possible for all the Assyrian heads and advisers to develop specific plans for their armies. Young Assyrian men showed enthusiasm, dedication and patriotism by enlisting in the Assyrian army. The Assyrian forces were divided into three battalions with each having its own commander. For e.g Russian Paljiwanick Qundrato commanded the first, the second was under Iskhaq d'Shamshana Slemon Shemonaya and the final group under Raphael Khan of Urmia. Furthermore, each battalion was composed of four Rab-Tremma (officer rank, leader of 200). Some Russian and Assyrian officers were to accompany each battalion commander.

¹ See Appendix.1

Rab-Khaila David d'Mar Shimon was appointed Commander-in-Chief of this new formation of Assyrian Disciplinary Army. Tribal forces were established under the command of their own heads of each tribe (Maleechi).²

There seems to be a sense of apprehension in State Department document on the part of the Assyrians regarding the attitude of Britain and Persia towards them. It might be argued that behind this misgiving was the Anglo-Persian Treaty signed on August 9, 1919 which made Persia into British "protectorate." Article 1 of the agreement stated that Britain would respect the independence and territorial sovereignty of Persia whilst Articles 2 and 3 would see Tehran bearing the costs for Britain supplying administrative and military advisers. The final article included the construction of railways, the improvement of trade and tackling famine.³

On October 4, 1919 U.S Secretary of State, Robert Lansing telegraphed the US Ambassador in London, Davis that the U.S Government "was not aware until formal announcement that an agreement was being negotiated by the British and Persian Governments."⁴ The Americans learned from an article published in a Persian newspaper *Raad* that she had abandoned Persia as the four great powers in Paris had decided that Persia should come under British protection. Two US newspapers-the *Chicago Daily Tribune* and *San Francisco Chronicle* ran headlines that were anti-British with the former 'British Trick America while trapping Persia' and the latter 'Boy Shah signs over Persia's Rights to Great Britain....American Government ignorant'⁵

Davis was instructed to remind Lord Curzon that the U.S was very interested in Persian affairs and had furnished aid during the recent dreadful famine. The U.S Minister in Tehran, Caldwell was to explain to the Persian Government that the US had not abandoned her and would provide aid. In the meantime, Davis was to express his government's view that "it is not in a position at the present time to give approval to the Anglo-Persian agreement until it is clear that the Government of Persia are united in their approval and support of this undertaking."⁶

² The background information on the Urmia Assyrian Central Committee was provided to the author by Mr.Sabri Atman via email on April 8, 2016

³ Persia No.1 (1919) Agreement between His Britannic Majesty's Government and the Persian Government, signed at Tehran, August 9, 1919 [Cmd.300], HMSO, London, 1919. (No.1 is the Anglo-Persian Agreement and No.2 a loan agreement of 2 million pounds at 7 per cent interest rate redeemable in twenty years.)

⁴ US Department of State, *Papers relating to the foreign relations of the United States, 1919. The Paris Peace Conference. Vol.2*, US Government Printing Office, Washington, 1942, p.714; Hereafter cited as *PPC Vol.2*

⁵ *PPC Vol.2*,p.714; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 20, 1919, p.5; *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 20, 1919, p.4

⁶ *PPC Vol.2*,p.717; For a scholarly account of the American campaign regarding the Anglo-Persian agreement, see Homa Katouzian, The campaign against the Anglo-Persian Agreement of 1919, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.25, No.1 (May 1998) pp.19-23

Curzon spelled out Britain's position that Persia was not a protectorate but an independent nation who wished to take her place in the international community of nations. Persia and Britain would co-operate in creating "Anglo-Persian enterprises for the development of the country" and " we thereby create no monopoly." A protectorate would have meant Britain assuming responsibility for Persia something she was disinterested. The Anglo-Persian agreement did not impose any restriction upon Persia pursuing trade with other nations. It seemed that Curzon was trying to dispel American suspicions regarding this treaty. ⁷

The attached documents highlights Assyrian dependency on American aid and Anglo-American differences over the Anglo-Persian agreement which possibly worried the Assyrians in Urmia.

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⁷ 'Curzon declares Persia still free', *New York Times*, September 21, 1919, p.5; 'No British Protectorate over Persia, says Curzon', *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, September 20, 1919, p.2

Appendix.1

DEPARTMENT OF STATE
WASHINGTON

Weekly Report on Matters Relating to
the Near East

December 16, 1919.

No. 59.

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By *C. Sutton*

PERSIA

The Consul at Tebriz has forwarded an appeal from the Urumia Assyrian Central Committee, in which they state that 2,000 former inhabitants of Urumia are at present entirely dependent on American relief funds, which may be diminished in the near future. No work is available for these people to support themselves. There are, in all, some 3,000 Urumia Assyrian refugees in Persia and 12,000 in the Bagdad district. They have all lost heavily from their expatriation and consequent destruction of their homes and property. They insist upon the right to return to their homes and to recover their property. They therefore ask the United States to prevent any plan for the future political control of Persia which will deprive them of their rights; to urge upon the British and Persian authorities the adoption of measures for their prompt repatriation and protection in their homes; and to obtain for them resources which will provide for their immediate sustenance and rehabilitation.

The interests of numerous naturalized citizens, as well as of the American mission at Urumia, are affected by this situation (Telegram from Consul at Tebriz dated November 30).