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Britain, Iraq and the Assyrians: The Nine Demands **By Stavros T. Stavridis**

When Britain 's mandate of Iraq was to end in November 1932, the Assyrians were concerned about their minority status in the future independent Iraqi State.

The Assyrians were hoping that Britain would support the establishment of an enclave for them in the north that would give them autonomy in their internal affairs.

Britain 's response was largely unsympathetic to Assyrian aspirations.

(A) Assyrian Intentions

On June 1, 1932 the Assyrian levies presented a signed memorial to their Commanding Officer stating that "all the men had decided to cease serving as from 1 st July." The reason was Britain had "failed adequately to ensure the future of Assyrian nation after the termination of their mandate over Iraq."

It should be noted the Assyrian Patriarch Mar Shimun and his bishops were preparing "to concentrate the whole Assyrian nation in the Dohuk-Amadiya area at the beginning of July, and that the levies on leaving their intended to join this concentration."

The British believed that the Assyrians were "to try to coerce (the British) and Iraqi Government[s] into creating and recognising an autonomous enclave for the Assyrians in Iraq , or alternatively, to establish such an enclave by a coup de main."

Britain was concerned that such political action could undermine the unitary nature of the future Iraqi State. It could also have inspired the Kurds to demand their own autonomous region in the North. Britain wanted to ensure that its vital strategic and oil interests remained intact in Iraq.

The British High Commissioner called a meeting of Assyrian officers on June 13 and laid down the law to them. He warned them "that the step which they were taking would alienate British trust and sympathy, and asked them to reconsider their action."

Britain "would overlook their folly and permit them to continue in their service." However, if they declined to heed the British warning, then "this could only lead to disaster."

It can be seen that the British would not tolerate any rebellion, protest or mutiny on the part of the Assyrian levies whose action might undermine the formal hand over of power from the mandatory administration to Iraqi sovereignty. Britain did not want to see the Iraqi military having to put down revolts from the outset.

The Mar Shimun was the key person in the Assyrian religious and political hierarchy. He was the most important person who could use his influence to tone down the tense political situation. The British were mindful of the Mar Shimun's position among the Assyrians.

(B) Assyrian Demands

At a meeting that took place at Amadiya on June 18, 1932, the Assyrians addressed their petition to the British High Commissioner in Baghdad and a copy of it was also forwarded to the Chairman of the Permanent Mandates Commission in Geneva .

The Assyrian demands are reproduced in full below:

"(1) That the Assyrians should be recognised as a millet (nation) domiciled in Iraq , and not merely as an Iraqi religious minority.

(2) That the Hakkari Sanjak in Turkey , in which some of the Assyrians formerly lived, should be annexed to Iraq and its villages restored to the Assyrians.

(3) (a) That if this could not be done, a national home should be found for the Assyrians which should be open to all Assyrians scattered in Iraq and to all other ex-Ottoman Assyrians from all over the world.

(b) That this new home should be arranged to include the whole of the Amadiya district and the adjacent parts of Zakho, Dohuk, and Aqra districts and that it should be made into a sub-liwa under the Mosul liwa with its headquarters at Dohuk under a Arab Mutessarif and a British adviser.

(c) That existing settlement arrangements should be wholly revised by a committee provided with adequate funds, and that the land chosen for Assyrian settlement should be registered in their names as their own property.

(d) That preference should be given to Assyrians in the selection of officials for this sub-liwa.

(4) That the temporal and spiritual authority of the Patriarch over the Assyrian nation should be officially recognised and that an annual subsidy should be given to him.

(5) That the Assyrians should have a member in the Chamber of Deputies nominated by the people and the Patriarch.

(6) That the Iraqi Government should establish schools in consultation with the Patriarch in which the language of the Assyrians should be taught.

(7) That the League of Nations or the Iraq Government should make a gift of 5,000,000 rupees for the creation of a church waqf for the Assyrian church.

(8) That a hospital should be established at the headquarters of the sub-liwa and dispensaries at other places.

(9) That the rifles earned by the Assyrians by their service in the levies should not be confiscated."

The Assyrians wanted a response to their demands by June 28. Such a deadline from the standpoint of the British High Commission was impossible. The Mar Shimun and other religious leaders insisted that the nine demands be honored in full.

However, they made one concession "excepting the Hakkari, as the condition of withdrawal of the levy manifesto of the 1 st June." There was no way Britain would accede to the Hakkari region located on Turkish territory being annexed to Iraq. The UK , Turkey and Iraq Treaty signed on June 5, 1926 in Angora (Ankara) finally settled the frontier between Turkey and Iraq.

(C) British Reactions

As the negotiation proved fruitless, Britain adopted a military and political approach towards the Assyrians. She displayed her imperial power by flying an infantry battalion using the Royal Air force (RAF) from Egypt to assume the duties of the levies.

These troops were finally distributed to levy stations at Mosul , Diana, Suleimani and Hinaidi . The British action had a salutary affect on the Assyrian religious and political leadership.

An encyclical issued by the Mar Shimun on June 29 to the Assyrian officers and men of the levies urged them to continue "[the] loyal and obedient service in the force until the national petition of the 17 th June had been considered by the League of Nations and an answer given, adding that if they then wished to take their discharge they must do so in accordance with the orders of the British officers."

The Assyrian levies at Diana, Suleimani and Mosul submitted without trouble to the Mar Shimun's injunction whereas at Hinaidi they were less compliant and behaved in a rebellious manner. Some 250 men were discharged from the levies.

At a political level the British High Commissioner "promised that the levies would be maintained at their present strength until an answer was given to the Assyrian petition, or until the 15th December which ever was the earlier. He also informed [the Mar Shimun] that certain questions raised in the petition, such as the recognition of the Patriarch, land settlement, schools, dispensaries and the retention of rifles, were recognised by him to be reasonable subjects for consideration, and that the earliest and most sympathetic attention to them would be pressed by him on the Iraqi Government, and through Her Majesty's Government, on League of Nations."

(D) Iraq and the League of Nations.

The Permanent Mandates Commission met in early December 1932 to discuss the Assyrian petition. It supported the concept "for a compact and homogenous settlement [for Assyrians] in Iraq " and favored dispatching a League Commissioner to discuss Assyrian grievances with the Iraqis. The British Ambassador in Iraq , Sir F. Humphrey urged the Iraqis to avoid discussing the idea of an autonomous Assyrian enclave. King Faisal and the Iraqi Prime Minister told Humphrey's of their opposition to a League Commissioner being dispatched to Iraq.

The Permanent Mandates Commission handed its report to the Council of the League of Nations regarding the Assyrian petition. It adopted a resolution at its meeting on December 5, 1932 stating that:

"The Council notes with satisfaction the declaration by the representative of Iraq of the intention of the Iraqi Government to select from outside Iraq a foreign expert to assist them for a limited period in the settlement of all landless inhabitants of Iraq including Assyrians, and in carrying out their scheme for the settlement of the Assyrians of Iraq under suitable conditions and so far as may be possible in homogenous units, it being understood that the existing rights of the present population shall not be prejudiced."

As a new sovereign nation, the Iraqis wanted to demonstrate that they were quite capable of appointing a outside commissioner of their choice and also wanted to be seen cooperating with the League Council. It gave them the opportunity to address Assyrian grievances on their own. The Assyrians were apprehensive of Iraqi intentions regarding their future and minority status in this new independent state.

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