

# THE ASSYRIAN NATION AFTER THE GREAT WAR

(JANUARY 1933 - JULY 1933)

## PART TWO

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In Part One, THE ASSYRIAN - Issue 5, we saw how the British high commissioner in Baghdad, Sir Francis Humphries, tried his utmost to have the Assyrian Patriarch, Mar Shimun, succumb to the wishes of Iraqi and British governments. Having recognized their critical position on the impending admission of Iraq to the League of Nations as an independent state in 1932 without any safeguards or guarantees being given to secure their settlement in a compact community, the Assyrians threatened a mass resignation of their Levies. Sir Francis, alarmed at this prospect, warned the Patriarch that such an action would be "a grave discourtesy to the League" and would appear to the British government and people as "singularly ungrateful and inopportune". On the other hand, Sir Francis assured the Patriarch that the Assyrian demands were "reasonable" and he would give them his "most sympathetic attention". Furthermore, he encouraged the Patriarch to go to Geneva, stating "I shall do everything in my power to help you and your people at Geneva". In reality, he adopted an obstructive policy in every possible way which culminated in the Assyrian demands being rejected by the League.

Mar Shimun, on his return to Mosul in January 1933, gathered together the leaders of the nation, explained to them the position and begged them to be loyal to the Government and wait for the fulfillment of the resolution of the League. The six months which followed was a period of great tension on all sides. The Iraqi Government attempted to force the settlement on their own lines and adopted the policy of ignoring the rightful Assyrian leaders. They then settled the Assyrians in small groups among hostile Moslems and established them as "tenants at will" under Arab and Kurdish landlords. It was clear that the Iraqi Government wished to ignore the direction of the League of Nations and to break up the corporate life of the nation.

The Iraqi Government, as was anticipated, employed methods to cause dissension among the Assyrians, taking on its side certain individuals who were instructed to carry out Iraq's policy. It was for this reason that Mar Shimun refused to cooperate with the British settlement officer, who was merely a mouth-piece of the Iraqi Government, and this action brought Mar Shimun into bad repute with the officials and gave rise to the accusation that he was using his "Temporal Power" against the Government. It was this position of Mar Shimun which the Iraqi Government continuously misunderstood and unwisely handled. They sought to set the Patriarch aside in their dealings with the Assyrian people.

When Major Thomson, the foreign expert, reached Iraq in June 1933 to settle the Assyrians in accordance with the recommendation of the League of Nations, the Iraqi demagogues, the press and parliament objected to the settlement of the Assyrians. An intensive but perverse propaganda was set on foot. This had actually commenced some six months earlier and on Thomson's arrival the situation was tense. Recognized Assyrian leaders were ignored and replaced by unpopular individuals. Coercive measures were taken against others under various pretexts and life was made desperate.

Thomson's plan which he placed before the Assyrians covered the Dashtazi area, within the "Z plan" (see below), politically detrimental to the interests of the Assyrians.

Sir Percy Cox's negotiations alluded to the British Government claim at Constantinople in 1924 showing failed, the British authorities launched upon a settlement scheme within the Mosul wilayet. The scheme was known as "The Z plan" which was to plant the Assyrians throughout the north of Iraq from Dashta Bazar Gair bordering the Persian territory to the north of Amadiyah 1,2. Moreover, in the plan the Assyrians were considered as an asset to Iraq should there be an external aggression, thus, enabling Iraq to maintain a balance of power between herself and the Kurds who much resented the Iraqi regime.

Nevertheless, the effects of "the Z plan" were disastrous to the Assyrians. The scheme did not take into consideration the safety or the health of the Assyrians and only regarded the reasons which mooted it. In certain districts, malaria and other diseases played havoc with the Assyrians as those regions fell within the "Z plan". The proposed area could have hardly accommodated 150 families. This is all the mandatory power could do for the Assyrians. She persisted in using them for fifteen years and finally she told them, "This is all that I can repay you, you must agree to be absorbed in the body politic of Iraq (which in practice meant that they should still remain homeless), must forget your language, traditions and customs and remain a disunited people for definite purposes".

These proposals were merely an echo of the plans of the Iraqi Government and were not regarded by the Assyrians as at all satisfactory.

It was clear to the Assyrians that the proposals were not attempting to settle the people as the League of Nations had determined, in

homogeneous units, and Mar Shimun told Major Thomson he could not co-operate with him.

Major W.C.F.A. Wilson, administrative inspector, Mosul, wrote to Baghdad on 10th May 1933 as follows:

Ask Mar Shimun to come to Baghdad to discuss matters with the Government. Detention to follow forthwith. This should eliminate the danger of seeing Mar Shimun installed in his summer residence at Sar Amadiyah, the consequence of such a move will be against the interests of the Iraqi case.

In order to break up the influence of the Patriarch family, the Iraqi Government would be well advised in increasing immediately of the police inspectors.

Immediate promotion of Christian officers having taken part in the campaign of the Iraqi army against Shaikh Barzan.

Lady Surma and Captain Yaku (Malik Yaku) have undertaken a strong anti-government propaganda amongst the Kurdish tribes.

It is urgently needed to invite these two persons to come to Baghdad where they should be detained and kept under control.

Make pressure on the Patriarch to sign an official document recognising the suppression of his temporal power.

Iraqi Government runs the risk of seeing the Assyrians proposing a scheme on lands near or bordering the Syrian frontier. All necessary steps should be taken to oblige the Patriarchal family to accept the Dashtazi region.

In consequence of this, Mar Shimun, in May 1933, was summoned to Baghdad, the Minister of Interior, Hikmet Beg Suleiman, sent for him to come to Baghdad. It was hoped that the misunderstandings between the Patriarch and the Government might be removed by personal conversations. By a coincidence it happened that King Feisal early in June left on his state visit to London. From the beginning of his reign the King has shown remarkable skill in balancing the conflicting claims of the different sections of his heterogeneous kingdom, and it is probable that had he not left Baghdad and thus lost touch with the situation, the events that were to follow in the late summer might have been averted. With the King to Europe went the best brains in the Iraqi Cabinet, at the helm in Baghdad was a group of ministers who lacked the wider vision and who reacted too quickly to their religious and Arab sentiments.

On his arrival in Baghdad Mar Shimun was, on May 28th, handed a letter from the Minister. The text of this letter (No. S/1104, dated May 28, 1933) was as follows

During my recent visit to Mosul I explained to you the attitude of Government with regard to your personal position and I now wish to confirm in writing what you have already heard verbally.

The Government is willing to recognise you officially as the *Spiritual Head of the Assyrian community* and to promise that you will at all times receive the respect due to you as the holder of that position. As you have already been told by the Mutasarrif of Mosul, it is anxious to enlist your help in preparing a Community Law on the lines of those already in force in the case of other communities. In order that your spiritual dignity should be properly maintained it has under consideration the creation of a source of income to assist you in a permanent manner and it does not intend to curtail the monthly allowance which is at present paid to you until such time as it is satisfied that you have ample provision from other sources.

I must, however, make it clear that the Government cannot agree to delegate to you any temporal authority. Your position will be the same as that of the other spiritual heads of com-

munities in Iraq; in all matters of administration the members of the Assyrian Community must conform to the laws, regulations, and manner of procedure which applies to all other Iraqis.

I need not assure you how sincerely anxious the Government is to do everything possible to see the Assyrian community, like other Iraqis, happy and contented and loyal subjects of His Majesty the King. It has declared its policy fully to the League of Nations at Geneva, which intimated its approval.

Amongst other things, in accordance with an agreement reached there last Autumn, it is obtaining the services of a foreign expert to advise in the important matter of land settlement. This expert, Major Thomson, is expected to arrive in Mosul at the end of this month. His work will be of the greatest importance to the Assyrian community, and I trust that he will receive the fullest assistance from all those who have the welfare of the community at heart. I have noticed with regret that you have up to the present adopted an unhelpful and, according to some reports, even an obstructive attitude in this very important matter, and I am therefore compelled to ask you to give me a written guarantee that you will do nothing to make the task of Major Thomson and the Government more difficult.

If there are any points which I have not made clear in this letter, I shall be glad if you will bring them to my notice. The recognition of your position as described above is conditional on your acceptance of it and on your giving a solemn promise that you will in all ways and at all times act as a loyal subject of His Majesty the King. I shall be obliged if you will do this in a written reply to this letter in the form attached.

#### Enclosure.

I, Mar Shimun, have pursued your Excellency's letter No. S/1104, dated May 28, 1933, and accept all that is contained therein.

I hereby undertake that I will do nothing to make the task of Major Thomson and the Iraqi Government in connection with the settlement scheme difficult, and that I will in all ways and at all times act as a loyal subject of His Majesty the King.

In his reply to the Minister, Mar Shimun declined to give his written undertaking. As, a result of his refusal the Patriarch was detained at Baghdad under surveillance and his house carefully watched so that he could have no communications with the outside world.

The British Administrative Inspector admitted that Mar Shimun's absence from his people would break his influence with them, so that such a settlement as the Government desired could be forced upon them. Meanwhile in Mosul, attempts were made to carry forward the Government scheme. The Assyrians refused to cooperate as it ignored the leaders of the nation, and was carried out with the assistance of certain disaffected individual Assyrians who were now in the pay of the Iraqi Government.

Mar Shimun thereupon wrote the following letter to King Feisal, dated May 31:

I humbly request leave to give Your Majesty my opinion in the following lines about the present policy of the Mosul authorities as I see it to settle the Assyrian question.

Knowing that a word from your Majesty at this hour to Your Majesty's Advisers could change this policy, and thus bring the affairs of the Assyrians to a successful issue.

I was ordered by the Mutasarrif of Mosul with great urgency to proceed to Baghdad immediately in response to an invitation from the Minister of Interior, to discuss with him and Major D.B. Thomeson, the Foreign Expert for the new Assyrian Settlement Scheme of the Assyrian affairs.

On the sixth day after my arrival in Baghdad, and after many attempts, I was granted an interview with H.E. the Minister of Interior.

In the meantime I have word from Mosul that the authorities there are still continuing their old policy with regard to the Assyrian question. If this is the case it is inconsistent with the purpose of my invitation to Baghdad as explained to me.

I very much regret to have to bring it to Your Majesty's notice that during my interview with H.E. the Interior Minister I was informed of the unfavourable attitude of the present Government towards me personally.

If I did not participate with the present policy adopted by Mosul authorities the reason has been that the policy was entirely unconstructive.

I do feel most confident that the present policy which has now for some time been carried on by the Mosul Liwa authorities only, as I presume, and which has already proved a failure, is not consistent with the noble spirit of your Majesty, which had been more than once most graciously expressed to me by Your Majesty personally.

I take advantage of your noble spirit and fatherly kindness to assure myself that Your Majesty's desire is to make the Assyrian people a contented, loyal, and helpful subject people within Your Majesty's Dominion, and to attain this end I am ready as I always have been to offer my utmost service to Your Majesty.

Hoping at this later hour that some constructive scheme can be arranged, which will enable my people and myself to prove to Your Majesty's person our loyalty and gratitude.

Much harmful propaganda has been made in the Iraqi Press regarding the Patriarch's Temporal Power, a power which the Patriarch has been accused of having claimed the object of such perverse propaganda has been to mislead public opinion by detracting its attention from the main issue.

It is an indisputable fact, as history bears it out, that the Assyrians in order to prevent evil elements from penetrating through them thus wrecking their long established organisation, and in order to preserve their existence as an entity, recognised their Patriarch as the supreme head of the nation. This long-established rule was preserved intact for many centuries before and during the Turkish domination, and was recognised by the Sassanite Kings, the Caliphs, the Monghul Khans and the Ottoman Sultan, until 1918, when the British and Iraqi Governments considered was no longer necessary, so they will be able to use the Assyrian people for their own benefits.

Conversations and interchange of letters continued between Mar Shimun and the Iraqi official for the next three weeks (June 1933), but without result. Mar Shimun wished to return to Mosul, and at this time a petition was made by the Assyrian leaders for the return of Mar Shimun which was suppressed by the Government.

On June 24th, however, the Minister of Interior wrote to Mar Shimun as follows:

I confirm my answer given to you by telephone on Thursday that I do not wish you to leave Baghdad for the present, pending further instructions.

On June 29th Mar Shimun wrote as follows to the Minister

I beg to state that the action of the Government now confirmed by your letter No. B/1273 of June 24th, detaining me in Baghdad against my will for no just cause, is illegal; and that any responsibility of what may happen when the news reaches my people rests with the Government.

I also wish to point out that the methods adopted by the local officials in dealing with the Assyrian settlement policy is contrary to the Fundamental Law or the guarantee given by the Iraqi Government to the League of Nations on May 30, 1932. Therefore I am arranging to place the documentary evidence before the proper authorities.

I AM QUITE PREPARED TO SUFFER ANY FURTHER INJUSTICE THAT THE GOVERNMENT MAY PUT ON ME BUT IN NO WAY WILL I SUBMIT TO THE METHODS WHICH HAVE BEEN USED TO MAKE ME SIGN DOCUMENTS WHICH BETRAY MY PEOPLE INTO ACCEPTING AN UNREAL FULFILMENT OF THE PROMISES AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS.

Finally, I again repeat, as per my previous correspondence with your Excellency, and also through YOUR BRITISH ADVISERS:

- (a) - I am willing to assist in the settlement of Assyrians in Iraq.
- (b) - After settlement I will give the required promises in writing to do my best to make my Assyrian people as one of the most loyal and law-abiding subjects of His Majesty and His Government.
- (c) - I will then make preparation in accordance with the Canon of my Church for drafting of a law according to your Excellency's suggestion and conformable to Article VI of the Fundamental Law.

If this is not agreeable to the Government, I claim the right to ask the League of Nations for alternative settlement scheme.

P.S. - May I draw your Excellency's attention to the inflammatory speech of an honorary Deputy recorded and broadcasted in Al-Istiklal of June 29, 1933, and other local papers inciting hatred towards the Assyrians.

Mar Shimun sent copies of this letter to all the foreign Ambassadors in Baghdad.

The receipt of this letter infuriated not only the Minister of Interior but the whole cabinet. Some Ministers wished legal action to be taken against him. The Minister, Hikmet Beg Suleiman, himself wished to arraign Mar Shimun before the court, but on what charge was by no means clear. On the other hand, his detention in Baghdad on no charge at all was quite illegal.

Ugly signs began to multiply, there were threats that the Patriarchal House should be exterminated. Inflammatory speeches were made in the Iraqi Parliament, advocating the expulsion of all Assyrians, and fears of massacre were widespread.

However short-sighted the Ministers of the Iraqi Government were to be, they have realised that the illegal detention and mal-treatment of the Patriarch was only adding to the list of cases of oppression which would not be tolerated by the Assyrians, and would only promote suspicion and create chaos and tension resulting in disaster.

Further complications for the Government had been, however, added by the receipt of several telegrams from King Feisal, who was now on his state visit to London, instructing the Cabinet to allow Mar Shimun to return to Mosul on his own terms. The Ministers were much irritated by these telegrams and more than once threatened to resign. King Feisal was out of touch with the situation which had changed considerably since he had left the country.



Major D.B. Thomson's two previous meetings and his personal tours of Assyrian settlements showed the impracticability of his scheme, unless modified, but unfortunately he persisted in it until on the 10th and 11th of July 1933 two more meetings, attended by Assyrian leaders to hear the Iraqi Government's ultimatum were held in the office of Mutassarraf of Mosul, Khalil Azmi.

On those days the Mutassarraf explained the Iraq Government's policy. He told the Assyrians attending the meetings, that this was your last chance and those who could not accept it could leave the country, and finally said:

"It is in the interest of Assyrians who decide to reside in Iraq to obtain nationality certificates, for the Iraq Government cannot allot lands to those who do not consider themselves Iraqis; such people cannot expect to attain private or government positions without it"

The idea behind the suggestion to obtain Iraqi nationality papers before allotment of land was made to induce the Assyrians to obtain such papers and to inform the League of Nations (even if the large majority of the Assyrians remained homeless) that the Assyrians have been settled and in proof thereof. "Here is a list of those who have obtained the nationality papers"

Ninety per cent of the Iraqi population at that time had no nationality papers, and few government officials possessed the. Moreover, **THE ASSYRIAN PEOPLE IN IRAQ WERE IRAQI NATIONALS BY VIRTUE OF THOSE PROVISIONS OF THE TREATY OF LOUSAUNE WHICH ARE REPRODUCED IN IRAQI NATIONALITY LAW.**

The Mutassarraf then asked his British Advisor, Colonel R.S. Stafford, the Administrative Inspector, to explain his points of view. He said:

"What I want all you Assyrian leaders who are present today to realise once and for all that this is an intolerable situation and one which must end. Assyrians must either recognise that they are Iraqi citizens enjoying the same rights and obeying the same laws as other habitants of the country, or they must be prepared to leave the country. There is no middle path... But I must emphasise that this is the last absolutely the last opportunity which will be afforded to landless Assyrians of obtaining any lands or cultivating rights in this country.

"As regards the second alternative which I have mentioned, that of leaving Iraq. The Iraq Government has undertaken to grant every facility to those Assyrians who wish to leave Iraq. That is to say, that no one who wishes to go will be prevented from doing so. But the Iraqi Government is in no way responsible for finding a place outside Iraq for Assyrians to go. It obviously could not do so. Nor has the League of Nations, for its part, promised to find such lands outside Iraq. It is up to the Assyrians themselves to make such arrangements, both as regards to obtaining approval from the government of the country in which they wish to settle and as regards the expense of transport.

"The acting Mutassarraf has dealt full with the question of Mar Shimun; I need only remark that what he has said is self evident truth and one which requires no explanation".

Following Mutassarraf and Stafford's speeches to the Assyrians, Major Thomson made the following announcement:

"Make up your minds once and for all that you must settle in Iraq. No other country will offer you the terms and conditions that you are being offered by the Iraq Government...."

The speeches made left no doubt in the minds of the Assyrians that they were not wanted in Iraq. The Assyrians did their utmost to keep on friendly terms and serve the Iraqi Government loyally, but the British policy was always a barrier between the two. When the Assyrians made their own arrangements to find a new home, they were stopped by diplomatic pressure and force of arms.

Finally, can any one doubt what would be the effect of those words (or speeches) on a nervous and excitable people who had been waiting for a settlement for fifteen years.

————— TO BE CONTINUED

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