

The Assyrian Levies Move to Hinaidi, 1928

The Assyrian Levies and the 1933 Crisis

The Assyrian Refugees of 1933

The Levies Move to Hinaidi, 1928:

By 1928 Great Britain had withdrawn all the British and Indian Army troops from Iraq but they still maintained three Air Bases in the country: Mosul, Shaiba and Hinaidi. To them Hinaidi was by far the most important. It was the biggest base in the country, with more accommodations for aircraft and personnel, and better maintenance facilities. The War Office had spent a lot of money on it before 1922 when the Air Ministry took it over and spent another £600,000. Hinaidi was only five miles from Baghdad and thus in close contact with the High Commissioner; it was linked by railway and river transport to Basra. In view of all this the Air Ministry declared that it would vacate the Mosul Base and move to Hinaidi. About this time Levy troop level was: two battalions, headquarters, two machine gun sections, transport and remounts. Now the Air Vice-Marshal ordered the Levy headquarters to leave Mosul for Baghdad. Levy troops were to replace the last of the Indian Army Battalions in Iraq. The Assyrians were to take over guard duties at the High Commissioner's house, the Air Vice-Marshal's house, the aerodome, as well as to perform numerous other duties.

The Levy Pay Office went to Baghdad on June 29th. Three months later the Iraqi Army received from the Assyrians the Mosul Air Base and took over guard duties. On October 13th, the machine gun section, the depot, ambulance, and transport left for Hinaidi via Kirkuk. Part of the Second Assyrian Battalion took over guard duties in Baghdad from the 5th Mahrattas Battalion on October 18th, and finally on October 30th, the Levy Headquarters opened up in Hinaidi after spending six years in Mosul. It is noteworthy that other Levy forces were still in Northern Iraq, and in November of that year a combined force of Iraqi army troops and Assyrian Levies stopped a major Kurdish advance from Iran aimed at the border town of Penjwin. It was led by Shiekh Mahmud of Suleimaniya.

In view of the terms of the new Anglo-Iraqi Treaty, a gradual reduction of Levy Troop strength was to take place. On April 1, 1933, the effective Levy strength was to level off at 1250 men. On February 16, 1932, one company of the Second Assyrian Battalion moved to Basra to take over guard duties at Margil and Shaiba. The R.A.F. Air Base at Shaiba was about 10 miles from Basra. It had a satellite seaplane anchorage base in Basra. Shaiba was important because it was on the air

route to India; it was a secure place because the Royal Navy could protect it from the Persian Gulf. Later on many Assyrians moved to Shaiba and the Church of Mar Benyamin was constructed in the 1940's. Shaiba was to play a crucial role during the Rashid Ali Al-Gailani revolt in 1941.

The Iraqis were never comfortable with the presence of a British Military Base so close to Baghdad. So it was agreed by the British High Commissioner, Sir Francis Humphrys, that the British could vacate Hinaidi to a new Air Base that would be built near Lake Habbaniya about 50 miles west of Baghdad. The A.O.C., Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, concurred with the idea declaring Habbaniya a desirable location. The building of the Base was to cost the British some £2,000,000. The Assyrians were to stay in Hinaidi for a number of years until the new Royal Air Base in Habbaniya was to be completed.

Author's Note:

During World War II both Habbaniya and Shaiba proved crucial to the allied war effort. They served to protect the British position in the Middle East. After the Habbaniya campaign of May 1941 the Levy force was expanded. Some three thousand additional Assyrians were recruited, many coming from Khabur area in Syria. For the remainder of the war the Levies protected vital allied installations in Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine and Cyprus. In September 1944, Assyrian paratroopers fought German Panzers in Arnhem, Holland. In 1946, they took part in the great victory parade in London. Half a century later Levy veterans could be found in all the major Assyrian centers in the world, from Baghdad to London and from Chicago to Sydney, Australia.

The Levies and the 1933 Crisis:

In a recent article, I had written in some detail about the failed Assyrian coup of June 1932, which was a last ditch effort by the Levies to force some settlement before the termination of the British mandate. However, early in 1933, it became increasingly apparent that Assyrian aspirations regarding their settlement as an enclave within Iraq, with their Patriarch Mar Eshai Shimun XXIII as their temporal head, would never be fulfilled. Also, it began to be realized, that Britain would not attempt to compel Iraq to accept Assyrian demands, and for the first time, the Assyrian leaders began to explore the possibility of

