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## 'The Assyrian and Armenian refugees in Mesopotamia. Memorandum by the Secretary of State for India'

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### About this record

The file opens with a memorandum by Edwin Samuel Montagu (Secretary of State for India) dated 4 November 1920 regarding the current situation of Assyrian and Armenian refugees in Mesopotamia, paying particular attention to the difficulties that they have faced in seeking repatriation. This memorandum seeks to provide an update to a previous memorandum of the same title which was issued by Montagu on 5 July 1920 (IOR/L/PS/18/B345). The memorandum is followed by an appendix in the form of a letter from the India Office to the Foreign Office on 2 November 1920 and its enclosure, 'note on the Christian communities in and around Mesopotamia'. The letter details the French and British spheres of influence in Mesopotamia and explains how the refugee crisis should be handled. The note details the different types of Christian groups in the area, and explains the initial reasons for the emigration of these communities from Urmia. The final folio is a copy of Montagu's initial memorandum dated 5 July 1920.

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Circulated by the Secretary of State for India.

SECRET.

The Assyrian and Armenian Refugees in Mesopotamia.

MEMORANDUM BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INDIA.

In continuation of my former paper (C.P. 1570, dated 5th July 1920, copy of which is attached for convenience of reference) I circulate to my colleagues the following statement with regard to the position of the Ba'qubah refugees.

It is as follows:—

(1) *Assyrians.*—They are now concentrated in the Mosul Vilayet between Mosul and 'Aqra. Sir P. Cox on 16th October telegraphed that the forward movement of the first portion [i.e., to their destination in accordance with the proposals of Sir A. Wilson referred to in my statement of 5th July] has commenced and should be completed before the winter. Sir P. Cox has been asked by telegram what portion he anticipates will remain for repatriation next spring. It is clear from the monthly reports of the Director of Repatriation, Lieut.-Col. Cunliffe-Owen, that the task of transporting these refugees from Ba'qubah to the Mosul Vilayet, in the midst of Arab risings and in spite of Arab attacks on the Ba'qubah camp, has not been easy, and I desire to draw the attention of my colleagues to the excellent work done by Col. Cunliffe-Owen and the officers under his command in the face of great danger and obstacles.

In the meantime the French Ambassador in two notes to the Foreign Office, dated 11th September and 28th September, has represented the desirability of repatriating a certain number of these refugees, who, he alleges, came originally from the area west of Jazirat al 'Umar in the sphere of the French mandate, to their original homes; and has proposed that the French and British Governments should arrive at an agreement for the purpose of safeguarding the interests of these Christian communities in the future. I circulate with this statement a copy of a letter, which I have caused to be sent to the Foreign Office, and of a note on the different Christian communities, in which I have attempted to show that the French Government can have no legitimate interest in the Assyrians who are on our charge as refugees, seeing that the former homes of these people lay in districts well to the east of the area of the French mandate.

(2) *Armenians.*—14,000 are concentrated near Basrah awaiting repatriation. Their own desire is to be repatriated to the Erivan district of Armenia *via* Batum. The disposal of these Armenians is to form the subject of an Inter-Departmental meeting as soon as a reply is received by the Foreign Office to a telegram sent to Colonel Stokes at Tiflis, enquiring whether, in fact, the Armenian Republic would be prepared to receive the refugees. The object of the meeting will be to decide what policy will be most to the interests of His Majesty's Government in regard to these Armenians. Sir A. Wilson thought that in the last resort they might be settled in Mesopotamia. But Sir P. Cox states that they will be bitterly disappointed if they are not repatriated to Erivan, and that they are of all refugees the least easy to settle in Mesopotamia, since they have little cohesion, and many of them are non-agriculturists. It appears to be in the interests of this country and of the Armenians themselves, and in accordance with the principles of the Peace Conference, that they should, if possible, be repatriated to an Armenian country. The sooner this is made possible the better, as the estimated cost of their maintenance at Basrah is 2,000l. a day.

(3) It is believed that there are no refugees left at the Ba'qubah camp by this time.

INDIA OFFICE,  
4th November 1920.

E. S. M.

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APPENDIX.

*Letter from India Office to Foreign Office, No. P. 7714, dated 2nd November 1920.*

Sir,

I am directed by the Secretary of State for India to transmit, for the information of Earl Curzon of Kedleston, copies of the marginally noted telegrams<sup>1</sup> from the High Commissioner, Mesopotamia, on the subject of the Assyrian refugees in Mesopotamia. I am further to transmit a copy of a memorandum<sup>2</sup> prepared in this Office on the Christian communities in and around Mesopotamia.

It will be observed from this memorandum that there is a clear distinction between the Assyrian refugees in Mesopotamia and the so-called Assyro-Chaldeans who originate from the area west of Jazirat al 'Umar. Special attention is directed to this point, because it is one on which the French Government, to judge from the notes transmitted with your letters No. E. 11261/88/44 of 21st September, and No. E. 11999/306/44 of 6th October, appear to be under some misapprehension. Secondly, it will be within the recollection of Earl Curzon of Kedleston that the consideration of the original French proposal to take over a number of these refugees was made contingent (*see* Foreign Office letter No. E. 11261/88/44 of 21st September) on the main movement for their repatriation now in progress in the Mosul Vilayet being postponed until the spring of 1921. Sir P. Cox now reports (1) that the Assyrian refugees in our charge are Nestorians whose pre-war homes were well to the east of the French zone and include no Assyrians of the category referred to by the French Government; and (2) that the forward movement of the first portion of refugees to their homes in the Urmia district has actually started and is expected to be complete before the winter. In these circumstances Mr. Secretary Montagu ventures to think that it is neither necessary nor desirable to take any action in the sense of the French proposal for transplantation to the area west of Jazirat al 'Umar.

With regard to the second French note and the wider issues broached in its paras. 2, 3 and 4, Mr. Montagu desires in the first place to call the attention of His Lordship to the statement made by Sir P. Cox in his telegram No. 12630, dated 19th October, regarding the general attitude of French ecclesiastics in Mesopotamia, which appears to corroborate the impression conveyed in para. 3 of Foreign Office letter No. 11999/306/44 of 6th October. In the circumstances Mr. Montagu would deprecate any such action as is contemplated in para. 4 of the second French note.

With regard to para. 3 of the Note, it is of interest to record that, at the recent election of the Municipal Council of Mosul, the one Christian elected was a Jacobite or West Syrian Christian. His election would appear to imply the presence of a considerable proportion of Jacobites in the Mosul area, though the home of the majority is believed to be west of Jazirat al 'Umar in the French zone. Under the regulations the Mosul Council should contain two non-Muslim members. But at the special request of the Christians, put forward on the ground of the excellent relations subsisting between themselves and Muslims, the Political Officer refrained from enforcing the regulation. The incident is significant (1) as illustrating the general friendliness between the two communities; and (2) by reason of the honour conferred in Mesopotamian territory upon a member of the sect in which the French would appear to have most interest. These conditions, if they continue, should afford a considerable safeguard against any undue tendency to migrate into the French sphere; and it would appear that, if the object of the French Government is ultimately to attract the Mosul Jacobites across the frontier, present indications promise little success to their design. On the other hand, it indicates the danger that if recognition is given to any French claim to protect Jacobites domiciled in Mesopotamia on the ground of their religion, the Christian vote in Mosul may be subject to direct French influence.

But it is, of course, always possible that circumstances may arise hereafter that would call for co-operation between the French and British Governments in safeguarding the interests of all the Christian sects in the countries in which they are concerned.

In all the circumstances Mr. Montagu would suggest, for His Lordship's consideration, that the French Government should be given the assurance asked for in para. 2 of their second note, whether it be taken as referring to Assyrian refugees

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or Assyro-Chaldeans at present resident in Mesopotamia of whatever origin; but that His Majesty's Government should resist any interference on the part of the French in the affairs of the Christians resident in the British zone.

The Under Secretary of State,  
Foreign Office.

I am, &c.,  
J. E. SHUCKBURGH.

Enclosure in above.

**B. 352.**

NOTE ON THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES IN AND AROUND MESOPOTAMIA.

A. *Groups*.—Reference may be made to "A Handbook of Mesopotamia" (I.D. 1118A), Vol. I., November 1918, prepared on behalf of the Admiralty and the War Office, from which the following summary has been extracted. *Vide* especially pp. 128-133.

The Christians are divided into three groups :—

- I. *Independent Asiatic Churches*.
- II. *Uniate Churches*—in communion with the Roman Catholic Church.
- III. *Miscellaneous groups*.

I. are divided into the following three classes :—

- (a) *Gregorian*.
- (b) *Nestorian or East Syrian*.
- (c) *Jacobite or West Syrian*.

II. are divided into :—

- (a) *Armenian Uniate*.
- (b) *Chaldean (East Syrian Uniates)*.
- (c) *Jacobite Uniates (West Syrian Uniates)*, officially called *Syrian Catholics*.
- (d) *Maronites*.

B. *Millets*.—These Churches were recognised as *Millets* by the Turkish Government, each with its civil head appointed by the Government, though in practice the spiritual head of the Church was chosen. It is believed that all enjoyed this privilege, though the official handbook only mentions I. (a), I. (b), I. (c), and II. (a) as *Millets*.

C. *Geographical Position* :—

I. (a) are to be found in Armenia and Mesopotamia. They have three "Catholici" in theory, the chief of whom is at Echmiadsin, near Erivan. They have also a patriarch (a rank which in their Church is counted lower than *Catholicos*) who resides in Constantinople for governmental business. The *Catholici* of Sis and Akhtamar are merely titulars. The Gregorian Church is the National Church of Armenia.

(b) overlap the borders of Persia and Turkey: at Urnia, Julamerk, &c., in the Hakkari and Tiari districts of Turkish Kurdistan and the Urmia district of Persia.

Their patriarch resided near Julamerk in pre-war times.

(c) are scattered and to be found in North Syria, Diarbekr, Mardin; also some in Mosul and Baghdad.

They have a patriarch at Mardin and first bishop called "Maphrian" at Mosul.

II. (a) Mardin and elsewhere: chiefly in West Kurdistan and south-east Anatolia. Archbishop at Mardin.

(b) At and near Mosul; also Baghdad.

Patriarch at Mosul.

(c) At Diarbekr, Syria, Mosul and Baghdad.

Patriarch at Baghdad, Antioch, or Damascus (?).

(d) Lebanon.

D. *History and Tenets* :—

I. (a) Called after St. Gregory the Illuminator, who converted the main part of the Armenian nation to Christianity between 250-330 A.D. The Armenian Church gradually lost connection with the Byzantine Ecclesiastical organisation and doctrine and became a national Armenian Church.

(b) A remnant of the great body of Nestorian Christians who in the Middle Ages were to be found in many parts of Asia. Their doctrine dates back to the 5th century. They were accused of holding that Christ was not one person, but two—divine and human. This doctrine was condemned as a heresy at the Council of Ephesus

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A.D. 431, and its adherents were forced to take refuge beyond the borders of the Roman Empire. They then spread into Mesopotamia and Persia. They were persecuted by Tamberlane in 1400. A remnant lingered in the plains of Assyria, near Mosul, and among the mountains south of Lakes Van and Urmia. In the 16th century the plain-dwellers joined the Church of Rome. They now dwell mostly in the mountains. They deny that they are Nestorians in the heretic sense.

(c) These are traced to Jacobus Baradaeus (6th century) in Syria and Mesopotamia. They maintained a position near the borders of the Eastern Roman Empire in spite of persecution by the Byzantine Government.

II. (a)-(d) The Uniate Churches are those portions of the independent Churches that have been brought (mostly since the 17th century) to accept the spiritual supremacy of the Pope. But they differ from the Roman Catholic Church and from each other in matters of ritual, liturgy, ecclesiastical laws and customs. They have a separate hierarchy and tend to resent any assumption of authority on the part of the Roman Catholic curia. These Churches are derivatives of the independent Churches.

As regards group III.: these fall into two groups:—

(a) *Protestant converts* from I. and II. who were officially recognised as one "millet" collectively.

(b) *Secessionists* :

- (i) New Chaldeans.
- (ii) Orthodox Armenians.

E.—The Assyrian refugees of Baqubah, now in the Mosul Vilayet en route for the Urmia district, are Nestorians or East Syrians, and are being repatriated to districts which may be regarded as their homes.

The French interest, as indicated by their notes to the Foreign Office, is professedly in the Jacobites, the majority of whom live west of Jazirat al 'Umar. None of these are among the refugees who are being repatriated to the Urmia district or are maintained as refugees on our charge. What Jacobites there may be from west of Jazirat al 'Umar in Mesopotamia now are at liberty to return to their homes as they wish. They are in no sense Nestorians as the French seemed to imply in their first note.

The refugees are, in fact, East Syrians, as opposed to West Syrians or Jacobites, and originate from areas east and north-east of Jazirat al 'Umar, from districts outside both French and British zones. Their homes were generally between Lake Van, Lake Urmia, and Mosul, in the Hakkari district of Turkish Kurdistan and in the Urmia plains of North-West Persia (Khoi, Salmas and Urmia). In the summer of 1915 the mountaineer section of Assyrians from Turkish Kurdistan were driven into the Persian districts in and about the Urmia plains, where they joined up with their co-religionists. When early in November 1917 our Russian allies decided to withdraw their forces from North-West Persia, the Assyrians were armed by the retiring Russians, much to the resentment of the Persians. The Persians early in 1918 ordered them to disarm and attempted to enforce their order. This led to disturbances in Khoi, Salmas and Urmia. After a to and fro of fighting with the Kurds, when about the middle of April 1918 a Turkish force was reported to be advancing from the direction of Sujbulak and Ushnu, the Assyrians advanced to meet this force. An initial success at Ushnu was followed by an attack by Persian democrats, who ruthlessly massacred some 4,000 Assyrians settled at Khoi. Finally, threatened by overwhelming numbers and without ammunition, these Assyrians were forced to leave their homes in the Urmia plains and to begin their long southerly march through hostile country to seek protection behind the British, whom they had long expected to come to their succour. It is not to be supposed that they would ever willingly migrate to the French sphere west of Jazirat al 'Umar so long as there is any prospect of their being able to settle in their ancient homes.

F.—The "Millet" which chiefly concerns His Majesty's Government as mandatory Power for the vilayats of Mosul and Baghdad is the Chaldean, *i.e.* Group II. (b), a progressive body of cultivators and artisans chiefly resident in and around Mosul. They are not to be confused with the Nestorian Millet, whose original homes are outside the limits of French and British mandates.

INDIA OFFICE,  
27th October 1920.

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Circulated by the Secretary of State for India.

SECRET.

The Assyrian and Armenian Refugees in Mesopotamia.

C.P. 1570.

MEMORANDUM BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INDIA.

At the meeting of the Cabinet on 30th June I was instructed to "send instructions to the local Administration in Mesopotamia that the repatriation of these refugees is to be expedited to the utmost possible extent."

The present position is as follows:—

(1) *Assyrians.*—These people came partly from the mountains north of Mosul, and partly from the region of Urmia, in Persian territory, and the difficulty has been to find a home for them, since the decision of His Majesty's Government regarding Kurdistan made it impossible to send back to the mountains north of Mosul those of them who came from that region, while the others were not wanted in Persia, where the Moslem inhabitants had already appropriated their property. On 30th March Sir A. Wilson telegraphed proposals for their repatriation to a region lying partly in Mesopotamian, partly in Persian, territory, where they thought they could maintain themselves without further assistance from us, if armed with rifles and a few mountain guns. These proposals raised certain difficulties, and while discussions were proceeding here Sir A. Wilson—fearing to allow more of the favourable season to elapse—anticipated the sanction of His Majesty's Government, and reported on 15th May that 15,000 Assyrians were already on the move, and that the remaining 6,000 would have left Bakubah by the end of the following week. "The sole condition they have made is that we should give them weapons to maintain themselves against their neighbours. If given these they will constitute themselves once more an independent community: if we refuse, their future existence as a nation is doomed. Before they became refugees they were well armed; we disarmed them when they came to us." The War Office had agreed to give them rifles, but refused the guns (22nd April). On receipt of Sir A. Wilson's telegram I wrote (25th May) to the Foreign Office, sending to the War Office a copy of my letter, and urged that his action and proposals should be approved, and that the decision regarding guns should be reconsidered. The Foreign Office eventually (15th June) left it to me "to decide whether matters have so far advanced that the disadvantages of countermanding the scheme outweigh those of proceeding with it." From the War Office, to whom I wrote again urgently on 24th June, I have had no reply. At present, therefore, the refugees are in a precarious position between Mosul and the Persian frontier, waiting for nothing but the guns, for which they have asked, to proceed to their destination. I gather, from oral enquiries at the War Office, that guns cannot be made immediately available, but that some can be sent from Egypt "within a month or two." It is obvious that His Majesty's Government, who will wash their hands of these people (so far as physical protection is concerned) as soon as they leave Mesopotamia, cannot honourably turn them out insufficiently armed. Until, therefore, the guns are forthcoming, I am afraid there is nothing more to be done. But I hope my colleagues will acquit the Civil Administration of all responsibility for the delay, while the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Mesopotamia, has strongly supported the scheme "both on financial and general grounds, and in order to reduce what constitutes very serious commitments and a heavy tax on his supply organisation."

(2) *Armenians.*—In this case the difficulty has been not to find a home for the refugees but to get them to it—a matter which lies entirely beyond the reach of the Mesopotamian Administration. The War Office, I believe, are dealing with the question of those whose home is in Constantinople. As regards the rest, I am awaiting a reply to an enquiry, addressed to the Foreign Office on 21st June, as to whether the hope of repatriation to Armenia must now be abandoned. If it must, Sir A. Wilson thinks it should be practicable to place them in some part of Mesopotamia as colonists, in which case little expenditure would be required after the end of this financial year. Again I am afraid that the matter does not rest in my hands, and that the local Administration can do nothing.

INDIA OFFICE,  
5th July 1920.

E. S. M.

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