

ASSYRIAN SETTLEMENT

A SUMMARY OF THE COMMITTEE'S VIEWS

JULY 1945

There have now been a sufficient number of meetings of the Assyrian Settlement Committee to enable a summary to be written expressing its general views.

On all the most important matters discussed, the Committee are in unanimous agreement, and it is thought that, as these have had the deep thought of all members, including some who are unfortunately no longer with us, they should be duly recorded.

1. The fact that the meetings have been so well attended shows that the Assyrian question, difficult and seemingly beyond solution, is yet very seriously regarded by the Committee members, who believe it to be of deeper significance than just a chivalrous and Utopian ideal - and are satisfied that major questions of honour and of policy are involved.

2. The Committee is agreed that there is a strong case for making Britain and the Empire thoroughly conscious of its obligations to the Assyrians, to whom we owe a debt which must be paid in full. The Committee believe there is also a League of Nations responsibility towards the Assyrians, and indebtedness from the United Nations as a result of their loyalty and courage at Habbaniyah, but that the British liability towards them is the greatest.

3. Beyond and apart from present or past indebtedness to the Assyrians, the Committee, though they have not frequently discussed the subject, are well aware that the Middle East is an area of high International importance. Because of the oil they think this must continue to be so for many years to come. Moreover from the British Empire's point of view the lines of sea and air communications passing through it to India, the far East and Australia are vital ones. Hence it is evident that we must at all costs endeavour to maintain that part of the world in peaceful equilibrium - a searching test of our diplomatic efficiency though this may be. Serious discontent in Iraq could be most dangerous to us, and every potential source of internal discord deserves study. The Committee are resolved that it is not sufficient, as in the past, merely to put powerful British air or military forces to support incompetent Iraqi administrations, and that the needs and aspirations of all sections - particularly the minorities - must be equally and fairly considered.

4. The Committee strongly disagree with the view that the Arab idea of the country's best mode of administration must always be accepted - the Assyrians for example to be dispossessed of rights and massacred

at their enemy's pleasure, with the British Government being asked to accept such a state of affairs as inevitable because of the racial antipathy of the two peoples and the misfortune of the Assyrians being temporarily without a homeland of their own. And while the Committee are fully conscious of the difficulties involved in advising and controlling Iraq when nominally independent and self-governing, nevertheless they think this course must, in some degree, be pursued if tranquility is to be secured by the best means. To allow the country to be a prey to periodic rebellions and massacres involving Kurd or Assyrian, Suni or Shiah, is to allow it to be ruled by gangster law, and we merely weaken ourselves in the eyes of all sections in the East by accepting such a state of affairs as inevitable.

5. The Committee believe that the Arabs are at least well aware of the sterling fighting abilities of the Assyrians, and if the latter cannot be moved from Iraq or Syria, there may, under British guidance, be some chance of bringing these two peoples to a better understanding. To this end, if the British could exercise more control over Iraq than since 1932, and pursue a policy of mediation and assistance - particularly in relation to the settlement of the Assyrians on lands which could be made fertile by dams and irrigation, the relations might be much improved. The Committee further believe that the Tigris valley, fully developed on modern lines, could well support the Assyrians if the Iraqis wished it either in its upper or its middle reaches. The valley has, from time immemorial, been their ancient home, and its flood control, hydro-electric development and irrigation and navigation possibilities are as yet almost untouched. By such development with British help all sections could benefit.

6. In view of their acknowledged military efficiency and long service to the British Crown, the present policy of discharging the Assyrians from the RAF Regiment guarding British air bases in Iraq is not only unwise but dishonourable if some other employment such as secure settlement is not at the same time being found for the Assyrians, either by the Iraqi or the British Governments. This is almost exactly the policy which led to the complete unsettling of the Assyrians in 1932 and the subsequent massacres. The Committee have heard of it with grave alarm, and know that there is today a more anxious feeling amongst the Assyrians than has prevailed for a good many years past.

7. While the Committee can understand the reluctance of Australia or Canada, who have many other post war settlement problems on hand, to give any positive pronouncement on accepting Assyrians in those Dominions at present, Committee members are of the opinion they would at any rate make good settlers if given the chance, and are racially of a type that could be absorbed amongst European and British stock without introducing any permanent bar or racial cleavage. Moreover it is believed that the Dominions could be convinced on these points, but more easily perhaps if the British Government would guarantee to finance transportation and initial settlement.

8. The Committee do not abandon any of the settlement suggestions they have from time to time made to the Government or investigated privately, but they think that before pressing any scheme fully - for example by extolling the Assyrians as soldiers, builders or cultivators to the extent they might through the church, the press or radio, - they should obtain from the Government a definite statement that Britain either will or will not undertake to do, or try to do, anything more for the Assyrians in Iraq. Upon this turns the extent and type of settlement that must be planned, and without it the Committee are considerably handicapped. The information should be freely given to us because the Committee consists of disinterested people wishing to do their best in the country's interests, and fully deserve the confidence of the Government.

9. It is believed that the influence of the Committee, unsuccessful as it has been as yet in arranging satisfactory settlement, has nevertheless caused the Government to think more deeply upon these questions. The Committee should be kept in being because it undoubtedly gives a much needed measure of confidence to the Assyrians themselves - who are by now aware of its existence. It is well able to explain the Assyrian viewpoint owing to the experience of its members, and the trust the Assyrians have in them.

A "The Assyrians saved the British Army from utter disaster in 1920."

Sir Arnold Wilson
MESOPOTAMIA: A CLASH OF
ROYALTIES, 1939, p. 291

"The service of the Assyrian's during the present war has exceeded anything they did before. Had it not been for their loyalty at the time of Rashid Ali's German inspired revolution in Iraq in May of 1941, our position in the Middle East might have been most precarious."

Air Commodore
J. L. Vachell
THE QUEEN MAGAZINE
March 9, 1944

"The Assyrian Levies have served with the RAF since the stormy days after the last War. Few communities have shown more courage than the Assyrians, when their Patriarch declared war upon the Turks in 1915 from the heart of the Turkish Empire." Page 145

B "The Habbaniah battle is the greatest battle of World War II - the battle that decided the world's destiny. It was the Habbaniah victory that had saved Iraq, and the position of the United Nations in the Middle East. It did more. For three weeks later came the invasion of Russia; and it had saved the highway through Persia which was now exceedingly vital for the transit of Allied aid to Russia. If that was to be safeguarded, Iraq must be in safe hands. By a strange coincidence of events, Habbaniah had helped to save the Kremlin, as well as Britain from a disaster worse than Dunkirk and Singapore, and this new victory was forged almost solely by the sweat and blood of the Assyrian Levies." Page 148

Philip Guedalla
MIDDLE EAST 1940-1942
A Study in Air Power
London 1944 pp. 145-148

C "...the Iraqis were beaten back, the Assyrians tearing open the tanks with their bare hands." Page 55

D "The Iraqi coup had failed by so little and the Iraqis hate the Assyrians; more than they hate the British, did they hate the Assyrians."

Capt. Somerset DeChair
THE GOLDEN CARPET
Romon, Faber & Faber, 1944

(This book is published now in U.S.A.....Oct. 11, 1945)

D "The Iraqis when retreating turned from khaki into white under your very eyes - each soldier discarding his material covering in order to be mistaken for a civilian." Page 55