Assyrians in the International Treaties: Paris, Sèvres, and Lausanne

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The treaties of Paris 1919, Sèvres 1920, and Lausanne 1923 are important in history as they decided the fate of many nations in Europe, Asia, and Africa post World War I. These treaties impacted the future of the Assyrians greatly.

Great Britain Asserts Control of Mosul Province, Northern Iraq

During World War I, Russia was supportive of the creation of an Assyrian homeland in northern Mesopotamia. The Russian Army had protected the Assyrians in Urmia, northwest Persia. Russia had been present during the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916) that put the foundation for the partition of the Ottoman Empire and Middle East. Per that agreement, Russia was supposed to invade and control northern Persia while the British were to invade and control southern Persia with its oil fields. France was supposed to take control of modern regions of Iraq and Syria.

Unfortunately for the Assyrians, Russia's role in the subsequent negotiations between the Allies and the Ottomans became reduced after the Bolshevik Revolution (October 1917) when Moscow's attitude toward earlier Tsarist secret treaties changed. The Bolsheviks repudiated Tsarist secret treaties to gain favor with the belligerent countries. With this shift, the major weight in the negotiations regarding the Near East tilted towards Great Britain. Also, the British realized that they alone could not win a war against Persia; therefore, the British interest switched from Persia to Iraq. The British also favored keeping open and friendly channels and with the majority Arab groups in the Middle East at the expense of smaller ethnic groups.

The British occupation of Mesopotamia began in 1914, moving from Basra in the south and moving northward. On November 1, 1918 they planned to enter Mosul despite the fact that an armistice had become effective the day before (October 30). After much haggling about armistice terms, the British occupied Mosul on November 10 and the Turks withdrew. This occupation of Mosul was to be disputed by Turkey for decades to come as the Turks argued that the British occupied Mosul in time of peace and not during war. The British insisted on applying universal ideals to a society that had functioned on tribal bases and lacked the minimum requirement for a modern civil society. Despite the advice of Arnold T. Wilson, the Civil Administrator in Mesopotamia (1918 -1920), who understood the problem of multi-ethnic divisions among Shi'ite Arabs in the south, Sunni Arab in the center and Sunni Arabs, Assyrians, Kurds, and Turkmen in the north, the British government failed to take such issues into serious consideration.

After the end of military operations of World War I, preparations began by Great Britain, France, and the other Allies to dictate terms of peace to the defeated countries at the Paris Peace Conference (1919 - 1920), the venue for these negotiations. Eventually, five treaties resulted from the Conference that dealt with the defeated powers. These took their names from towns

around Paris: Versailles, St. Germain, Trianon, Neuilly, and Sèvres. At Sèvres, the Allies dealt with the Ottoman Empire.

Assyrian Hopes from the Peace Process

Earlier, when World War I was approaching an end, President Woodrow Wilson laid down a set of principles for world peace called the Fourteen Points. These principles contained his vision for how the Allies should build peace after the war was won. The critical twelfth point states: "**The Turkish portions of the present Ottoman Empire should be assured a secure sovereignty, but the other nationalities which are now under Turkish rule should be assured an undoubted security of life and an absolutely unmolested opportunity of autonomous development.**" Taking heart from this key principle, Assyrian leaders prepared to argue for the creation of an independent Assyrian state. Three main Assyrian groups from the United States, Mesopotamia, and Iran were scheduled to participate in the Paris Conference. The Iran delegation included Jesse Malek Yonan, Abraham Yohannan, Shimun Ganja, and Lazar George. Britain worried that the Iran delegation would jeopardize its control over the Assyrians since it could not exercise direct authority in Iran. Therefore, the British forced the Assyrians from Iran delegates to leave Paris.

Rev. Joel E. Werda led the Assyrian delegation from the USA, representing the Diaspora community. He accompanied Bishop Aphrem Barsoum (Patriarch Barsoum I in 1933) and his secretary, Capt. A. K. Yousuf (1866-1924). The Assyrian Mesopotamia delegation received conditional permission to travel from the British authorities on July 21, six months after the Conference had begun. The condition placed on Lady Surma, sister of the assassinated Mar Benyamin Shimun (1887-1918) and head of the delegation, was to stop in London first. There she was kept until the Conference ended. Later, she was allowed to address Assyrian demands but only in Britain. Other representatives comprised of a deputation led by Sa'aid Namiq and supported by the Chaldean Catholic Church patriarchate and a delegation from the Caucasus led by Lazar Yacouboff, President of the Assyrian National Council of the Transcaucasus (Yacoub, p. 9).

Therefore, the Assyrian delegations met with obstacles from the early beginning, the most serious from Britain, and the mandate power most directly involved with the fate of Assyrians once Russia stepped out of the picture.

Assyrian Demands

The Assyrian Delegates brought two sets of demands: The American Assyrians demanded the establishment of an Assyrian independent territory, as the Allies had promised repeatedly, to include northern Mesopotamia, beginning from the lower Zab River, Diyarbakir and extending to the Armenian mountains, with access to the Mediterranean Sea, and under the protection of the super powers (Werda, p. 205). A national home for the Assyrians had been discussed earlier. In April 1917, Dr. Fraidon (Aturaya) Bet- Avraham (1891-1926) had completed the Urmia Manifesto of the United Free Assyria. His vision was for an Assyrian self-governing national

home in the regions of Urmia, Mosul, Tur Abdin, Jazira, and Hakkari with economic and military ties with Russia (Melta, p. 4).

Great Britain and the US delegates denied the Assyrian right to present this petition under the pretense that President Wilson was having strong reservations about any plans to divide Turkey. Lady Surma demanded basic freedoms and the release of all prisoners and the punishment of the criminals responsible for the atrocities committed against the Assyrians during the Great War (Matviev, p. 119). These demands included allowing the Assyrians of Hakkari to return to their homes. There was nothing about the fate of the Assyrians of northern Iraq who have lived in the region of Mosul, Nineveh Plain, Barwar, etc. since the Assyrian Empire period. Although there was nothing about the establishment of an Assyrian autonomous area, even these modest demands were ignored over the coming decades.

Post Paris Peace Conference Events

The League of Nations was conceived in 1919 as an instrument to maintain the peace and security thought achieved in World War I, and to promote international cooperation. Its Charter, called the Covenant, consists of the first twenty-six articles of the Treaty of Versailles.
On August 23, 1921, Great Britain brought to Baghdad Faysal (son of Sharif Hussein the Hashemite ruler of the Hejaz) who had lost his throne in Syria, and proclaimed him king of the newly established Kingdom of Iraq. It included the three Ottoman provinces of Baghdad, Basra and Mosul, although the status of the latter had not been decided internationally. Besides the diplomatic efforts at the Peace Conference, other Assyrians, such as Agha Potros d-Baz (1880-1932), continued to pursue steps to establish an Assyrian autonomous state. In confidential letters written (April 1921-March 1922) the office of the British High Commissioner in Baghdad and the Director of Repatriation and the Divisional Advisor in Mosul discussed Agha Potros' comprehensive proposal, which was accompanied by a map (Yusuf Malek, pp. 212-213). The two officials discussed the difficulties and complications with a plan that demanded the inclusion of territories within Iraq, Persia, Turkey, and Syria.

This involved the French as well. The efforts of Agha Potros were giving the British troubles; they decided to get rid of him. He was called to Baghdad, accused of collaboration with the French, and exiled to France in 1921 (Nirari, p. 147).

San Remo and the Treaty of Sèvres

The Paris Peace Conference did not succeed in resolving the partition of the Ottoman Empire. The denunciation of the secret treaties by the Bolsheviks and the attitude of President Wilson had forced the Allies to leave Paris with agreements on the principles of partition and revision in the issue of British and French mandates. The interested parties gathered in April 1920 at San Remo for further deliberations. Great Britain's Lloyd George dominated the meetings and dictated demands: The Turkish government in Constantinople, having lost the war, capitulated to Allied demands. Turkey gave up its rights in all the regions it had dominated, including Mesopotamia

(Howard, p. 243). Bishop Aphrem Barsoum addressed the delegates through his memorandum dated February 1920. In his address, he mentioned that he was instructed by his patriarch with the task of laying before the conference the sufferings and the wishes of our ancient Assyrian nation that resides mostly in the upper valleys of Tigris and Euphrates in Mesopotamia. The bishop asked for the emancipation of the vilayets of Diarbakir, Bitlis, Kharput, and Urfa from the Turkish yoke. He protested against any plans to establish a Kurdish authority or state and demanded compensations for all loses the Assyrians had suffered as well as guarantees for the future survival of the Assyrian nation and its religion. A month later, Bishop Barsoum addressed the conference by letter again. He repeated the earlier demands and reminded the Conference that the massacres were not against the Armenians alone; but against all Christians, and that half of the Assyrian people were victims of the Turkish sword and Kurdish dagger. He protested against the return of Turkish rule in Diyarbakir, Mardin, and Urfa. In August 1920 the Treaty of Sèvres was signed. The Fertile Crescent came under British and French mandate. Mosul was awarded to the British Mandate in Mesopotamia and made part of the new Iraq in keeping with an earlier agreement regarding Mosul reached between Britain and France. France gave up its interest in Mosul, granted under Sykes-Picot, in exchange for a twenty-five percent share in Mosul's oil and a free hand in the whole of Syria. Racial and religious minorities received mention in Treaty articles 62, 63, 140, 141, 142, 147, 148, 149, and 150. Article 62 declares: "The Scheme shall contain full safeguards for the protection of the Assyro-Chaldeans and other racial or religious minorities within these areas, and with this object a commission composed of British, French, Italian, Persian and Kurdish representatives shall visit the spot to examine and decide what rectifications, if any, should be made in the Turkish frontier where, under the provisions of the present Treaty, that frontier coincides with that of Persia."

Treaty of Lausanne

Three years after signing the Treaty of Sèvres, Turkey began to demand reconsideration of the Mosul frontiers and amendment of certain articles in the Treaty of Sèvres. A new round of deliberations commenced on November 20, 1922, between Turkey and the Allies that concluded with the Treaty of Lausanne signed on July 24, 1923. The reason for this drastic change in Turkish policy stemmed from the success of the Kemalist movement, both military and political, based in Ankara, the capital of the new Republic. However, it was the Istanbul government and Sultan Mehmet VI that had participated in the Paris Peace Conference and signed the Treaty of Sèvres. With the change in both the form of the Turkish state and its leadership, the Treaty of Sèvres became a dead letter. During negotiations for this second treaty, the issue of the many national minorities in Turkey, addressed in the Treaty of Sèvres, remained unresolved.

The representative of the League of Nations at the round of negotiations, Dr. Fridtjof Nansen, Director of the League of Nations High Commission for Refugees, raised the issue of the minorities on December 1, 1922. He had traveled to the region and reflected the League's concerns regarding minorities in Turkey. These concerns lingered. According to the Nansen International Office for Refugees, there were still thousands of Assyrian refugees in the early 1930s (League of Nations, p. 180). In response, the League of Nations formed a sub-committee to address the issue: its report was made twelve days later. Lord Curzon, the British Foreign

Minister emphasized the interest of the international community in the welfare and protection of the Greeks, Armenians, Assyrian Christians, and Jewish minorities in Turkey. Mr. Child, the American observer, agreed that strong measures ought to be taken to protect those minorities. The sub-committee presented its report in which it asked for written guarantees for the protection of minorities in Turkey and suggested a League commission in Constantinople to supervise the process. However, after further deliberations and with strong Turkish opposition, a revised report was submitted. "**The report of the sub-committee on minorities was presented on January 9, 1923. In essence, it was almost a complete Turkish victory, for it provided guarantees by treaty, but abandoned the plan for an international commission... under supervision by the League of Nations.**" (Howard, p. 302-304).

Assyrians, yet again, were not allowed to participate at Lausanne, as Great Britain stood in their way, but Agha Potros attended the opening ceremonies of the conference. Agha Potros did not give up. He tried again by submitting a letter to the British authorities, dated October 26, 1923. Agha Potros' suggestion for the Assyrian enclave was the land between the Rivers Tigris and Zab, and Mount Sinjar (Nirari, p. 191). The Assyrian state proposed by Agha Potros covers in reality the Assyrian Christian historical homelands, lands that have been inhabited by Assyrian Christians (Nestorians, Chaldeans, and Jacobites) for 2000 years. The well-known Father Jacques Rhétoré (1841-1921) comprehensively described the region of the Assyrian Christians and visited all their churches and monasteries as he traveled the region in 1891. According to Rhétoré the Assyrians lived in an area confined generally within these boundaries: north to an imaginary line running from Lake Van to Lake Urmia, west to a line just west of the forty-second longitude near Seert, where the rivers Tigris and Bitlis meet, south to the thirty-sixth latitude, east to the Great Zab (Sanders, p. 31).

In Lausanne, the U.S. backed Great Britain because the latter promised concessions regarding American companies sharing in the Mosul oil fields. Turkey lost its appeal to win Mosul back based on Great Britain's claims that this region would be saved as the future home for the Assyrians and Kurds. No final agreement was reached. The Lausanne Treaty under Section III - Protection of Minorities, Articles 37 - 44 contained many stipulations with regard to "**the protection of minorities**" and specified that the minorities were the "**non- Muslim minorities**."

The Turkish government never respected those provisions. This is why it refused to have a special League Commission oversee minority rights in Constantinople. Speaking at the Lausanne Conference, Lord Curzon said: "**In so far as they are now settled within the borders of British influence, they [Assyrians] are assured of our friendly interest and protection**." As history has witnessed, when within a year of its independence, the Iraqi army in 1933 slaughtered Assyrians, the British promise of protection had vanished. In hindsight, the minorities, Assyrians or Kurds, became an excuse in the Turkish-Iraqi frontiers (Mosul Vilayet) negotiations to cover British desire to control Iraq's oil fields. The status of minorities in Turkey had been internationally certified by the 1923 Treaty of Lausanne, according to which they included non-Muslims in Turkey. Turkey had become a unitary state where "Turkish citizenship" was an all-embracing juridical concept encompassing all citizens, granting them equal rights and obligations. Thus, theoretically, constitutional citizenship was one of the most basic principles

upon which the Turkish Republic had been founded. All constitutions of the Turkish Republic to date have envisaged equal rights to all citizens. But the extent to which this principle is respected is the issue that has arisen with regard to European Union entry discussions, some 80 years after the Treaty of Lausanne. The Copenhagen criterion of "**respect for and protection of minorities**" should be applied not only to the Jewish, Greek and Armenian minorities defined by the Treaty of Lausanne, but also to the Assyrians and many other ethnic groups, religious sects, and minorities that make up Turkey's cultural fabric. In addition, the Assyrians are not a minority in northern Mesopotamia; they are the indigenous people of that region unlike all the other groups, such as the Arabs, Turks, and Kurds who arrived and settled in northern Mesopotamia much later.

The Iraqi-Turkish frontier was left for future negotiations to settle. Article three of the treaty gave Turkey and Great Britain nine months to resolve the frontier dispute and, if that failed, the issue was to be referred to the Council of the League of Nations. Thus, a solution to the Assyrian settlement problem lingered on.

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