

**Assyrian Colonial Encounters:
The Collective Re-Settlement of a Community**

The unraveling of the multi ethnic, multi religious Iraqi society after the American invasion 2001 has created a number of unanswered questions. This has graphically and tragically revealed the fault lines in modern Middle Eastern states. The politics of the modern Iraqi state has been studied extensively; but the impact of the long, conflicted, colonial period in Iraq on relations between religious and ethnic minority communities has been largely neglected.

The British mandate in Iraq (April 1920-October 1932) was established in the country under the direction and control of the League of Nations. The League deemed Iraq “to have reached a stage of development where [Iraq’s] existence as a Nation... required assistance from a Mandatory until it can stand alone”¹. The mandate in Iraq had policies that directly influenced various minority populations such as Christians, Jewish, Yezides, Shi’i communities. Various colonial policies and agendas were aimed at the Christian Assyrian population, who the British described as the “other Kurds”. The Assyrian population of Northern Iraq consists of various Christian communities that all share a Syriac language and follow the same religious doctrine. The Assyrians inhabit areas of northern Iraq, northwestern Iran, southeastern Turkey, and northeastern Syria².

However, there is little doubt that colonial policies also contributed to present inter-religious and ethnic tensions. I contend that the problems facing Iraq today did not suddenly emerge; they happen to be rooted in the late Ottoman period and colonial past. My particular focus will be on the “Assyrian minority re-settlement question” in Iraq. The Assyrians were enlisted in military and civil service capacities by colonial administrations because they were perceived to be more “Western” than the Muslim populations.

The British utilized the Assyrians as a military force to protect key outposts within the country. British officials believed that the Assyrians constituted a “warrior race” and as a result were more capable militarily. The special status of the Assyrians gave rise to Iraqi nationalist sentiments, especially during the events of the “Assyrian Massacre” in the summer and fall of 1933³. My paper will describe how one of the outcomes of this policy: British colonial attempts at the end of the mandate and the conclusion of World War II to “solve” the Assyrian question. Context these policies and explore an initiative to re-settle the Assyrian population throughout the British Empire, and how this resulted in a deep divide between the urban and rural Assyrian populations.

¹ Mahammad Gholi Majd, *Iraq in World War I: From Ottoman Rule to British Conquest* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2006), 370.

² Sebastian Brock ed., *The Hidden Pearl: At The Turn of The Third Millennium; The Syrian Orthodox Witness* (Vol 3). 2001. Roma Giacomo Pezzali, 6.

³ Khaldun Husry, “The Assyrian Affair of 1933 (I).” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* vol. 5 no.2 (1974), 170, and Khaldun Husry, “The Assyrian Affair of 1933 (II).” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* vol. 5 no.3 (1974), 355-360.