

ԵՐԵՎԱՆԻ ՊԵՏԱԿԱՆ ՀԱՄԱԼՍԱՐԱՆ  
ԱՐԵՎԵԼԱԳԻՏՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՖԱԿՈՒԼՏԵՏ

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**Հրատարակվում է Երևանի պետական համալսարանի  
արևելագիտության ֆակուլտետի  
գիտական խորհրդի որոշմամբ**

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պատմություն, Երևան, 2018, էջ 364.....141-144



*Svante Lundgren*<sup>1</sup>

## THE ASSYRIAN LOBBYING AT THE PARIS PEACE CONFERENCE – MYTHS AND REALITY

**Keywords:** Assyrians, Paris Peace Conference, Ottoman genocide, Assyro-Chaldean delegation

After the end of the First World War – during which some 300,000 Assyrians were killed in a genocide which the Assyrians today call *Seyfo* (the Syriac word for “sword”) – Assyrians from different countries travelled to Paris in order to lobby the victorious powers at the Peace Conference on the subject of the compensation that should be paid to the Assyrian – or, as they put it, the Assyro-Chaldean – people for its losses. Their basic demand was a free Assyria under a mandatory power (France or Britain). In the end, nothing of what the Assyrians wanted was effected: no independence, no autonomy, no freedom from the “Muslim yoke”.

There are some popular notions among Assyrians about what happened in Paris, which not exactly correspond with reality. Contrary to the popular conception of a unified effort to further a common cause, the lobbying suffered from internal division. There were not one, but several Assyro-Chaldean delegations present at the Paris Peace Conference and although they attempted to coordinate their activities and speak with one voice, there was serious division among them: geographical and denominational differences caused conflicts and the personal chemistry between the delegates was not good. The fact that the lobbying was not successful created among Assyrians much bitterness and a sense that they were betrayed by the Allies, especially by the British. In fact, however, the internal division contributed to the failure, and the promises about a free Assyria were not as unequivocal as many suggest. The claim that the British in 1917 promised independence for the Assyrians, its “smallest

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ally”, is not supported by contemporary documents concerning these events.

The Ottoman genocide during the First World War did not affect the Assyrians of the Empire to the same extent as the Armenians, who undoubtedly were the primary target of the genocidal policies; nonetheless, Assyrians also suffered immense losses as a result of massacres and deportations. After the war, the Assyro-Chaldean delegations to the Paris Peace Conference calculated that 250,000 Assyrians lost their lives in what is nowadays called *Seyfo*, the Syriac word for “sword”. Scholars have since shown that the delegations failed to count some victims and therefore the estimate of the total number of Assyrians killed has risen to about 300,000.<sup>2</sup> After the end of the war many Assyrians travelled to Paris in order to lobby the victorious powers at the Peace Conference for a free Assyria.

There are some popular notions, or maybe myths, among Assyrians about what happened in Paris. In this paper, I look at three claims in particular, and how they correspond with reality.

### ***Was there an Assyro-Chaldean delegation at the Peace Conference?***

It is a widely held belief that an Assyro-Chaldean delegation, led by Archbishop (later Patriarch) Aphrem Barsoum, was present at the Conference and lobbied the victorious powers at the Peace Conference on the subject of the compensation that should be paid to the Assyrian – or, as they put it, the Assyro-Chaldean – people for its losses.

This notion is not wrong, but neither is it correct. Firstly, there was not one, but several Assyrian or Assyro-Chaldean delegations at the Conference;<sup>3</sup> exactly how many is not easy to establish. The French historian Sébastien de Courtois, whose research focuses on church leaders,

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<sup>2</sup> David Gaunt, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim-Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia During World War I* (Piscataway, New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2006), 300-303.

<sup>3</sup> Even scholars who know the truth adjust their vocabulary to the established assumption. Donefuses the term “the Assyrian delegation” in the singular although he admits that it “was not a single cohesive entity”. (RachoDonef, “The Assyrian delegation at the Paris Peace Conference”, in *The Assyrian Genocide. Cultural and Political Legacies*, ed. Hannibal Travis (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 217.)

claims that there were three delegations: a Syriac Orthodox, led by Barsoum, a Syriac Catholic, led by Patriarch Ignace Ephrem II Rahmani, and finally an Assyro-Chaldean “lay delegation” of people from the diaspora who also turned up.<sup>4</sup>

This is a very strange statement. Barsom and Rahmani were, indeed, present at the conference, but did not head any “delegations”. What de Courtois calls a “lay delegation” were in fact four different delegations from the USA, Constantinople, Iran (Urmia) and the Caucasus respectively. Furthermore, while mentioning the “Syriac” clergymen at the Conference, de Courtois fails to note that the Patriarch of the Chaldean Church, Josef Emmanuel II Thomas, also spent some time at the Conference.<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, the Assyrian or Assyro-Chaldean delegates or delegations were not formally included in the Peace Conference as this right was assigned only to recognized states or political units which had been “received into the family of nations”, as the expression went. This was also the case with the two Armenian delegations present at the Conference.<sup>6</sup> The Assyrian delegates therefore promoted the Assyrian cause in informal meetings with representatives of the Great Powers.

### ***Did the different fractions among the Assyrians unite in Paris?***

In modern times Assyrians have been internally divided, with different fractions opposing each other vehemently at times. The lobbying at the Paris Peace Conference has been seen as one occasion where the people stood united.

This notion also lies somewhere between truth and falsity. Undoubtedly there were declarations of unity. The delegation from Constantinople represented the Assyro-Chaldean National Council, which

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted from the Swedish translation: Sébastien de Courtois, *Det glömda folk mordet: Österns kristna, de sista araméerna* (Södertälje: Syrisk Ortodoxa Kyrkans Ungdomsförbund, 2015), 256.

<sup>5</sup> It is in fact impossible to make a definitive list of Assyrians acting as representatives of their people, as numerous individuals visited Paris and London to promote the Assyrian cause during the Conference. Donef has given a list of 19 in total, but admits that there is some uncertainty concerning a few names. (Donef, “The Assyrian delegation”, 221-223)

<sup>6</sup> Richard Hovannisian, *The Republic of Armenia. Volume I. The First Year, 1918-1919* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 255-257.

had been formed in February 1919 after Syriac-Orthodox, Chaldeans and Syriac Catholics had united and “declared their basic political and national unity under the name ‘Assyro-Chaldeans’”. In practice, however, the Assyro-Chaldean National Council in Istanbul was a Catholic organization.<sup>7</sup>

The delegates tried to coordinate their work; however, there was soon serious division among them. They tried to speak with one voice, representing the whole Assyro-Chaldean people but, ultimately, geographical and denominational differences caused conflicts. One source of division concerned the name of the people. Most, but not all, of the delegates preferred the term “Assyro-Chaldean”. Another source of disagreement concerned which state should be Assyria’s mandatory power: the Nestorians, who had strong ties to the Church of England, preferred Britain, and the Chaldeans, France. Some of the delegations, especially those from Caucasia and Persia, focused exclusively on the interests of Assyrians in their own region, whereas others tried to take into consideration the people in its entirety.<sup>8</sup>

There was a will to work together and a rhetorical unity. In reality, however, there was serious division among the delegates.

### ***Did the Allies betray the Assyrians?***

The Assyrian delegates demanded a free Assyria under a mandatory power (Britain or France). Although encountering a lot of sympathy from the delegates of the Great Powers, ultimately nothing of what the Assyrians wanted was effected. Among Assyrians, therefore, there is a strong sense of bitterness, of having been betrayed. This feeling is especially directed against the British.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Claire WeibelYacoub, *Le Rêvebrisé des Assyro-Chaldéens. L'introuvable autonomie* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2011), 118-131.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Abraham K. Yoosuf, *Assyria and the Paris Peace Conference*, ed. Tomas Beth-Avdalla (Mölnal: Nineveh Press, 2017), 92-95.

<sup>9</sup> The prominent American-Assyrian, David B. Perley, wrote that “the British broke every promise they had made and abandoned the Assyrians to their sad fate.” (David B. Perley, *A Collection of Assyrian Writings*, ed. Tomas Beth-Avdalla (Mölnal: Nineveh Press, 2016), 537).

It is a fact that the Great Powers did not give the Assyrians what they wanted. This was mainly because the situation on the ground changed, and Britain and France had other plans for Iraq and Syria, but also because the Assyrians were not united in their claims and furthermore made claims that were unrealistic. They presented a map of the projected Assyria, insisting that there was an Assyrian majority in the population within this territory. The Allied delegates were skeptical about that, with good reason, and even Abraham K. Yoosuf, an Assyrian delegate from the USA, had to admit that “at present you cannot expect a majority after massacres, deportations and immigration”.<sup>10</sup>

The bitterness against Britain is based on the assumption that British officials made promises in 1917 to the Nestorian Assyrians in Urmia, Persia, that if they fought alongside the British they would be granted freedom, autonomy or independence, after the war. The Assyrians fought bravely, but were betrayed by the British.<sup>11</sup> The British, however, deny ever having given such promises. They urged the Assyrians to fight for the Allied cause and promised to help them, but never promised independence or anything like that. The person who supposedly made the promise was Captain George Gracey, who twice visited Urmia in late 1917 in order to convince the Assyrians there to join the British war effort. He was instrumental in creating the Syrian Central National Committee. The committee wrote a petition to the Allies in May 1918 in which it reminded the Allies of the promise to arm the Assyrian battalion; the petition did not, however, say anything about any promise of autonomy or independence.

Nor is there any mention of such a promise in any Assyrian document dating from 1918 or 1919. Indeed, the first time it comes to light is in 1920. Gracey himself denied ever having given any promise about autonomy or independence, emphasizing that he did not have the authority to make such pledges.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Yoosuf, *Assyria*, 118.

<sup>11</sup> So, e.g., Sargon O. Dadesho, *The Assyrian National Question at the United Nations (A Historical Injustice Redressed)* (Modesto, California: own publishing, 1987), 52-57.

<sup>12</sup> Florence Hellot-Bellier, *Chroniques de massacres annoncés: Les Assyro-Chaldéens d'Iran et du Hakkari face aux ambitions des empires (1896-1920)* (Paris: Geuthner, 2014), 496-506.

Nevertheless, among Assyrians it has become a well-established truth that the British promised a free Assyria but later betrayed the Assyrians, their “smallest ally”.

### **Conclusion**

Many truths nurtured by our collective memory stand on not-so-solid ground. We tend to look at our own history in a glorified light in which the elements we want to remember are emphasized and the ones we want to forget are played down or forgotten. Assyrians have for almost a century told stories of being victims of genocide, of uniting to demand justice after the First World War, and of ultimately being betrayed by the Allies, especially the British. These stories are not wrong, but the reality was – as often is the case – more complex than these claims would have it.

## **ԱՍՈՐԱԿԱՆ ԼՈՐԲԻՆ ՓԱՐԻՉԻ ՎԵՎՃԺՈՂՈՎՈՒՄ. ՄԻՖԵՐ ԵՎ ԻՐԱԿԱՆՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ**

### **Սվանտե Լունդգրեն (Ամփոփում)**

Հողվածում ուրվագծվում է Առաջին համաշխարհային պատերազմի ավարտին կայացած Փարիզի վեհաժողովի ընթացքում ասորական լորբիի գործունեությունը, մասնավորապես ներկայացվում են Առաջին համաշխարհային պատերազմի տարիներին 300 000 ասորիների կյանք խլած ցեղասպանության (Seyfo) վնասների փոխհատուցման պահանջները, որոնցից և ոչ մեկը չբավարարվեց: Ասորական լորբի անհաջողության հիմնական պատճառների շարքում մատնանշվում են ասորական տարբեր պատվիրակությունների միջև առկա անհամաձայնություններն ու տարակարծությունները, միասնականության բացակայությունը: Պահանջների մերժման համատեքստում քննության են առնվում ասորական համայնքների մոտ վեհաժողովի և դրա որոշումների շուրջ ձևավորված ընկալումները, ուսումնասիրվում է դրանցում իրականության և միֆի միահյուսումը: