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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

This file consists of a memorandum written by Edwin Samuel Montagu, the Secretary of State for India, describing the situation of Assyrian and Armenian refugees in Mesopotamia.

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SECRET.

The Assyrian and Armenian Refugees in Mesopotamia.

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.

E. S. M.

INDIA OFFICE,  
5th July 1920.

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