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## **REPATRIATION OF ARMENIAN REFUGEES FROM MESOPOTAMIA (IRAQ) IN THE 1920s**

**Key words:** Iraq, Mesopotamia, Van – Vaspourakan Refugees, Repatriation of the 1920s, British Mandate, Ba'quba and Nahr Omar Refugee Camp, Armenian Relief Committee.

### ***Introduction***

During WWI, tens of thousands of refugees from different parts of Western Armenia, Cilicia, tasting all kinds of deprivation, repeatedly massacred, finally set foot on the hospitable soil of Mesopotamia. Although they were received, sheltered and taken care of by the British authorities, however the desire to return to the homeland kept growing among these people, as the live picture of their homeland they had lost in the recent past, was still fresh and alive in their minds and memories. They kept on sending endless appeals to the relevant national Armenian and non-Armenian organizations in an effort to help them return to their Native Country. After long and strenuous negotiations between all parties concerned (National Delegation in Paris, AGBU, Armenian Deportation Committee in Mesopotamia, Armenian Immigration Committee headed by Levon Shaghoyian and the British Authorities) 8000–9000 migrants returned to their Homeland in three British ships, starting from October 1921 and afterwards in the mid-20s overland by buses to Armenia via Persia.

The present article sheds light on the most influential and striking stages of the repatriation process, that took place in the 1920s, the initiators and the contributing organizations. This repatriation process marked the beginning of the unique pages of the modern history of the Armenian people, which

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continued, with short and/or long intervals, with its dark and bright sides for the next six decades<sup>1</sup>.

#### ***Armenian Refugees at Ba'quba and Nahr Omar Refugee Camps***

Mesopotamia – present-day Iraq, is located on the edge of the desert, which was planned by the Ottoman authorities to be an exile or rather dumping ground and the grave of those unfortunate deportees from the southern villages of Van in Western Armenia and other parts of the Ottoman regions. Therefore, various retreating groups from those regions and Cilicia were directed to this part of the world which had already been conquered and taken over by the British forces.

In August 1918, around 18000 Armenian refugees together with their companions of misfortune namely 35000–40000 persecuted Assyrian refugees arrived at Ba'quba concentration camp, about 35 miles northeast of Baghdad, where they were met and sheltered by the British forces under 3000 tents and stayed there until 1920.

The camp was divided into three sections, A, B and C. The Armenians were settled in Section A, whereas the Assyrians occupied the rest of the Sections.

Statistics of the Armenian Refugees was prepared by The Armenian Relief Committee of Mesopotamia, Baghdad on 12 August, 1919, a summary of which is as follows:

Province	Villages	Men	Women	Boys	Girls
<b>Bitlis</b>	79	510	463	205	203
<b>Vaspourakan</b>	200	3449	3559	214	1940
<b>Aderbadagan</b>	43	690	760	795	504
<b>Total</b>	331	4684	4782	1214	2647
<b>Caucasian</b>		35			

Therefore, at the time of preparing the above statistics, there were 14109 refugees at the camp, while 105 refugees had left this place voluntarily and for different reasons. 1036 persons had died after arriving at their seemingly "*final destination*", because of the horrors they had encountered during five months of the *nightmarish journey* since leaving their Homeland<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Մելքոնյան 2005, 118:

<sup>2</sup> Լեւոն Շաղոյեանի արխիւ, Ներգաղթի թղթապանակ, ՀՅԴ Կեդրոնական արխիւ, Երեւան:

On the other hand, as per statistics prepared by the Armenian Refugee Committee at Baq'uba headed by Levon Shaghoyan, as of September 1918, the number of refugees who arrived at this place, was 18219 souls, of whom 15000 from Van, 719 from Salmas and 2500 from Urmiya and Sulduz in Persia<sup>3</sup>.

After settlement of the refugees in the camp, several attempts were made by all interested parties, including the British Authorities, to repatriate those who desired to return to Constantinople and Cilicia. At the end of 1919, the British authorities commented that this appeared practicable if shipping was available. However, the British Army Council regarded Cilicia as "*a doubtful possibility*" because "...there were obvious political disadvantages to this course vis a vis Islam..."<sup>4</sup>. At that particular time, Cilicia was under the control of France. Despite the latter's objections to this move, *which could lead to the formation of an artificial Armenian majority in this region, in the summer and fall of 1919 small caravans of refugees left Ba'quba for Aleppo, hoping to regain their hometown in Cilicia*<sup>5</sup>.

In this regard, it is noteworthy that the majority of the Armenian refugees at Ba'quba were hopeful to have the chance of settling down in Armenia. In July 1919, *after receiving a communique from the Armenian refugees Committee in Iraq, the Catholicosate of All Armenians at Echmiadzin urged the government of the newly-independent Republic of Armenia to hasten the repatriation of the refugees*<sup>6</sup>.

It was obvious that the national authorities in Armenia could not stay indifferent to the cruel ordeals their compatriots were going through in Mesopotamia and extended their efforts to help them overcome those difficulties. Thus, the government of the independent Armenia, opened 5 million rubles loan to help the Armenian refugees<sup>7</sup>. However, the main concern of the

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<sup>3</sup> Լևոն Շաղոյեանի արխիւ, Ներգաղթի թղթապանակ, ՀՅԴ Կեդրոնական արխիւ, Երեւան:

<sup>4</sup> Shemmassian 2021, 248:

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. However, the movement of limited number of refugees (590 refugees) came to an end as Turkish Kemalist forces reoccupied Cilicia in 1920–21 and forced the general Armenian population of that part of the world to seek permanent refuge in Syria and Lebanon. (Shemmassian, Ibid).

<sup>6</sup> Shemmassian 2021, 249.

<sup>7</sup> Հայաստանի Հանրապետութեան Պառլամենտի Նիստերի Արձանագրութիւններ 1918–1920 թթ., Երեւան, Հայաստանի Ազգային Արխիւ, 2010, 67-րդ նիստ, 20 Փետրուար

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Armenian authorities was to keep the retreated Armenian people with their armed forces from Vaspourakan and elsewhere, together in one place as long as possible and also try to liberate the remnants of these people – children and adults - from the Arab tribes, scattered in the deserts of Mesopotamia until their much awaited repatriation to the homeland<sup>8</sup>.

Among other initiatives, the government, sent Arsen Gidur to Baghdad to assist the refugees in this regard and to urge the British authorities to repatriate them to Yerevan<sup>9</sup>. But lack of necessary funds, and the British authorities' refusal to grant Gidur official recognition, the latter's mission was not successful although *a small number of refugees was dispatched from Ba'quba to Yerevan in the fall, 1920 under Shaghoyan's directorship*<sup>10</sup>.

As mentioned, the refugees stayed at this camp for two years until the uprising of the Arab liberals, known as the Iraqi Great Revolution against the British forces, which sparked from towns and cities of Mid-Euphrates Plains, and its tremors spread and covered all mid-Iraqi cities and villages. This prompted the British forces to transfer the Armenian refugees to a similar camp, established at Nahr Omar, situated along the Shatt El-Arab river, 50 km north of Basra, with an unhealthy climate, which reflected negatively upon the Armenian refugees, who had come from the Armenian Highlands and were not used to such unbearably hot and humid climate.

The Assyrian refugees were relocated in the northern city of Mosul and its surrounding villages.

This situation continued till June 1921, when the British Authorities cut off the rations provided to the refugees and ordered them, on a very short notice, to leave the camp and disperse in Mesopotamia-Iraq. This Memorandum was issued by the British Civil Administration of Mesopotamia dated 9<sup>th</sup> June, 1921 and signed by the Deputy Director of Repatriation. The order included the dismissal of the orphanage too<sup>11</sup>.

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1920, էջ 449: (Օրէնք թիւ 24 հաստատուած է Պառլամենտի փոխ-նախագահ Ա. Սահակեանի եւ աւագ քարտուղար՝ Յակոբ Տէր Յակոբեանի ստորագրութեամբ 1920 Փետրուար 21-ին):

<sup>8</sup> **Տէր Մինասեան** 1952, 171–173:

<sup>9</sup> **Shemmassian** 2021, 249.

<sup>10</sup> **Shemmassian** 2021, 250.

<sup>11</sup> Լեւոն Շաղոյեանի արխիւ, ՀՅԴ Կեդրոնական արխիւ, - Letter No. Q-1/914 dated 9<sup>th</sup> June 1921.

Upon receiving those orders, the leadership of the Armenian Refugee Committee of Mesopotamia had to find other safe countries, where those unfortunate people could, at least temporarily be placed. The reaction of the Armenians in Baghdad and Nahr Omar refugee camp was swift<sup>12</sup>. They promptly forwarded a telegram – followed by a detailed letter – to Boghos Nubar Pasha, the president of the United Armenian Delegation in Paris, to the effect that the High Commissioner of the British Authorities had informed Father Vahan Tajirian, Chairman of the Board of the Armenian Relief Committee, that the rations provided to the 12000 refugees at Nahr Omar, would be terminated. Furthermore, he (the High Commissioner) had already given clear and decisive orders to demolish the camp and have the emigrants disperse as per the following schedule:-

1- Beginning June, 1921 and for the following 15 days, 400 unmarried and skilled workers, whose names are at the disposal of the government, will be discharged from the camp.

2- 900 refugees with their families will be discharged from the camp after a period of forty-five days.

3- As for the orphans, widows and unskilled persons, those would be given three months' time, after which, they would also be left to their fate, completely deprived of the opportunity to live and endure the severe and negative living conditions in Mesopotamia<sup>13</sup>.

The Chairman of the Armenian Refugees Committee in Nahr Omar - Mr. Levon Shaghoyan also approached the president of the United Armenian Delegation in Paris, Boghos Nubar Pasha, informing the latter that as of 11<sup>th</sup> July, 1921, as per the orders of the High Commissioner 1400 refugees should leave the camp weekly. Mr. Shaghoyan reiterated the importance of keeping those refugees together, as their dismissal in strange surroundings like Mesopotamia (Iraq) would be disastrous and would have a negative effect on the fate of those people, who would undoubtedly face abuse and physical

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<sup>12</sup> Շաղոյեանի արխիւ, ՀՅԴ Կեդրոնական արխիւ, Ներգաղթի Թղթապանակ, Նամակ Շաղոյեանէն՝ ուղղուած Աւետիս Ահարոնեանին 19 Յուլիս 1921:

<sup>13</sup> ՀԱԱ, ֆ. 430, ց. 1, գ. 771, թ. 7-12 (անգլերէն), բնագիր-ձեռագիր: Նամակը ուղղուած է Ազգային Պատուիրակութեան նախագահ՝ Պօղոս Նուպար փաշային: Իրաքահայ համայնքը 1915-1990 թվականներին, ըստ արխիվային փաստաթղթերի, Հայաստանի Ազգային Արխիվ, Երևան, 2018, էջ 34:

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extermination. For its importance we append below a free translation of an excerpt of the said appeal "...The authorities are taking off their responsibility for those refugees, who were "lucky" enough to escape the genocide at the cost of the lives of thousands of their fellow countrymen and are now facing the horrors of starvation and depravity. He again pointed out the importance of keeping these people together until the happy and long-awaited immigration to the Homeland because, if these people left the camp, it would almost be impossible to gather them again for the purpose of repatriating to Armenia. As per the order of the British Authorities by August 15, 1921, only 5000 disabled, orphans and widows would stay in the camp, who would be taken care of by the local Armenian national organizations. 2000 men, with their families about 6000–7000 people, should leave and endure the humid climate, deprived of medical care and hospital facilities, who would soon face perversion and physical extermination"<sup>14</sup>. These people, together with their leadership decided to stick to the idea of their unity, which they thought the safest way to keep their identity until their return to the Homeland<sup>15</sup>.

Mr. Shaghoyian again appealed to Boghos Nubar Pasha on the 19<sup>th</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> July, 1921 and to all Armenian national organizations, asking for their assistance to arrange the repatriation of these destitute people to Armenia<sup>16</sup>.

A telegram was also wired by the Armenian Relief Committee in Baghdad, addressed to Boghos Nubar Pasha on June 27, 1921 confirming their previous telegram of June 11, 1921 about the fact that "... refugees specially orphans, invalids, widows in great despair unanimously and earnestly request transfer anywhere more convenient stop. If impossible, those fit might undertake temporary labour without being dispersed for rest continuation grant ration absolutely essential cable urgently".

Signed Kouyoumdjian<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> ՀԱԱ, Հայ Ազգային Պատուիրակություն, ֆ. 430, ց. 1, գ. 773:

<sup>15</sup> Իրաքահայ համայնքը 1915–1990 թվականներին ըստ արխիվային փաստաթղթերի, ՀԱԱ, Երևան, 2018, ֆ. 430, ց. 1, գ. 773, թ. 20–25, N 1258 19 Օգոստոսի 1921, Նաիր Էլ-Օմար, բնագիր, ձեռագիր, էջ 55–59:

<sup>16</sup> ՀԱԱ, ֆ. 430, ց. 1, գ. 1773, Նամակ No. 1194, 1206, 19 եւ 28 Յուլիս 1921 համապատասխանաբար:

<sup>17</sup> ՀԱԱ, ֆ. 430, ց. 1, գ. 1771, թ. 19:

Amongst the efforts made to execute the foregoing purpose, i.e. the repatriation of the refugees to be finalized, there was a letter by the Armenian Central Repatriation Committee, Baghdad, signed by Levon Shaghoyian, Vahan Tajirian and three others. The president and the secretary of the said Committee addressed all parties concerned. In this regard, it is noteworthy mentioning that Patriarch Zaven Der Yeghyaian also actively participated in the initiative of addressing several appeals to the Armenian notables with the same purpose. Amongst these notables was Gabriel Noradungian<sup>18</sup>, who also received a letter from Patriarch Der Yeghyaian, asking him to do his best to help those unfortunate people in paving the way to have them relocated to a safe haven, until their final repatriation to Armenia<sup>19</sup>.

It is worth mentioning that *"...the leadership of the Immigration Committee and its exceptionally strong endurance gave great results. The migrants kept their unity, fought along and stubborn fight and got out of trouble. The majority*

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<sup>18</sup> Gabriel Noradunkian was an Ottoman Armenian statesman and bureaucrat. He served as the Minister of Trade in 1908 and Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Ottoman Empire from July 1912 to January 23, 1913 during the reign of Mehmed V and the prime ministership of Ahmed Mukhtar Pasha and Kamil Pasha. Noradungian was born in Selamsuz neighborhood of the Uskudar district of Constantinople in 1852. His father was a local bread maker of the Imperial palace. His family originated from the village of Agn (today's Kemaliya) near Erzingan. He received his elementary education at home, attended St. Joseph's French High school in Kadikoy district. After graduating, he continued his education in law and political science at Sorbonne University in Paris. He furthered his studies in Political Science, returned to Constantinople and became professor of law, appointed as secretary at the Foreign Affairs, etc. Noradungian was an active member in the Armenian community and became the Chairman of the Armenian National Assembly in 1894. After the Young Turk revolution in 1908, he was appointed at the Ministry of Trade. He was elected as a member of the newly formed Senate of the Ottoman Empire. He became the Minister of Foreign Affairs from July 1912 to January 23, 1913. Noradungian moved to Europe in 1915 and headed the Armenian National Committee, representing the Armenians in Lausanne. His properties in Constantinople were confiscated. Noradungian was an ardent supporter of the establishment of an independent state in Anatolia. After the Treaty of Lausanne was signed, he moved to Paris where he headed various Armenian organizations. He became the vice-president of the Armenian General Benevolent Union. He died in Paris in 1936. Prior to his death he dictated his biography, but only fragments of it have survived. Noradungian knew Ottoman Turkish, Armenian, Italian, French and English. [www.en.m.wikipedia.org](http://www.en.m.wikipedia.org) visited on 07.06.2022.

<sup>19</sup> ՀԱՍ, §. 430, g. 1, q. 1774, p. 22:

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*arrived in Armenia by sea and overland by buses mainly due to Levon Shaghoyian's efforts*<sup>20</sup>.

The Vaspourakan Reconstruction Society, founded in October 1917 in the US city of Detroit, also provided its moral and financial assistance for the repatriation operations in the years 1921–1922<sup>21</sup>.

As for the actions taken by the British mandate authorities in this regard, on 21<sup>st</sup> August a telegram was received from the Secretary of State for India, London, by the Civil Commissioner asking if it was feasible that repatriation could take place in Autumn. The latter's answer was that by the end of March next year there would be some 16,000 Armenians under canvas<sup>22</sup> in the Refugee Camp at Ba'quba, all of whom came from the *vilayets* of Van and Bitlis, and it was agreed that it would be impossible to repatriate them by land owing to the hostility of the Kurdish tribes enroute (especially Simko and his tribe – S.O.) and to the impossibility of providing pack transport. It was therefore, strongly recommended that authority be given to send them by sea to Suez (Egypt), there to be dealt with on the same lines as other Armenian refugees with the assistance of various philanthropic societies. Furthermore, it was confirmed that the necessary British officers and other ranks, tentage and equipment would be provided by the British Authorities<sup>23</sup>.

However, this scheme never materialized as there was no shipping available for this purpose.

At this stage, it was not possible to repatriate any of the refugees from Van, Bitlis, Caucuses and Azerbaijan (Aderbadagan) by land. But in July 1919, it was found possible to repatriate some refugees to Aleppo and Adana at their own risk and that the Armenian Relief Committee would guarantee their onward passage from Baghdad and arrival at their destination, also a grant of 50 rupees would be allocated for each person<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> **Տէր Մինասեան** 1952, 171–173:

<sup>21</sup> Լեւոն Շաղոյեանի արխիւ, ՀՅԴ Կեդրոնական արխիւ, Երեւան, 2021, Վասպուրականի Վերաշինութեան Մարմինի թղթապանակ:

<sup>22</sup> In tents.

<sup>23</sup> Letter/Report by BT. Lieut.-Col. .A.T. Wilson, Acting Civil Commissioner in Mesopotamia No. 16176 dated 4<sup>th</sup> of December 1919, addressed to the Secretary of State for India, London, S. W. 1. P. 9. ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)). Տէս նաեւ Լ. Շաղոյեանի արխիւ – Ներգաղթի թղթապանակ:

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.



Consequently, 281 Armenian refugees were despatched from the camp to Aleppo and Adana in groups of 50 persons. Later on eight more Armenian refugees under the same conditions, were sent to Constantinople<sup>25</sup>.

As regards the majority of the refugees, who as mentioned above, came from Van and Bitlis *vilayets*, every effort was made to repatriate them by sea, but the War Office were hitherto unable to provide freight. At that time, the Persian government, for various reasons, was also unwilling to allow them to go via the Persian territory<sup>26</sup>.

After long and strenuous correspondence and negotiations between all parties concerned (namely – the Armenian Refugee Committee of Mesopotamia, the Iraqi Government, which was then the British Protectorate, the Armenian National Delegation in Paris, the Soviet Armenian authorities, the British central government and also many Armenian philanthropist societies and individuals) it was possible to repatriate the Armenian refugees partially in three ships to Armenia. The first ship was m.s. “**Dara**” which took 3000 persons and sailed off in October 1921 to Batumi, Georgia, from there they continued their trip to Armenia overland by buses.

The second ship was the m.s. “**Akbar**” which arrived in Basra port in December 1921 and sailed with 3000 persons on board from the inhabitants of Nahr Omar camp, heading to the same destination, i.e. Batumi in Georgia and afterwards to Armenia overland by buses.

The third steamer m.s. “**Shuja**” was reserved for the orphaned children (850 including their teachers, caretakers and the staff of the orphanage) to be transferred to Jerusalem. However, to fill up the ship and bring it to an even keel, 2000 refugees were taken on board for repatriation and sailed for Batumi, then overland to Armenia by buses<sup>27</sup>.

After repatriation of the 8000 refugees to Armenia and the children of the orphanage to Jerusalem, there still remained about 3000 persons in Nahr Omar

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 20.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 20.

<sup>27</sup> It is worth mentioning, that all expenses incurred for the transfer of the orphaned children to St. James’s monastery in Jerusalem were covered by the AGBU and the Near East Relief. Archbishop Torgom Gushagian, who was then the Primate of Armenian Apostolic Church-Community of Egypt, played an important role in implementing this transfer. ՏԵ՛Ս ՎԱՐՊԱՆԵԱՆ 1923 477–478:

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camp, waiting for their turn to leave the temporary dwellings in Mesopotamia and catch up with their fellow countrymen in Armenia, who were lucky enough to be on board of the ships that took them to the "Promised land". It was essential to make arrangements for them too.

In 1924 after the above mass repatriation, the following represented the demographic picture of the Armenians in Iraq including the "local"<sup>28</sup> Armenians<sup>29</sup>:-

<b>Local Armenians</b>	<b>persons</b>
Baghdad	706
Basra	242
Mosul	<u>173</u>
Total	1121
<b>Armenian Deportees</b>	
Baghdad city	600
Geylani Camp Baghdad	2200
Henaidi Camp Baghdad	300
Basra city	427
Nahr Omar Camp	2000
Mosul city	640
Zakho and surrounding villages	600
Sinjar	250
Scattered in different places	300
Total Armenian deportees	<b>7317</b>
Total "local" Armenians	<b>1121</b>
Total of all Armenians in Iraq in 1924	<b>8438</b>

In this regard, approaches were made to the British Authorities to allocate another vessel to take the remaining refugees to Armenia. However, they refused to do so, as they had, they argued, done more than enough and that

<sup>28</sup> "Local" Armenians are the descendants of the population that Shah Abbas in 1604 transferred from Arax and Ararat valleys, including the inhabitants of the thriving Armenian city of Julfa, where Armenian merchants had commercial connections with European and Far East merchants. Some of these people later moved on to Iraq and formed a very wealthy trade community competing with the financially and politically influential Jewish merchants, who had been in Iraq for centuries. (Seda **Ohanian** 2013, 90–105).

<sup>29</sup> ՀԱՍ, ֆ. 409, ց. 1, գ. 4377: Տե՛ս նաեւ՝ **Օհանյան** 2016, 75:

because of the huge expenses encountered during the WWI, the central government (London) would not be able to incur additional funds.

Upon receiving the reaction of the British government, the Armenian Refugees Committee at Nahr Omar went to action and immediately addressed a letter to the Armenian Church Council in Calcutta, India, giving details of the prevailing conditions of the camp and the grim future which awaited the remaining almost 3000 refugees if their application for supporting the repatriation process for those people was refused. By then, the government had already closed down the hospital, dismantled the tents, provided by them to shelter the refugees since August 1918, leaving them under the blazing and scorching summer sun of Mesopotamia – Iraq and left the camp. All the utilities, used by the inhabitants of Ba'quba and later on Nahr Omar camps for the last 3–4 years had been taken away<sup>30</sup>.

An additional appeal was written by the Chairman of the Armenian Refugees Committee Leon (Levon) Shaghoyian addressed *"To our Most Honourable Compatriots of India"*, giving full history of the refugees life in the camp and the situation there after taking down the tents and the rest of the facilities *"...it is obvious to everyone the present embittered, perilous, hard, uncertain, and hopeless conditions of the Armenians"*. The appeal went on explaining as to *"how the National High Authorities (The Soviet Armenia Authorities) involved in their higher and more immediate duties, were too busy to be able to respond in the least measure to our cries, and that there was no one to heed the pitiful condition of these orphans and widows"*. To save these people morally and physically, until the time of their repatriation, immediate help was urgent, in order to keep the hungry alive, the school open, medical and medicinal requirements supplied and the policemen (who were appointed by the government from the refugees) paid and so on<sup>31</sup>.

To accomplish this mission, Archimandrite Hovhannes Hewsian, a refugee clergyman himself, who was the abbot of the monastery in Lim island in Lake Van before the last retreat of the Armenians of Van-Vaspourakan, was sent to

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<sup>30</sup> Նամակ No. 1724 06.07.1922, Լեւոն Շաղոյեանի արխիւ, Ներգաղթի թղթապանակ, ՀՅԴ Կեդրոնական Կոմիտէի արխիւ, Երեւան:

<sup>31</sup> Appeal to the Indian Armenian Community, dated May 4, 1923, attested by Der Ghokas Ghazarian and the rest of Basra Senate on May 10, 1923. Տե՛ս Լեւոն Շաղոյեանի արխիւ, Ներգաղթի թղթապանակ, ՀՅԴ Կեդրոնական Կոմիտէի արխիւ, Երեւան:

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India and the surrounding countries, wherever there was a well-off and patriotic Armenian community, to raise the necessary funds. In the meantime, every effort was made to achieve success in finding ways and means for the transfer of 1000–1500 widows, orphans and helpless refugees overland via Persia to the borders of Armenia.

As mentioned above, Iraq was under the mandate of Great Britain, therefore, a letter of recommendation<sup>32</sup> was needed to be supplied to Father Hewsian from H.E. the High Commissioner in Baghdad, addressed to the heads of various local governments in India, to the effect that *“the bearer Monsieur Ter Ovaness Archdeacon of the Armenian Community of Basra is proceeding on a visit to India in order to endeavour obtain funds from the Armenian Community and elsewhere for the sustenance of their co-religionists in this country”*<sup>33</sup>.

*His mission has the support of this High Commission”*<sup>34</sup>.

In this regard, the Patriarch Yeghishe Durian of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem sent his blessings to Archimandrite Hovhannes Hewsian by his letter No. 1310/16 July 28, 1923, who was already in Calcutta, where a sum of 2000 rupees was raised by the church<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> This letter of recommendation was supplied to Hovhannes Hewsian at the request of Levon Shaghoyian through Archbishop Ayvadian who was the primate of the Armenians in Mesopotamia. (Letter No. 1774 of 21.4.1923 written from Basra addressed to the latter in Baghdad).

<sup>33</sup> A similar letter of recommendation dated January 4, 1920, reference Number 303-119/47 was supplied to a previous mission headed by Mardiros Kouyoumdjian, Chairman of the Armenian Relief Committee in Mesopotamia, assisted by Yervand Dervishian, the Belgian consul at Basra. This mission had the full support and approval of the Acting Civil Commissioner in Mesopotamia, namely Bt. Lt. A. T. Wilson in order to endeavor to obtain funds from Armenian Communities in India and elsewhere for the maintenance of the Armenian Orphanages and other philanthropic institutions connected with the Refugee Armenians at Baghdad. (Լեւոն Շաղոյեանի արխիւ):

<sup>34</sup> The letter of Recommendation bears No.6038/30.00 dated May 4, 1923 Baghdad, addressed to the Secretaries of each of the Governments of Bombay, Madras, Bengal/Calcutta and the Secretary of the Government of Burma. Also to the Commissioner of Police in Bombay, Madras, Calcutta and Burma. Տե՛ս Լ. Շաղոյեանի արխիւ, Նոյն թղթապանակ:

<sup>35</sup> A letter dated August 16, 1923 from the church wardens addressed to The Very Rev. Archimandrite Hovhannes Hewsian. Լեւոն Շաղոյեանի արխիւ, Ներգաղթի թղթապանակ, ՀՅԴ Կեդրոնական Կոմիտեի արխիւ, Երեւան:

Upon the Archimandrite's visit to Rangoon, a sum of Rs. 1000 was subscribed by the Armenian church there, which was approved by the board of trustees, hoping that the Armenian community of Rangoon would also contribute their share to expand the funds of the Armenian Refugee Committee<sup>36</sup>.

The mission was successfully accomplished and the delegation returned to Iraq with 40000–45000 rupees, which was utilized to meet the abovementioned needs of the refugees and later on repatriation purposes<sup>37</sup>.

In addition to the abovementioned, the Chairman of the Armenian Refugees Committee at Nahr Omar, Mr. Levon Shaghoyan appealed to the American Consul in Baghdad in 1922, explaining the catastrophic situation of the refugees and *"explaining to the American people and government through his kind person, so that ways and means be derived and to also repatriate these unfortunates to Batumi over sea or to Yerevan overland via Persia.*

*We hereby believe that this appeal in the name of Christianity and Humanity being presented to your benevolent government and to your goodselves shall receive a favorable and immediate consideration"*<sup>38</sup>.

The letter also went on giving further details of the real life of the refugees after closing down the hospital of the camp and that *"...there were 145 sick people who were sent down to Basra civil hospital by means of ballams"*<sup>39</sup> and *that the number of the patients were increasing day by day on account of the heat and without any medical assistance in the camp for treatment of emergency cases"*<sup>40</sup>.

In relation to this subject on July 8, 1922, a telegram was sent to Mr. L. Sarkissian, Mission Diplomatic Armenian in Tehran to the effect that Nahr Omar refugee camp was almost demolished, tents were taken away, leaving 2700 refugees under the blazing sun. The author of this telegram Mr. L. Shaghoyan reiterated the importance of these people's repatriation via Tabriz and

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<sup>36</sup> Letter dated September 29, 1923 addressed to Father Hewsian. Տե՛ս Լ. Շաղոյեանի արխիւ:

<sup>37</sup> Լեւոն Շաղոյեանի արխիւ, Ներգաղթի թղթապանակ, ՀՅԴ Կեդրոնական Կոմիտէի արխիւ, Երեւան:

<sup>38</sup> Լեւոն Շաղոյեանի արխիւ, Ներգաղթի թղթապանակ, ՀՅԴ Կեդրոնական Կոմիտէի արխիւ, Երեւան, No. 1731, 08.07.1922, Նաիր Օմար:

<sup>39</sup> Small boat.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

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requested the permission of both the Armenian Diplomatic Mission and the Persian government.

Finally, on September 7, 1922 the authorized representative of the Soviet Armenia in Tehran confirmed the approval of the Soviet Authorities for the refugees to enter Armenia through Persia overland by buses in groups of 300 people, at 2–3 days intervals and with rations for a short period. A page taken from the Repatriation Register, representing the names and full information of the first group of refugees, who repatriated to Armenia by buses through Persia, is pictured below<sup>41</sup>:

As per Shaghoyan's archival register, 261 persons in groups A, B and C repatriated overland to Armenia, of whom 192 persons were adults (Over 12 years), 16 people aged 3–12 years and 53 children under 3 years<sup>42</sup>.

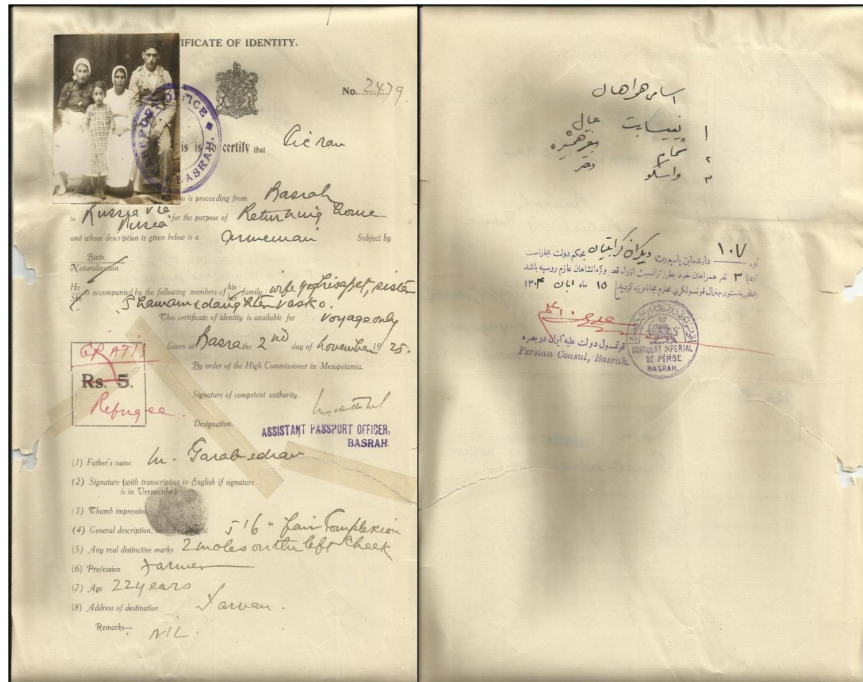
During the following years, until 1929, another 1000 refugees were transferred overland to Armenia through Persia, by special arrangement with the authorities of Soviet Armenia.

A Certificate of Identity was given to each family against a sum of five rupees, which was fully paid by the parties concerned. It is worth mentioning that on the first page of this Certificate, it is clearly stated that the said family is

<sup>41</sup> Լեւոն Շաղոյեանի արխիւ:

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

**returning Home** from Basrah. A photocopy of such a certificate is pictured hereunder:



### Conclusion

It is obvious from the foregoing that every effort was made by the Armenian Refugee Committee at Nahr Omar, whose members were elected by the refugees themselves, together with the Armenian Refugees' Committee in Mesopotamia were doing their utmost to have the approval of all interested sides, as well as secure the necessary funds to finalize and execute the repatriation process of the refugees to their Homeland. In addition to the local Iraqi-Armenian philanthropists, such as the most respected Honorary Consul of Belgium and well-known businessman Simon Gharibian, two delegations were sent to India in an effort to secure the necessary funds from the Indian Armenian diaspora and non-Armenian benefactors. Both delegations – headed by Mardiross Kouyumjian and Archimandrite Hovhannes Hewsian respectively returned to Iraq with fruitful results, which helped the refugees overcome the difficulties they were facing after the demolition of the camp at Nahr Omar.

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With the help of all the above parties, about 9000 Armenians repatriated to the Homeland in 1920s.

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ՕՀԱՆԵԱՆ Ս.

Ամփոփում

**Բանալի բառեր՝** Իրաք, Միջազգային, Վան – Վասպուրական, փախստականներ, հայրենադարձություն, Բաքուբայի եւ Նաիր Օմարի գաղթակայաններ, Հայ Տարագրելոց եւ Հայ Փախստականներու յանձնախումբեր:



Առաջին Համաշխարհային պատերազմին հազարաւոր հայ տարագիրներ Արեւմտեան Հայաստանի եւ Կիլիկիոյ տարբեր շրջաններէն ապաստան գտան Միջագետքի հիւրընկալ երկիրքին ներքոյ՝ փրկուելով ստոյգ բնաջնջումէ: Այսուհանդերձ, մեծ էր հայրենիք վերադառնալու ձգտումը: Այս առնչութեամբ բազմաթիւ դիմումներ պատկան մարմիններուն յղելէ ետք եւ երկար ու դժուար բանակցութիւններու իբր արդիւնք՝ 8000 գաղթականներ երեք շոգենաւերով կը ներգաղթեն Հայաստան:

Յատկապէս մասնաւոր ուշադրութեան արժանի են 1920-ական թուականներուն տեղի ունեցած առաջին զանգուածային հայրենադարձութեան գործընթացին տարբեր փուլերը եւ զայն իրականացնող կազմակերպութիւններու եւ անհատ բարեգործներու գործունեութիւնը:

## РЕПАТРИАЦИЯ АРМЯН ИЗ МЕСОПОТАМИИ (ИРАКА) В 1920-Х ГОДАХ

ОГАНЯН С.

### Резюме

**Ключевые слова:** Ирак, Месопотамия, Ван-Васпуракан, беженцы, репатриация, беженцы из Бакубы и Нахр Омара, комитеты депортированных армян и армянских беженцев.

Во время Первой мировой войны тысячи армян, депортированных из разных уголков Западной Армении и Киликии, нашли пристанище в Месопотамии, однако их не покидало желание вернуться на родину. В результате многочисленных обращений в соответствующие органы и длительных и трудных переговоров 8000 мигрантов получили возможность переехать в Армению.

Настоящая статья посвящена рассмотрению этапов первой массовой репатриации в 1920-е годы. В ней также освещается деятельность организаций и отдельных благотворителей, содействовавших реализации репатриации армян.