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ARMENIAN RELIEF CORPS IN IRAQ (1927/1930–1958)

“With my people, for my people”

Key words: Mesopotamia, Iraq, Armenian Genocide, Survivors, Levon Shaghoyan, Armenian Relief Corps, Annual General Conventions.

In August 1918, during and after the Armenian Genocide, more than 20.000 refugees from Western Armenia and Cilicia kept pouring into Mesopotamia – today’s Iraq, with no means of living whatsoever. Armenian national organizations, local or other, as well as individual benefactors, provided moral and financial support to the refugees, assisted them to recover from their unspeakable wounds, sheltered and housed them in this hospitable country.

The present article seeks to acquaint the readers with various phases of one of the most active philanthropic and educational organizations, namely – *The Armenian Relief Corps in Iraq* or better known as *Iraqi Hye Karotelotz Khnamakalutyun*¹ whose role was crucial in assisting not only the neediest of the mentioned refugees, but tacitly expanding their social and educational services to the Iraqi Armenians throughout the first half of the 20th century.

Formation and Activities of the Iraqi Armenian Relief Corps

In the Armenian reality there have been several phases of despair and endless disillusionings, but bright and hopeful aspects were not rare either. The organization of the Iraqi Armenian Relief Corps [IARC]² has been one of those hopeful and resplendent aspects in Iraqi Armenian history from the start of the

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¹ Իրաքի Հայ Կարօնելոց Խնամակալություն:

² Henceforth IARC.

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20th century until its suspension by the Iraqi Authorities in 1958³. Therefore, it is not accidental that this organization is characterized by the *Encyclopedia of the Armenian Diaspora*, published in Yerevan, in 2003, as “the most diligent one in the community”.⁴

When in 1918 the Armenian refugees arrived at Baquba refugee camp, the Central Administration of the Armenian Red Cross⁵ in The United States of America was in constant touch with the president of the Armenian Refugee Committee in Mesopotamia, Levon Shaghoyan and provided the displaced refugees with financial and moral assistance. This process continued until 1927 when the first chapter of “*Hye Gtutyun Khach*”⁶ (*Cross of Armenian Charity*) was founded in Baghdad⁷.

In 1930, this organization was officially recognized by the Iraqi Ministry of Internal Affairs as a legal entity under the name *Iraqi Hye Karotelotz Khnamakalutyun – The Iraqi Armenian Relief Corps*⁸.

After the official recognition and registration, the first board of directors was formed in Baghdad⁹ and as per the organization’s Rules and Regulations (Programme Code), branches were established in other parts of the country. Hence, such chapters were formed successively in Haditha, Mosul, Geylani Camp, and Kirkuk.

³ In 1958, after the military coup by the Iraqi army, the care of all the needy in the country was transferred to the local “Red Crescent” and the licences issued on behalf of private organizations were revoked, including that of the Iraqi Armenian Relief Corps.

⁴ Սարգսյան 2003, 272:

⁵ Later the name was changed into Armenian Relief Society.

⁶ Հայ Գթութեան Խաչ:

⁷ The Central Administration of the Armenian Red Cross in America contributed generously to the establishment of Havrezq village in 1929 by allocating 3000 \$ followed by an additional amount of 2000 \$ to cover the innumerable needs of the people who settled down there. (Levon Shagoyan’s archive, Havrezq folder, letter dated 17 November, 1929, written by Levon Shaghoyan from Nahr Omar addressed to the Armenian Red Cross in America. – ARF Bureau, Yerevan, 2019.

⁸ Իրաքի Հայ Կարօտելոց Խնամակալութիւն 1976, 201:

⁹ The members of the first Board of Directors were Margarit Minasian, Arusyak Nersesian, Margarit Palian in addition to Dr. Hakob Chobanian and Dr. Emurze’ Qetenjian, also Captain Shmavon Danielian and Mr. Hovhannes Hovhannesian.

The IARC's first annual General Convention was held in Baghdad, in 1934¹⁰. Delegates, who participated in this convention, represented the 235 members of the above chapters. During this convention the first Central Committee was elected, consisting of the following members: Lusya Yesayan, Siranush Grigorian, Tiran Gantarjian, Aram Duzian, Harutyun Sultanian, Sargis Grigorian and Mesrop Hovhannesian.

Soon afterwards chapters were established in Basra, Margil (suburb of Basra), Slekh (suburb of Baghdad), Khanaqin, Suleymania, Havrezq, Zakho¹¹ and H-1¹². In other words, wherever Armenians settled down in their "*New Home*" and formed a community, members of this organization were there to assist the needy families, in particular the newly arrived refugees. By 1945, members of this organization throughout Iraq numbered more than 700 of both sexes¹³.

One of the main goals of the IARC was to keep the refugees from begging on the streets. In this regard strict and urgent steps were taken to overcome this practice by taking care of the financial needs of the neediest families. Special attention was given to the undernourished children. Consequently, in a short while, the phenomenon of Armenian beggars diminished from the Iraqi streets¹⁴.

As mentioned above, during and after the Genocide, thousands of Armenian refugees had arrived in Mesopotamia, who were in need of medical and moral support. Most of them were suffering from various kinds of diseases, particularly malaria, dysentery, tuberculosis and trachoma, which they had attracted during their five-month long and nightmarish journey from their homeland in Vaspourakan (Van) and other parts of Western Armenia and Cilicia through

¹⁰ The IARC held 17 Annual General Conventions, the last was held in August, 1956.

¹¹ Havrezq and Zakho chapters were established in 1948 as per the Central Committee of IARC's letters Nos. 143 and 157 dated November 5, 1948 and December 27, 1948 respectively addressed to Levon Shaghoyan. See Levon Shaghoyan's archive, Havrezq Folder, ARF Central Committee, Yerevan, 2019. For its importance we attach photo copies of these handwritten letters to the present article to emphasize the role of the IARC as well as Shaghoyan's decisive part in every aspect of the Iraqi community's life during the first half of the 20th century.

¹² H-1 was a pumping station on Mosul-Haifa oil pipeline. This station was established by the British Air Force as a landing ground as "RAF H-1" in the 1930s. H-1 was one of several airfields established as part of the British Mandate of Iraq.

¹³ Ամբողջ տեղեկատվություն մը Իրաքի Հայ Կարօտելոց Խնամակալութեան 15-ամեակի առթիւ 1945, 15-18:

¹⁴ Իրաքի Հայ Օգնութեան Միութիւն – Նախապէս՝ «Հայ Կարօտելոց Խնամակալութիւն» Հիմնադր. 1927-ին, 2010, 75-77:

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Persia until arrival in their final destination in Iraq. Urgent and decisive steps were taken to take care of the sick of all ages. Therefore, a dispensary/clinic was opened on the IARC's initiative, in Geylani quarter in Baghdad. The aim was to take care and treat the more helpless and neediest of the refugees, in particular the malnourished children. Devoted doctors were attending the clinic and rendering their services to their unfortunate compatriots.

To give an idea of this clinic's activities, it is worth mentioning that from April 1936 up to March 1937, 3502 medical examinations were carried out with 7876 prescriptions supplied to the sick visitors. In addition, 2142 patients suffering from trachoma were cured by Armenian oculists. Needless to say that all the doctors and the rest of the medical team were working as volunteers. *The clinic was open to all*¹⁵.

Some of the selfless and devoted doctors, who treated the patients were: Drs. Hakob Chobanian, H. Raiyeesian, N. Ruben, N. Papikian. E. Ketenjian, Keshishian, Levon Rshtouni and Karnik Hovhannesian. In appreciation of their selfless service, those doctors were granted honorary membership of the Armenian Relief Corps in Iraq during one of the latter's Annual General Conventions¹⁶.

Unfortunately, due to reasons beyond the organization's control, the clinic building was demolished by the owner for personal reasons. However, this practice of offering free medical treatment, as well as free medication continued by the doctors in their own clinics, not only to patients from Baghdad, but to all Armenians coming from various parts of Iraq¹⁷.

In addition, the organization was in constant touch with the Armenian clinic-sanatorium in Azuniya – Lebanon by taking care of the travel expenses and entry visa fees of the patients, who were transferred there to recover from their illness. These patients were suffering mainly from tuberculosis, which caused the death of many people¹⁸.

¹⁵ Հայ Օգնության Միության Հարիւրամեայ Յուշամատեն 1910–2010, 2010, 76:

¹⁶ Ամփոփ տեղեկատուութիւն մը Իրաքի Հայ Կարօտելոց Խնամակալութեան 15-ամեակի առթիւ 1945, 17:

¹⁷ Ամփոփ տեղեկատուութիւն մը Իրաքի Հայ Կարօտելոց Խնամակալութեան 15-ամեակի առթիւ 1945, 17:

¹⁸ Ամփոփ տեղեկատուութիւն մը Իրաքի Հայ Կարօտելոց Խնամակալութեան 15-ամեակի առթիւ 1945, 17:

The administration and services of the IARC's multi-faceted program are much more and worthy of publicity. In addition to the welfare work, education was also one of its targeted goals. In all national schools of Iraq, the IARC aided students who couldn't afford paying the tuition fees. As a matter of fact, during the years of its vibrant existence in Iraq (1927–1958) all the chapters did not spare any means to satisfy the multiple needs of those around them. They were assigned the noble task of healing the wounds of the Armenian Genocide survivors¹⁹, to help the helpless, supply food for their preservation, clothes to cover their bodies and most important of all, education for their minds and encouragement for their shattered spirits²⁰. Members of this organization made it their top priority to look after the welfare of the widowed and the orphaned and to achieve those goals. They worked hard to raise funds needed for the self-perpetuation efforts, being put forth by this ancient race²¹.

To give a better idea of the organization's beneficial activities, we provide the following excerpt from the organization's bulletin issued during the 12th Annual General Convention held in Baghdad February, 1949:

“....During the Convention, 36 authorized and 9 advisory deputies who had come from various parts of Iraq, were present. Judging from the reports given by these deputies about their activities in each chapter, it was apparent that during 1948, an amount of 3067 Iraqi dinars²² was allocated to cover various needs of the community. The IARC helped the schools and the needy students with 918 Iraqi Dinars, for school construction 744 dinars, medication and travel expenses for patients travelling to Lebanon for treatment 530 dinars. It contributed with 100 dinars to the construction of the National school in Baghdad and 300 dinars as a loan for the same purpose, in addition to 267 dinars to the Armenian clinic”²³.

Appeals were made to all the chapters from the Armenians, residing in Iraq for assistance in various fields such as loans or gifts for the elderly homeless and

¹⁹ In 1932 Iraq declared its independence and became a full member in the League of Nations. Consequently, Iraqi citizenship was granted to all those who were living in this country, including the Armenian refugees.

²⁰ **Rustigian** 1951, 54–55.

²¹ Իրաքի Հայ Կարօտելոց Խնամակալութեան ԺԵ Պատգամատրական Ժողովի ատենադրութիւն, 1952: «Գոյամարտ», Դ. Տարի, Թիւ 33, էջ 3, առաջին սիւնակ:

²² For the readers' information, at that time, one Iraqi dinar equaled 3.70 US dollars.

²³ Գոյամարտ, 10 Մարտ, 1949, 1:

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people, seeking medical assistance. According to the summary of the organizations, 15th Annual General Convention, held on 6 June, 1952, substantial amounts were allocated to various chapters in Iraq to meet the needs of education and other philanthropic activities. For example, an amount of 540 Iraqi dinars was allocated for Armenian national schools, 425 dinars as tuition fees for the needy students, 680 dinars to participate in school construction works, 110 dinars financial assistance to the poor. Finally, an amount of 250 dinars was allocated to young girls who were interested in taking sewing and dress designing courses²⁴.

The above-mentioned figures attest the extent of this organization's devotion to their nation through the fruitful activities they exercised in every public and social field they set foot. In addition to rendering financial aid to the helpless people, they also played a dominant role in the preservation of national values, moral ethics and didactic activities which is undeniable and incontestable²⁵. In this regard, it is important to point out that the lecture series organized by IARC and delivered by experts from various fields and other educational activities did not only create a joyful and truly national atmosphere, but also helped raise the morale of the people²⁶.

In the late spring of 1954 floods had run over many cities and villages of Iraq. The IARC naturally could not sit still without helping their fellow Iraqis by providing significant assistance to all the victims indiscriminately. In Basra, for example, a cultural event was organized on June 10, 1954 by the IARC together with the Armenian Young Men Association, and the entire income of 100.378 Iraqi dinars was handed over to the governor of Basra²⁷.

The activities and the dedication of the IARC were not confined to its compatriots inside Iraq; rather spread out of the borders wherever these were needed. As a result of the catastrophic events of 1948, thousands of Palestinians were left homeless and in dire need of food, blankets and clothing. The IARC, despite its private calling, did not hesitate to extend a hand and help the suffering

²⁴ Իրաքի Հայ Կարօտելոց Խնամակալութեան ԺԵ Պատգամաւորական Ժողովի ատենադրութիւն, 2019:

²⁵ This was reflected in the activities of the Junior chapters of the IARC (Պարմանոսիկներու խումբեր), where the girls were educated and trained to become good mothers in future with national moral ethics.

²⁶ Դասախօսութիւն՝ Բժիշկ Է. Քերենճեանի կողմէն, Իրաքի Հայ Կարօտելոց Խնամակալութեան օրուայ առթիւ, Գոյամարտ, 1952, թիւ 17:

²⁷ Գոյամարտ, 1953, թիւ 41:

Palestinians as far as possible by raising funds to alleviate their suffering. For example, in 1949 the Habbaniya chapter, succeeded in giving a performance for this purpose, while in Khanaqin having only 42 members, it was possible to raise an amount of 157.670 Iraqi dinars which was handed over to the government. In return, the IARC chapter of Khanaqin received a letter of thanks and appreciation from the authorities concerned.

Over time, the number of the members of IARC multiplied and owing to their dedication and heartfelt activities, gained the trust of the people. In 1952, during the 15th Annual General Convention held in Baghdad, it was confirmed that there were 960 members throughout the whole country. It is interesting to note that if we take into consideration that the Armenians living in Iraq at that time counted nearly 14000, then it is obvious that 7 percent of the community were members in this most active organization, which by now, had branches spread all over Iraq, rendering it's services to all the needy and helpless people.

In September 1954, all the organizations and societies in Iraq were dissolved by the government's order. The IARC was not an exception. However, the latter applied to the Ministry of Home Affairs, asking for the re-establishment of the organization. After making some trivial changes in its Code, the necessary permission was granted at the beginning of 1955. According to this reformed Code, the IARC was accountable to the said ministry by presenting its financial as well as its regular activities.

In 1957, chapters of the Iraqi Armenian Corps were functioning in 13 cities/villages, namely Baghdad (city), Geylani Camp, Slekh, Kirkuk, Mosul, Khanaqin, Zakho, Havrezq, Habbainya, Hadithe', Basra (city), Margil and Fao. By this time the members numbered more than 1000, mostly women.

In 1958, after the military coup by the Iraqi army, the care of all the needy in the country was transferred to the local "Red Crescent" and the licenses issued on behalf of others were revoked, including that of the Iraqi Armenian Relief Corps. Despite this, the licence given to the Basra chapter was kept intact and this branch continued functioning until the recent unfortunate events in Iraq that made it impossible to continue.

At present, the activities of the IARC have come to a full stand still because of the unstable and insecure conditions, prevailing in Iraq.

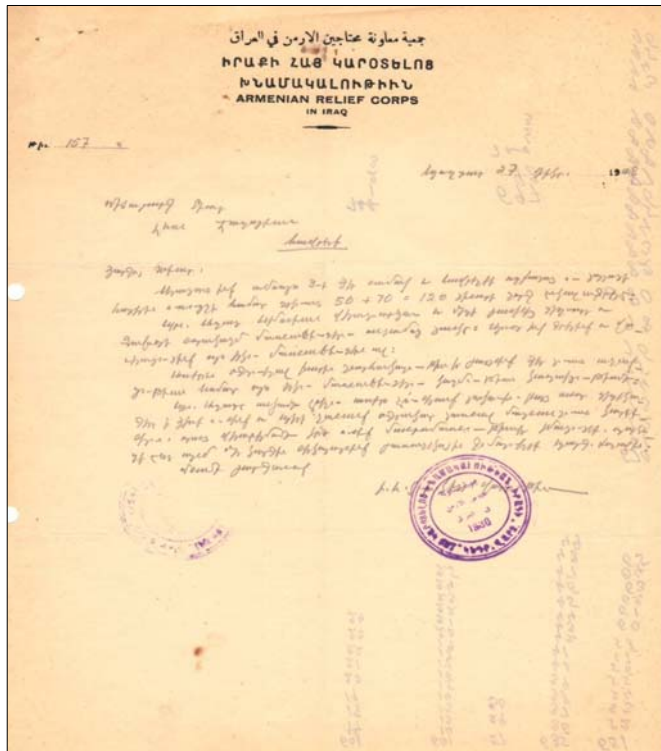
As a conclusion, judging from the foregoing, it is obvious that the IARC was the center of all social and relief activities inside Iraq during the first half of the

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20th century. It maintained clinics, dispensaries as well as open-air camps and sanatorium. To achieve these goals, each year this organization called for raising of a stipulated annual sum to be sent to the Central Committee in order to make up the Annual Budget, which was assigned by the preceding Annual General Convention. From this Annual Budget the allotments were made to the various chapters in Iraq for the maintenance of their local projects. The financial aid received from various Armenian organizations, such as the regular annual sum of 500 dollars from the Central Committee of the Armenian Red Cross (later renamed the Armenian Relief Society), the donations from The Rehabilitation Society of Vaspourakan (established in USA, in 1917 but merged with the Vaspourakan Society in 1930), as well as Vaspourakan Society and of course, contributions from the well-off Iraqi members of the community plus the humble membership fees, were invaluable and undeniable.

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Գոյամարտ, շաբաթաթերթ, Պաղտատ, Բ տարի, 1949, 10 մարտ, Դ տարի, 1951, թիւ 17, 23, 2 տարի, թիւ 41:
Հայ Սփիւռք Հանրագիտարան 2003, Երեւան, Հայկական հանրագիտարան հրատ., 730 էջ:
Հայ Օգնութեան Միութեան Հարիւրամեայ Յուշամատեն 1910–2010, 2010, Պոսթոն, Համազգային Վահէ Սէթեան Հրատարակչութիւն, 295 էջ:
Հայ Երկսեռ Երիտասարդաց Միութեան 50-ամեայ Յուշամատեն, 1926-1976, 1976, Պէյրութ, Համազգային Վահէ Սէթեան Հրատարակչութիւն, 238 էջ:
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Levon Shaghoyan's archive, Havrezq folder, ARF Bureau, Yerevan, 2019.
Rustigian Stella, Presenting the ARS, ARS periodical, Vol. XII, , Boston, April 1951.



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**The Central Committee
of the Iraqi Armenian
Relief Corps, 1936,
Baghdad.**



**Members and Young Women of the Iraqi Armenian Relief Corps of Margil chapter
during one of the visits of the national hero Levon (pasha) Shaghoyan to Basra, 1952.
(Levon Shaghoyan first row 7th from left).**

ԻՐԱՔԻ ՀԱՅ ԿԱՐՕՏԵԼՈՑ ԽՆԱՄԱԿԱԼՈՒԹԻՒՆ (1927/1930–1958)

ՕՀԱՆԻԱՆ Ս.

Ամփոփում

Քանալի բառեր՝ Միջագետք, Իրաք, Հայոց Ցեղասպանություն, վերապրողներ, Լեւոն Շաղոյեան, Իրաքի Հայ Կարօտելոց Խնամակալություն, Տարեկան Պատգամատրական Ժողով:

Հայոց Ցեղասպանության տարիներուն աւելի քան 20000 հայ փախստականներ Արեւմտեան Հայաստանէն եւ Կիլիկիայէն հանգրուան գտան Իրաքի հիւրընկալ հովանիի ներքոյ, չունենալով ապրուստի ոչ մի միջոց: Օտար եւ հայկական ազգային կազմակերպութիւններ, ինչպէս նաեւ անհատ բարեգործներ ոչ մի ջանք խնայեցին տարագիրներուն օգնութեան ձեռք մեկնելու՝ պատասպարելով զանոնք եւ հոգալով իրենց կենսական բոլոր պէտքերը:

Ներկայ յօդուածով անդրադարձ կատարուած է վերոյիշեալ կազմակերպութիւններէն ամենակազմակերպուած եւ կրթադաստիարակչական ու բարեսիրական մարմինի մը՝ Իրաքի Հայ Կարօտելոց Խնամակալութեան կէս-դարեայ գործունէութեան տարբեր ժամանակահատուածներուն: Կարօտելոցի դերը ոչ միայն Ցեղասպանութիւնը վերապրողներուն անմիջական եւ կենսական օժանդակութիւն հասցնելն էր, այլեւ իր գործունէութիւնը ծաւալուեցաւ եւ ընդգրկեց իրաքահայութեան կեանքին բոլոր ոլորտները: Հետեւաբար, բնական է, որ այս կազմակերպութիւնը իր անսահման ու անշահախնդիր նուիրումով արժանացաւ բոլորի սիրոյն եւ յարգանքին:

АРМЯНСКИЙ КОРПУС ПОМОЩИ В ИРАКЕ (1927/1930–1958)

ОГАНЯН С.

Резюме

Ключевые слова: Месопотамия, Ирак, геноцид армян, беженцы, Левон Шагоян, Армянский корпус помощи в Ираке, Годичное депутатское собрание.

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Во время и после геноцида более 20.000 беженцев из Западной Армении и Киликии нашли прибежище в Месопотамии (современный Ирак). Армянские национальные организации, а также отдельные благотворители оказали моральную и финансовую поддержку беженцам, обеспечив их жильем и всем необходимым.

Особо следует выделить благотворительную организацию «Армянский корпус помощи в Ираке», которая более известна как **«*Iraqi Hye Karotelotz Khnamakalutyun*»**. «Армянский корпус помощи в Ираке» сыграл ключевую роль не только в оказании помощи наиболее нуждающимся беженцам, но и в предоставлении услуг как в социальной сфере, так и в сфере образования.