

The Role of British Diplomats in Yazidis Affairs in Iraq 1932-1939: An Archival Study

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Abstract—Studying the history of minorities in Iraq has been an important field of interest for many scholars. This study (The Role of British Diplomats in Yazidis Affairs in Iraq, 1932–1939) is an attempt to present and analyze the role of the British diplomats toward the affairs relating to the Yazidi minority in Iraq during a very important period in the latter’s cotemporary history. The Yazidis, who had been living in Sinjar, a sub-district of Mosul in northern Iraq, had been in continuous conflict with Ottoman authorities. This was partly due to their refusal to perform mandatory military service (compulsory conscription) and pay taxes. Ottoman campaigns were conducted against them to subjugate them by force to Ottoman rule. This was the reason for their isolating themselves in a mountainous area far from the city center. When the British developed influence in Iraq, an opportunity was presented to the Yazidis to defend themselves. Their leaders asked British authorities to defend their interests and to help them get rid of the oppression of the Ottomans. For the purpose of establishing British influence among the Yazidis, the former called the Yazidi leaders to hold a conference and issue a plea to the British authorities in Iraq to include them under British protection. Britain was planning to set up a Yazidi principedom in Sinjar to serve as a buffer between Iraq and Syria, tipping the French away from oil fields.

Keywords—Yazidi, Britain, Sinjar, Ambassador, Attitude

I. INTRODUCTION

Studying the history of minorities in Iraq has been an area of interest for many scholars. This study (British diplomacy’s attitude toward the Yazidis of Iraq, 1932–1939) is a try to present and analyze the role of the British diplomats toward the affairs relating to the Yazidi minority in Iraq through a very important period in the latter’s cotemporary history. The Yazidis, who had been living in Sinjar, a sub-district of Mosul in northern Iraq, had been in continuous conflict with Ottoman authorities. This was partly due to their refusal to perform mandatory military service (compulsory conscription) and pay taxes. Ottoman campaigns were managed against them to subjugate them by force to Ottoman rule. This was the cause of their isolating themselves in a mountainous zone far from the city center. When the British had a growing influence in Iraq, an opportunity was presented to the Yazidis to defend themselves. The Yazidi leaders demand that British authorities defend their interests and help them get rid of the oppression of the Ottomans. For the purpose of establishing

British influence among them, the former called the Yazidi leaders to hold a conference and issue a plea to the British authorities in Iraq to include them under British protection. Britain was planning to set up a Yazidi principedom in Sinjar to serve as a buffer between Iraq and Syria, keeping France away from oil fields.

A. Importance of Research

The importance of this topic (The Role of British Diplomats in Yazidis Affairs in Iraq, 1932–1939) comes from the fact that the British always try to preserve their interests with minorities in Iraq, which led to the deterioration of their relations with Britain, especially after Iraq’s independence in 1932. Then, the paper attempts to explain the causes of the problems that led to the Yazidis’ opposition to the Iraqi government.

B. Research Question

The topic raises a number of questions, the most important of which are: Did the British use the Yazidis for their own

interests and how? What was Britain's role in protecting the Yazidis? Was Britain able to prevent the Iraqi government from violating the rights of the Yazidis?

C. Research Hypothesis:

The Yazidis should have been loyal to the Iraqi government rather than the British and accepted compulsory conscription to avoid the wars and chaos they were experiencing.

D. Research Methodology

The researcher relied on an analytical approach and used critical discourse; the data that were analyzed to a large extent were British archival material, and the memoirs of the personalities who were contemporary to the events were also consulted. In addition, other sources, such as contemporary dailies and academic studies in English, were equally utilized in analyzing the role played by the British diplomats.

E. Research Contents

Research contents: The research has an introduction, two sections, and a conclusion. It was mentioned in the preface that when Britain took control of Iraq during World War I, an opportunity was presented to the Yazidis to gain an external and powerful ally. Their leaders contacted Britain for their safety to get rid of the oppression of the Ottomans. The Yazidis had gained British attention during the Mandate period. The announcement of the 1930 treaty between Iraq and Britain increased the fears of the Yazidis because the treaty did not provide any guarantee for their protection. The first section deals with the British diplomatic attitude regarding the Yazidis stand on conscription. This section also discusses the armed action that was used by the government to implement the National Service Law. For their part, the British administration maintained that they could not interfere in the internal affairs of the Iraqi government. This shows the attitude of the British toward the residents of Mount Sinjar. The conscription law was an imposition by the government toward the National Service Law and indicates that the Yazidis was wrong in taking up arms against their government.

The second section deals with the issues affecting bilateral relations between Yazidis and the British; it includes the British diplomatic attitude toward the Yazidis in a conflict between the Yazidis and the Shammar clan, Britain's attitude on the issue, and the British Ambassador, Clark Kerr.

II. THE ROLE OF THE BRITISH DIPLOMACY IN THE YAZIDIS AFFAIRS DURING LATE OTTOMAN AND MANDATE PERIODS

The Yazidi community lives in the villages of Sheikhan and Mount Sinjar, and these are two districts of Mosul. The Yazidi Sinjar was in constant conflict with the Ottoman government because of their refusal to perform military service and pay taxes. Therefore, campaigns were being conducted against them to subjugate them (Abdullah, 2013). Thus, the Yazidi chiefs asked Britain for their safety, and the first contact was to send a message from the Yazidi chiefs

Hussein Bey, Sheikh Nasser, and other chiefs, through Christine Rassam, Deputy Consul in Mosul, to the British Ambassador Stratford Canning in Istanbul on October 29, 1849. The Yazidi leaders asked the British embassy to open friendly relations with them and asked for help for their people. They also asked the ambassador to intervene to stop the Ottoman Empire's pressure on them and facilitate recruitment issues for their youth and the preservation of their lives and property (Guest, 2010).

When the Ottoman Empire entered the First World War and the chance came for the Yazidis to get rid of the Ottoman oppression, their leaders held a meeting in the presence of Hammu Sharo on how to contact the British authorities, so he decided to send Ismail Bey as an envoy to carry out the mission. This event was mentioned in a memorandum from Percy Cox in October 1917. The extent of the British interest in the Yazidis, and a British Expeditionary Force was formed and sent to the Yazidi areas, led by A.W. Leachman, a British political official for the Mosul and the British political governor in the Mosul District (Guest, 2010).

Military campaigns against the Yazidis by the Ottomans continued, the last of which took place in the year 1917. This was due to Yazidi's refusal of military service. This led to Ismail Bey, one of the leaders of the Yazidis, hastening to contact the British, offering himself under the orders of the British administration, and accompanying Colonel Lechman when he entered Mosul. He walked with him to Sinjar, where the Sinjar region was controlled by British forces (Abdullah, 2013). Then the Yazidi leaders sent a message to the British military leadership in Iraq through a Christian figure named Ossi, in which the Yazidi leaders asked for the help of the British forces against the Ottomans, and Stanley Maude confirmed that the British government was ready to help there (Joul, 1934).

For the purpose of establishing British influence, Lechman invited the Yazidi leaders to a conference to be held in the city of Mosul. This was to resolve the conflict over assuming the Yazidi leadership and to choose Hammu Sharo for that position. Hammu Sharo received his orders from the assistant to the political ruler, Major Paulo, in Tal Afar (Al Gullami, 1966). He was able to impose his control over the Mount Sinjar region under British auspices. This is what prompted the political governor's assistant in Tal Afar to describe Hammu Shuro as loyal and supportive of the British. The British administration tried to take advantage of Hammu to achieve their political goals in the Sinjar region. It is clear that the British intended to establish a Yazidi emirate from Sinjar to Al-Hasakah in Syria. The British's goal with this idea was to divide Iraq between national and sectarian minorities and create a political entity to be an insulator between Iraq and Syria, which was under French control, and then to distance France from the oil fields. However, the idea failed because Hammu was not a Yazidi prince, according to the beliefs of the Yazidi religion. No one other than the princely class could assume the leadership of an emirate (Abdullah, 2013). In early 1919, Sinjar became administratively subordinate to the British political officer in Mosul (Wilson, 1930).

The Yazidis stood alongside the British forces as part of a campaign to provide protection for Christian minorities and announced their readiness for the British authorities to provide them with protection and shelter. They sheltered a large number of refugees on Mount Sinjar (Lowthian, 1920). British political officials entered into negotiations with the Yazidi leaders, and the Hammu was appointed by the British authorities as a contact between the two parties. Britain hopes that Hammu will be satisfied by the Yazidi leaders to be governor of the mountain Sinjar and that links with the Yazidis will continue because Sinjar is affiliated with the British political officer (Fuccaro, 1999).

The Yazidi minority gained British attention during the Mandate period, as the Yazidis could benefit from carrying out military missions or purposes and benefit from their areas on Mount Sinjar, and the British could use them to implement their policy (Wickram, 2010). Britain tried from the beginning of the establishment of the Iraqi government to encourage the Yazidis to be supportive of the Iraqi government. When Britain asked the minorities to pledge allegiance to King Faisal I, the Yazidis refused because they refused to join Iraq. Therefore, the British persuaded them to pledge allegiance to King Faisal by supporting the authority of the Yazidi leader Hammu, who was appointed governor of Sinjar and granted him the village of Jadala as a reward for the support he gave to the British (Fuccaro, 1999). Between 1920 and 1925, a large number of Yazidi employees and informants were recruited for the Royal Air Force. From one side to another, the Kemalists tried to pressure the Yazidis to collaborate with them; this prompted Hammu to ask the British authorities in Mosul for help and to provide him with weapons. Britain launched a campaign of recruitment among the Yazidi tribes and armed them, and this was led by British officers to defend the region in the event of the Kemalist forces advancing (Fuccaro, 1999).

In 1924, disturbances occurred on Mount Sinjar among the Yazidis themselves. A new figure emerged, namely Daoud al-Daoud, head of the Yazidi Maharkan clan in Sinjar (Al-Hasani, 1953), a competitor to the authority of Hammu, the leader of the Yazidi coalition. Daoud's forces moved to Mount Sinjar to control it. This created anxiety in the Yazidi region and among the British officers in charge. These disturbances coincided with the Mosul affairs (1923–1935), in which Turkey tried to gain control over the Vilayet of Mosul. The Iraqi kingdom was assisted by the British authorities in Iraq. Consequently, the Mosul affairs were referred to the League of Nations to arbitrate. This was a serious challenge to the authority of Hammu. The league sent a delegation to the region to enquire about the desires of people, and the delegation asked people whether they wanted to stay in Iraq or join the Kemalist Turkey. Hammu's position was very clear and expressed that the Yazidis wanted to join the Iraqi state, provided that it was under British protection and mandate (Abdullah, 2013).

Britain used its forces against the opponents of Hammu, and this was done by the intervention of the British Air Force bombing of the village of Zairwan, which belongs to David. British interest in the Yazidis increased after the end of the

turmoil of 1925. The British Royal Air Force presented a detailed project to the British government to establish the Yazidi Levy Forces, and this army would protect the existing western borders of Iraq (Fathallah, 2002).

The announcement of the 1930 treaty (Anglo-Iraqi Treaty) between Iraq and Britain, (for details, see Al-Omari, 2014) increased Yazidi fears because the treaty did not provide any guarantee for their protection, and Yazidi leaders submitted a petition to the League of Nations asking for safe guards for their national rights. The Iraqi and British authorities decided to pay more attention to the Yazidis because France raised the issue of protecting minorities in Syria and demarcating borders between Syria and Iraq. This news spread among the Yazidis, and there were some concerns about French deign in the area. Consequently, the British and Iraqi authorities worked to contain the issue. The British administration proposed to the Iraqi authorities to establish a special administration in the Mount Sinjar region for Christians in northern Iraq and one for the Yazidis in Mount Sinjar until the border issue was resolved in favor of Iraq (Fuccaro, 1999).

In October 1931, Yazidi leaders held a conference in Mosul under the auspices of the British delegate, Francis Humphreys (Longrigg, 2019). At the end of the conference, Yazidis gave a message to Humphreys, in which they stated: returning the lands seized by the government and establishing the Yazidi emirate in Sinjar, and that they should have representatives in government departments and the House of Representatives (Abdullah, 2013). Humphreys decided to form a committee from the Mosul District to look into the conditions of the Yazidis. In March 1932, the Iraqi Interior Minister, Naji Taher Shawkat, with his advisor, Kenhan Cornwallis, went to Mount Sinjar, met with Yazidi leaders, and convinced them not to agree to annexing their areas to the French mandate in Syria. They were urged to attack French forces if they entered Mount Sinjar, and they tried to bring the Yazidis together and remove the dispute between them. Then after that, the Iraqi government and Britain, along with the League of Nations, established a special committee to determine the border between Iraq and Syria. In May 1932, after the League Committee's visit to Sinjar, it made its recommendations to annex the Yazidi areas in Sinjar to Iraq (Farhan, 2019, P126). In 1932, a broad consensus was reached in Sinjar regarding their interests under the auspices of the British authority (Fuccaro, 1999).

A. British Diplomats and Yazidi Conscription and Rebellion

Iraq acquired independence in October 1932 from the British, but the problem of minorities did not end. The fear and anxiety increased after the death of as fears increased among Yazidis when Hammu Sharo died. The political crisis deepened further when rumors and news began to circulate suggesting that the Iraqi government intended to appoint an Arab Qaimaqam in Sinjar rather than someone from the Yazidi community. Besides, in 1933, the Iraqi authorities were considering appointing an Arab Qaimqam on Mount Sinjar. Moreover, during this year, the Simil massacre – also known as

the 1933 Assyrian massacre; for details, see: (Zubaida, 2000) – occurred, which also increased their concern. The death of King Faisal I was another reason for their concern because he was considered the protector of minorities. Then came the announcement of compulsory conscription and the imposition of this law on all Yazidis. The British embassy confirmed that it was not possible to interfere in the internal affairs of the Iraqi government. The Yazidis found that the Iraqi government and Britain did not fulfill their promises. This policy on the part of both Iraq and the British affected the Yazidis to try to open new relations with France. As Stafford, the administrative inspector in Mosul, pointed out, Khadida Ibn Hammu told him many times that if Britain could not help the Yazidis in Sinjar and the Yazidi areas, then they thought about joining the French authorities in Syria to ensure their safety because they had promises that the latter would protect them and respond to their demands (Abdullah, 2013).

In 1933, the internal disturbances and disagreements among the Yazidis, which were between the Yazidi leaders and Mir Saeed Bey, were reduced. In September, the authority of the Sinjar region was returned to Mir Saeed. In October 1933, Hammu, who was the most formidable tribal leader, opposed Said Bey, the tribal leader most opposed to, died. He was succeeded by his son, Khudaidah, a political and administrative man among the Yazidis, and he did not have much experience about the internal disputes and was intolerant of others (F.O., 1933, P. 26).

Britain wanted to include the Yazidis in the Iraqi army and impose compulsory conscription on them, which would be a very important step in unifying the national army because the Iraqi government could no longer rely on British military support (Fuccaro, 1997).

The government wanted to implement the National Service Law of 1934, which had different repercussions for the residents of Mount Sinjar (Fuccaro, 1997). In August 1935, the Mosul Governor made efforts to obtain a pledge from the Yazidi chiefs to provide their support for the implementation of the national service law among the Yazidi tribesmen of Mount Sinjar. Then some prominent leaders went to the Mosul governorate and demanded the formation of a special Yazidi company to serve in the Iraqi army under the command of Christian officers. However, the government refused to accept all their protests, and orders were issued to implement population registration procedures in Sinjar. Some tribesmen surrendered, but others fled to their villages and gathered in armed groups in a mountainous area under the leadership of Daud-i-Daud. The government took measures against them, and they were defeated. On October 15, their leaders surrendered to the government, with the exception of Daoud himself, who fled with a small number of his supporters across the Syrian border (F.O., 1935, P. 32). The British ambassador supported the Iraqi government's position. The military court that was formed in Sinjar dealt harshly with the Yazidis. The embassy's position appears to have been that it supported the Iraqi government against them. It shows its position and indicates that the Yazidis were wrong in taking up arms against their government (F.O., 1935, P. 33).

The position of the British Embassy regarding the National Service Law has emerged, and it was expressed clearly by the British Ambassador that Yazidis could not bear arms against the Iraqi government. For his part, the ambassador indicated that the Iraqi government must avoid the method of repression against the Yazidis. Some Yazidis pointed out that the British administration in Iraq discriminates between nationalities, as the Iraqi government used a harsh policy toward the Yazidis. The British ambassador only advises the government to avoid the method of repression, but when the issue concerns Christians, the ambassador intervenes directly to prevent the government from using violence against them (F.O., 1935, P. 33).

In June 1935, the authorities in Mosul informed Khadida bin Hammu that they would apply the National Service Law to the Yazidis. Khadida was asked to sign an official agreement with the government, but he refused to cooperate with the authorities. In November, under the leadership of Daoud, residents of the villages of Alidina, Zarwan, and Meherkan began selling their property and buying weapons in the hope of obtaining weapons to avoid compulsory conscription. British sources confirmed that Khudida had a fear of armed rebellion against the government, so he tried in vain to convince the authorities that it would be better that the Iraqi government form exclusively Yazidi units. Nevertheless, the authorities confirmed that they were ready to meet the demands of the Yazidis. At the beginning of their recruitment campaign on Mount Sinjar, the British consul in Mosul intervened. The formation of separate Yazidi units would have only solved part of the problem, even if the government accepted it. The consul indicated that forming separate teams would face a problem. Because the Yazidis are not suitable for the army (Fuccaro, 1997), British consular correspondence indicates that a group of Yazidi leaders went to the Iraqi authorities and proposed forming a Yazidi unit under the leadership of Christian officers, but the government refused, and the government took security measures and replaced the Christian administrative official in Sinjar with another Muslim (Al-Damluji, 1949). The government announced that it would launch a military campaign against the Yazidi opponents. For their part, the Yazidis took up arms and sent a delegation to Syria to ask for help from the French (Leseot, 1938).

In 1935, the Iraqi government accused the Yazidi movement of having hidden foreign interference that affected the country's sovereignty; there was even an accusation that the British in Iraq had a hand in the disturbances. The British ambassador, Archibald Clark Kerr, intervened by objecting to the death sentences issued against the accused rebels. The British ambassador also requested that the cases of the convicts be examined by a judicial board formed in Baghdad for this purpose. Despite the government's interest in this request, Clark Kerr maintained his belief that the implementation of the death sentence was not necessary (Safwat, 1936).

In March 1935, the British ambassador wrote to the British Foreign Minister and informed him that he had urged King Ghazi on the necessity of issuing a general amnesty for the

Yazidis. Then the ambassador complained about the king's policy because he was late in issuing the pardon. He also accused the king of taking the advice of his enthusiastic officer friends and ignoring the embassy's advice. The intervention and pressure from British Ambassador Clark Kerr and Edmonds, Deputy Counselor of the Ministry of the Interior, contributed to changing the Iraqi government's position toward the Yazidis. Edmonds also proposed an amnesty for the Yazidis in Sinjar, and some of the accused Yazidis were actually released (Faraj, 1987).

Regarding Britain's attitude toward the Daoud Al-Daoud movement, Ambassador Archibald Clark Keer objected to the death sentences issued against those accused in support of the Yazidis, and demanded that the cases of the convicts be investigated by a judicial board formed in Baghdad for this purpose, in accordance with the ambassador's desire. The Interior Minister, Rashid Aali al-Kilani, scrutinized the rulings, as the British ambassador's intervention was a result of the developments that happened in the Sinjar region. The embassy's fear of the movement came as a result of Daoud's increasing popularity among the Yazidis, to be a strong symbol of the Yazidi opposition, and so as not to be an enclave for France in the region. The British ambassador asked the Iraqi government to facilitate matters for the Yazidis. In October 1935, a delegation of Yazidis visited the French in Syria and asked him for approval to settle the Yazidis in Syrian territory. In February 1936, they planned to immigrate to Syria, where the British Embassy put pressure on the Iraqi government to follow a more comprehensive and conciliatory policy (Fuccaro, 1997). The government softened its stand and showed some moderation toward the Yazidis. Thus, the government issued a general amnesty to the convicts on the anniversary of the birth of King Ghazi. In April 1936, the Iraqi government tried to convince French officials to return the fleeing Yazidis to Syria and their homes (F.O., 1936, P. 16).

After Hikmat Suleiman assumed the post of prime minister in November 1936, his government issued a general amnesty for prisoners. This was due to their fear of the French authorities in Syria, who were continuing their attempts to settle Kurds, Assyrians, and Yazidis in the Jazira region adjacent to Sinjar. On the other hand, the migration of the Yazidis would encourage other minorities that had a bad relationship with the Iraqi government to do the same, and these migrations were in the interest of the French and strengthened their attitude (Fuccaro, 1997).

In the year 1937, the Sinjar region remained completely calm after the harsh treatment they suffered at the hands of the Iraqi army. However, Hikmat Suleiman released all the Yazidi prisoners. This had a great impact on restoring confidence between them. Compulsory conscription was the source of disputes between the Yazidis and the government. Although a number of Yazidis had agreed to abide by the law, many of them avoided forced conscription (F.O., 1937, P. 12).

Clashes occurred between the Iraqi police and the Yazidis in 1938, and at that time the Yazidi leaders threatened to start a general movement against the Iraqi government,

which encouraged the British embassy to put more pressure on the Iraqi government to change its policy toward them. The government stopped recruiting Yazidi units and looked for another formula for recruiting Yazidis, so a decision was taken to apply the proportional system that was used in other tribal areas, which is to allow tribal heads to choose recruits according to the population ratio of the tribes (Fuccaro, 1997).

B. British Diplomacy and the Yazidi-Shamar Conflict

The British authorities wanted Mount Sinjar to be an important strategic fortress, so they dealt with the Shamar tribe, which was loyal to Turkey, and it became a source of concern for Britain. During the events of World War I, the Shamar tribe cooperated with the Turkish army and was prepared to attack convoys and other tribes to assist the Turkish state (Howell, 2006).

The policy of the British administration was to use the Yazidis in Iraq to attack the Shammar tribe, just as Hamu had done before. It is worth mentioning here that when confrontations occurred between the Shammar and the British, the Shammar forces moved to Sinjar in search of pasture. The British administration instructed Hammu to attack them and provided him with the necessary weapons, forcing Shammar to return to their original place. Hammu became a tool in the hands of Britain to attack its opponents, especially the Shammar tribe (Abdullah, 2013).

The British Embassy in Baghdad intervened to stop the Shammar advance toward Sinjar and resolved the conflict between them. Yazidi property was attacked by the Shammar tribe, led by Ajil al-Yawar, who was trying to expand his influence in eastern Sinjar. Edmonds, advisor to the Ministry of the Interior, had observed the conflict between the Shammar and the Yazidis directly, and he always acted as a mediator between them. This was done to prevent the Shammar tribe from obtaining ownership of Yazidi lands. The policy of the British Embassy since 1935 has been in favor of the Yazidis, which aimed to stop the Shammar's advance into Sinjar. On the other hand, the embassy wanted to protect the rights of minorities in Iraq, which constituted one of the main conditions for Iraq's admission to the League of Nations in 1932. After Edmonds' intervention, the Shammar's attempts to seize Yazidi lands had stopped (Fuccaro, 1997).

In December 1936, a dispute broke out between Sheikh Ajil Al-Shammari and the Yazidis over land. The governor of Mosul tried to prevent unrest, and the Shamar tribe was trying to penetrate Sinjar by buying plots of land in the Yazidi villages. The government of Iraq was not serious about resolving the differences, but the interventions of Ambassador Clarke Kerr and Edmonds, deputy advisor to the Ministry of the Interior, led to a change in the Iraqi government's attitude toward the Yazidis and prevented the Shammar from entering the region (F.O., 1936, P.16).

III. CONCLUSION

The Yazidis in Iraq received clear British attention from the beginning of their entry into Iraq and the strengthening

of their influence among them to confront other factions, such as the French in Syria. Britain exploited the Yazidi recruits under its command and took advantage of Yazidi personalities to achieve their political and military interests in the Sinjar region. Also, the British diplomats made effective use of Yazidis by using them against the Ottomans, Arabs, and French. Also, the British policy toward Yazidis during the period of the study was very similar to their policy toward other Kurds; the British in general stood by the Iraqi government and tried to cover up the latter's shortcomings because they intended to present Iraq as a viable state to be accepted by the League of Nations. Besides, British policy toward the Yazidis was partly affected by the French authorities' design in Sinjar.

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