

The Near East Foundation Records at the Rockefeller Archive Center

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It was to you [my dear Uncle Sam], indeed, through your generous people and your heroic, self-sacrificing sons, who rushed immediate relief to Syria and Armenia in their dire distress and destitution. In Syria alone thousands of people have been saved from the death-grip of disease and many more thousands have been snatched from the fangs and claws of famine by the generous, sympathetic and heroic hand of the American people. And I am not exaggerating when I say that were it not for this splendid work of American charity, which was sponsored and stimulated by President Wilson himself (sic), there might not have been a soul left in Syria to-day.

It is not I alone, therefore, and the thousands of your adopted Syrian children that are indebted to you: our native country, our own native people are bound to you in eternal gratitude. For if France has been the protector of Syria in the past, you are the savior of Syria to-day.”¹

Amīn ar-Rīhānī, (1917-1919)
Letters to Uncle Sam

Introduction—The Near East Foundation

These words by the “father” of Arabic literature in America, and of Arab-American literature written in English, *Amīn ar-Rīhānī* (sometimes spelled Ameen Al Rihani,” 1876-1940), offer a clear testament to the efforts and early successes of the Near East Foundation, formerly known as the Near East Relief Foundation, or the *American Committee for Armenian and Assyrian Relief* (ACASR). In another sense, these words speak of a historic connection between Americans and people of the area known as greater Syria, which has been overlooked or marginalized in the common disassociation between these separate geographic regions, but which is therefore so important to remember now.

The Near East Foundation (NEF) is only one example of American charitable work in the region. Americans had come to the aid of Greece during the Greek War of Independence in 1821, sending their financial contributions to the Greek cause, and sometimes even traveling abroad to offer their personal services; other episodes of American philanthropy in the region included the founding of schools in Syria and Malta starting in the 1820s; the Christian Philanthropists in Turkey, who founded Roberts College of Istanbul (established in 1863, which is incidentally the oldest American school still in existence in its original location outside the United States); and the Syrian Protestant College at Beirut in 1866 (Lebanon was then under Ottoman rule), which in 1920 became the American University of Beirut. Still, though, these efforts signal a continued American presence in the Middle East since the 1820s. The Near East Foundation evidences a wider, more democratic involvement in the region, because of its origin, outreach and generosity, both financially and otherwise.

While academics may be wary of describing such a narrative as “heroic,” Rihani describes it precisely as that, because the mobilization of the Near East did not have proselytizing as its goal. Rather, the consequence, if not the aim, was saving human lives—whether Muslims, Christians or otherwise. The story of Near East Foundation is both a story particular to the history of the U.S., as well as it is one in particular to the history of the Middle East, Eastern Europe, the Armenian people, and the people of the Caucasus. Though this narrative may be clouded in both popular and academic consciousness due to more recent developments in these regions, Rihani’s statement leaves little in question regarding the efforts, if not the achievements of this organization. It is proper that nearing the one hundredth anniversary of this organization, its history come to light.

What makes Rīhānī's statement even more dramatic though is the fact that it was made most likely after the end of WW I. American and Arabic speaking intellectuals could not have foreseen that such an organization would persist in its efforts and determination to advance philanthropy in the region. The organization's records are housed at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC). By no measure exhaustive, this review of the collection illuminates some of the history of the contents in the collection, up until about 1950. This represents a start to aid other researchers in examining the collection.

Contents at the Rockefeller Archive Center

Since the collection has not been fully reviewed and processed, researchers can only have limited access to the material. The Near East Foundation Records cover approximately 1900-1980. Information for 1900-1930 is incomplete at best. Much of the material in the collection for these years was generated by the NEF's New York office and there appears to be very little material from the period 1915-1930 in the way of correspondence and reports from individuals and institutions in the field. However, the collection includes many photographs taken by either Barclay Acheson or H.C. Jaquith, and some detailed circa 1927 trip diaries from Barclay Acheson that may prove to be helpful. Armenian-relief related materials are located in boxes: 133,136-139, 144, 145, 153-156, 161. In addition to the records of the NEF itself, several other collections at the RAC contain files related to support for Near East relief during the period 1915-1930. Relevant files are in the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial (LSRM) records, the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) Archives, and the Rockefeller Family Archives.

Inception and War and Post-WW I Periods

The Near East Foundation formally began in 1930, but prior to this, it was operating under different names. Shortly after September 16, 1915, a volunteer committee, which would become the basis for the NEF was formed in New York in response to human distress and destruction engendered by the First World War. The committee hoped to raise \$100,000 for relief in Ottoman Turkey and adjacent countries. All classes of people, religious bodies of all creeds, schools, colleges, and individuals, with a single spirit and purpose, joined in supporting the effort. Not only was the original goal reached, but over \$91,000,000 was received in the National Office in New York within a few years. The U.S. and other governments donated some \$25,000,000 in food and supplies.

This mobilization came as WW I loosened pent-up hostilities against the Christian minorities of the Ottoman Empire. Death came to at least 600,000 Armenians and various degrees of suffering came to another roughly one and a half million. With Mustapha Kemal's rise to power in the 1920s, nearly 1,100,000 Greeks residing in Turkey were uprooted and compelled to seek new homes in Greece. To mitigate the suffering visited on the Armenians, Greeks, and Syrians, American missionaries and educators suspended most of their usual activities and devoted themselves full time to disaster relief.

When the Committee on American Atrocities solicited \$20,000 from the RF, but it stipulated that further aid would be contingent on the merger of all relief committees functioning in the Near East. In response to this ultimatum, the three committees merged in November, 1915, as the American Committee for Armenian and Assyrian Relief. During the war years, 1915-1918, relief work was carried on by missionaries and educators who were in the area. Given the magnitude of the devastation, the relief workers could often do little more than give temporary

shelter, first aid, and enough food to sustain life. The organization initially focused on Iran, Syria, and the Russian Caucasus. When the U.S. entered the war, a German banker, Ernst Schoemann, took formal responsibility for distributing the funds that the organization gathered to the people of the region.

The arrival in Syria in 1915 of 110,000 Armenian refugees from Anatolia made soup-kitchen relief necessary. In areas where food supplies were available, the refugees were given a cash dole. In other areas the mission imported food stuffs. The principal relief task was to assist the Armenians in Antolia and the Caucasus. Initially, Ambassador Morgenthau suggested that the Armenian refugees be brought to the U.S., although his plan was rejected by the American committee to which he referred it. In the Caucasus, where some 300,000 Armenians had drifted, the protection of the Russian armies enabled three American missionaries to accompany them until the collapse of the Czarist regime in 1917 made their stay untenable. Hence, the relief work was largely in the hands of the locals.

Besides working for the benefit of others in terms of granting food and protection, the press releases of the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief made the front pages of among others, the *New York Times* and the *Christian Science Monitor*. Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish institutions rendered their services and publications to publicize conditions in the Near East. These efforts expanded the reach of the campaign and made it a nationwide mobilization by 1917, and with the help of presidential proclamations creating Near East Relief Days, the fund-drives acquired a semi-official character. Food and clothes were collected at fire houses, police stations, and public schools. A concerned public gave jewelry, heirlooms, and wedding presents. Money was sought from schools, fraternal societies, and even door-to-door solicitation. Never before had overseas philanthropy enjoyed such a broad base.

The end of the WW I in Europe brought hope that the missionary-relief workers could finish their job and resume their missionary work. The organization then reorganized and was reincorporated under a Congressional charter as Near East Relief (NER). Corporate status was brought in order to give the organization the “prestige and unity essential for the efficient administration and distribution of funds.” The organization was charged with providing relief and assisting in the “repatriation, rehabilitation and reestablishment of suffering and dependent people of the Near East.”² Relief activities overseas were reorganized and hastily expanded. Civilian relief workers were recruited in the U.S., while abroad, U.S. Army officers were placed on service to direct the relief efforts. By the end of 1920, NER’s staff numbered two hundred seventy newly recruited lay workers in addition to an equal number of missionaries. The employment of laymen created personnel problems, as civilians were often more interested in seeing the world than in devoted service to the refugees. Misappropriation of funds occasionally occurred, and six relief workers were apprehended by American consular officials. Still, in view of the task confronting the relief workers—it was estimated that there were four million refugees of whom four hundred thousand were children separated from their parents—it is surprising that the complaints were not more numerous and serious.

The most serious task of the NER was the caring of thousands of refugee children who were drifting about. Starting in 1919, the NER put the children in mission stations and other facilities used for relief work. Since many of these children were younger than five, the NER assumed a responsibility to develop a child care which lasted until the children reached the age of independence. Many of the children had diseases such as scabies, otrachoma, or favus. The NER had to address these maladies, as well as to provide education. Children were taught trades such as shoemaking, baking, and tailoring. The largest orphanages were in the Caucasus.

Arrangements were made with Soviet authorities to house the children in former army barracks of the Czarist regime. In Constantinople, the NER carried out a varied program. About fifteen thousand children were cared for there, but the native community would assume support for the work. The NER organized day nurseries for the children of widowed mothers and treatment centers for victims of tuberculosis and trachoma.

Much energy was also devoted to feeding and clothing adults. Dr. Barton, on an inspection tour in the Caucasus in March, 1919, found adults wearing “the rags they have worn for four years,” and saw hungry women stripping flesh from a dead horse with their hands. Improvised soup kitchens sustained over a half million persons during the winter and spring of 1919-1920. Over 300,000 persons were clothed from some 1,500,000 pounds of used clothing shipped from the U.S. The need in the Caucasus was such that Barton estimated that it would cost thirty million dollars in 1920 alone to provide food and clothing to the distressed.³

The NER was significant in its magnitude. It operated for nearly fifteen years and saw the distribution of more than a hundred million dollars in relief supplies. Only the American Red Cross and the American Relief Administration performed on a larger scale. In so far as it ministered to the immediate needs of the victims of the disaster, the NER followed techniques of relief work that missionaries had periodically utilized in times of trouble. The special contribution of the NER was in its broadening of the base of support of American philanthropy in the Near East. The magnitude of the disasters in the Near East attracted the attention of the general public, and this in turn enabled the founders to create a broadly based committee in support of relief work. The character of the distressed forced the relief committee to transcend the levels of organization that had characterized all earlier efforts to solicit relief funds outside the circle of givers to the missionary boards. The NER’s service involved great sacrifice beyond

the vast sums contributed by a willing people. As a consequence of their work, by 1930, thirty American relief workers died in this service.

Near East Foundation, 1930-1940

In 1930, the NER changed its name, dropping “Relief,” as the foundation moved to initiate a program of rural reconstruction in the Near East. No longer a “relief” foundation, it reorganized as the “Near East Foundation” (NEF), which pioneered agricultural extension services, home demonstration and social service work, and sanitation and public health projects, becoming the first American organization expressly designed to undertake technical assistance work abroad. The NEF simultaneously reorganized the refugee centers which it inherited from Near East Relief to transform them into social welfare programs. In all cases the NEF sought to avoid conducting service programs, because it sought instead to induce local governments to assume the responsibility for themselves to duplicate them. Agricultural extension, home demonstrations, public health work, and recreation programs claimed most of the NEF’s attention, but in Athens and Sofia, the NEF focused on work with refugees.

Near East Foundation between 1940-1950

WW II brought changes to the Near East and the role of American philanthropy. The natives of the Near East displayed mixed attitudes towards the West, recognizing the efficiency and power of Western technology and industry, but at the same time resenting Western political domination. In this context, American philanthropy terminated some activities, renewed others, and branched out in new directions. When the Balkans succumbed to Axis control, NEF financial support was terminated. In Greece the agricultural and home demonstration work was interrupted for the duration of the war, but relief work on a limited scale continued. Joan

Vanderpool, the wife of an American archaeologist in Greece, for example, opened a small soup kitchen for village children in a suburb of Athens. Initially Mrs. Vanderpool was supported by friends from the U.S., but when communication with the U.S. was interrupted, the NEF assumed support for her project.

During WW II, NEF officials in the U.S. concentrated on plans for postwar reconstruction. It joined other American agencies in surveying the conditions and needs of the Near East. A first step was the creation in June, 1942, of the Coordinated Committee of American Organizations interested in the Reconstruction of Greece. Member organizations included the RF, the American Classical School, Athens College, and the NEF.

The NEF's experience in the Levant was very different from the encounter with Greece. Internal disorders attendant to Syrian and Lebanese independence, friction between the Syrians, Lebanese, Israelis and the French, made the Syrian and Lebanese governments reluctant to assume responsibility for projects initiated by an American organization. At the same time, the NEF's work suffered from a lack of financial support, and continuous able leadership. As in Greece, the NEF increasingly acted as a catalyst in bringing together the resources of several other organizations.

Bibliography and Further Readings

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The ideas and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author and are not intended to represent the Rockefeller Archive Center.

ENDNOTES:

¹ Ameen F. Rihani, *Letters to Uncle Sam*. Washington D.C.: Platform International, 2001, p. 23.

² James L. Barton, *Story of Near East Relief (1915-1930)*. New York: Macmillan, 1930, pp. 432-437.

³ James G. Harbord, "Conditions in the Near East: Report of the American military Mission to Armenia." *Senate Documents* 66 Congress, 2nd Session, Document number 266 (April 13, 1920), p. 8.