

## Y.T.Kanna: a man on a mission<sup>1</sup>

The series **C3939/2 item N64/75159 Assyrian Migration from Iraq** from the National Archives of Australia shows Youaw Toma Kanna's exchange of correspondence with senior officials of the Australian Department of Immigration covering a five year period- June 1964 to July 1969. It should be noted that a portion of this file still remains to be examined by the National Archives before being released into the public domain. The documents convey the impression of a man on a mission determined to assist his fellow Assyrians in Iraq to migrate to Australia. The documents also highlight the problems faced by Assyrians wishing to migrate to Australia.

Y.T Kanna, an Iraqi Assyrian, arrived in Sydney on January 24, 1964, from Iraq and read a newspaper article in the *Daily Telegraph* on February 8 that the Australian Ministry of Labor and National Service considered the importation of foreign labor to make up the shortfall in skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers. There was a major labor shortage concentrated in Wollongong (New South Wales) at the Port Kembla steelworks who had vacancies for 750 unskilled and 150 skilled workers and also was a need to find suitable employment for women.<sup>2</sup> In response to this news article, Kanna wrote a letter to the Minister of Labor and National Service, William McMahon stating that he could "get 1,000 semi-skilled [men?] and unskilled ladies" and was prepared to discuss this matter in person.<sup>3</sup>

Kanna acted as an "intermediary" for Assyrians who wanted to migrate to Australia from Iraq. There are two documents showing Kanna's support for Assyrian migration and his attempts to convince Australian officials that his people would have something positive to offer Australia. In a letter of June 29, 1964 he states that "there are about 2,600 families willing to come to Australia" and continues that "Of the above: 60% can read and write English language; 30% have served the British R.A.F (as Assyrian Levies) in Habbaniyah, Iraq; 45% have served Iraqi Army; 80% can speak or read and write at least two languages. 80% are semi-skilled... ." He was convinced that "they will not be a burden on Australian Government." (see Doc.1)<sup>4</sup>

According to Kanna, the Assyrians good English language skills were attributed to them attending private schools rather than public ones. He believed that the Assyrians generally had a "higher standard education than the average population." He further contends that "the better type positions, such as in banks, have been held by Assyrians. This again has lead to a degree of unsettlement because of current programme of nationalization of banks will mean the progressive sacking of Assyrians and their replacement by the native population." (see Doc.4)<sup>5</sup>

Another document written by H.G.Brooks, the Chief Migration Officer -Foreign, provides the Assistant Secretary of Operations Branch with background information on Iraq. The document lists the total population of Iraq including the religious breakdown of the Assyrians into Nestorian, Chaldean, Jacobite and Protestant churches. It further mentions the military coups of 1958 and 1963, the importance of the oil industry for Iraq's economy, an outline of the different levels of the Iraqi education system, Iraq's neutral position in international affairs including a potential federal union with Syria and United Arab Republic (UAR), and the

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<sup>1</sup> This is an expanded version of the same title published in <http://zindamagazine.com/html/archives/2002/4.29.02/index.php#Bravo> (accessed April 1, 2016)

<sup>2</sup> YT Kanna letter to Stavos T.Stavridis (author), June 30, 2003 including a cutting of article titled 'So many jobs workers must be got abroad', *Daily Telegraph*, February 8, 1964

<sup>3</sup> YT Kanna ltr to Hon.William McMahon, Minister of Labor & National Service, February 8, 1964 (a photocopy of this letter supplied to the author by YT Kanna)

<sup>4</sup> see Appendix.1 Document.1

<sup>5</sup> see Appendix.2 Document.2

prospects for Assyrian immigration to Australia. On the last point it was imagined that the Assyrian immigrants would pay their own fares. (see Doc.2)<sup>6</sup>

It is evident that Y.T.Kanna did his best to sell the benefits of Assyrian immigration to Australian officials. He made it clear that Assyrians spoke good English and held better type positions in Iraq. Those who had served as Assyrian Levies were to be considered loyal to the British Empire and would make excellent Australian citizens. Furthermore, the Assyrians resided in Mosul, the second largest city, of Iraq which would make it easy for them to live in Sydney or any other Australian city.

The remaining documents outline some of the difficulties encountered by Assyrian Iraqis who wished to migrate to Australia. Firstly, they needed a guarantee of accommodation before being eligible for entry into Australia. This was a requirement imposed by Australian authorities for which Kanna tried unsuccessfully to get them to change it on behalf of the Assyrians.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, Assyrians could not travel directly by air to Australia from Iraq. They had to travel to Lebanon at great expense before making the long journey to Australia by ship. There were some exceptions with Assyrians arriving by air to Sydney.<sup>8</sup>

Thirdly, in October 1964, the Australian government set up a migration office in Beirut to process Assyrian immigration applications. The Lebanese government raised concerns regarding the presence of two Australian officials , i.e. a Trade Commissioner and a Senior Migration Officer, operating in Beirut when Australia and Lebanon had no normal diplomatic relations but a Lebanese Consul-General office existed in Sydney since 1947. Harfouche, the Secretary-General of the Lebanese Foreign Ministry believed that this situation could easily be resolved, if Australia opened up an Embassy in Beirut. Lurking behind all this was the suspicion of the Arab League that "Australia is engaged in siphoning off Palestinian refugees and pressure on Lebanon to obstruct such a thing."<sup>9</sup>

Finally, British Consular officials in Baghdad and Basra issued visas on behalf of the Australian Government for Assyrians wishing to leave Iraq. However, the Iraqi government and its consular officials in Beirut were reluctant to stamp the name "Australia" in the part of the passport of "countries to be visited." <sup>10</sup> It wasn't until 1976 that Australia established its embassy in Baghdad which offered some advantages to it such as " Iraq's growing political and economic importance in world affairs" , "trade benefits" and enhance Australia's " standing with the Iraqi Government and generally in the Arab world." <sup>11</sup>

### **Stavros T.Stavridis (M.A).**

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix.3 Document.3

<sup>7</sup> See Appendix 4 Documents 4(a) &(4b)

<sup>8</sup> See Appendix 5 Documents 5 & 4(b) in Appendix.4

<sup>9</sup> For Plimsoll from Stuart, Australian Embassy, Cairo to Department of External Affairs (Canberra) , Inward Cablegram, April 9, 1965, National Archives of Australia [NAA] A1838 item.1634/131 part.1 Immigration - Australian policy and relations with other countries-Lebanon General , (Canberra, ACT); Department of External Affairs to Australian High Commission, London & Australian Embassy, Cairo, Outward Cablegram , April 8, 1965 title Migration Office Beirut, NAA A1838, item.1531/156 Immigration-Migration to & from Lebanon, 1959-72; The names of Lebanese Consul -Generals in Sydney for the period 1947-66 is listed on its official website, see <http://www.lebconsyd.org.au/index2.htm> (accessed April 1, 2016)

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix 6 Document.6

<sup>11</sup> Opening of an Australian Embassy in Baghdad, Iraq by Andrew Peacock, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Canberra, ACT, June 1976, NAA A12909 item. Submission No.440. June 1-15, 1976

## Appendix.1 Document.1

6 Comber Street,  
Paddington,  
SYDNEY

29th June, 1964.

The Ministry of Immigration,  
Commonwealth of Australia,  
Canberra, A.C.T.



Respected Sir,

On behalf of the Assyrians in Iraq (Middle East), I have the honour to submit this petition for your kind consideration and necessary action.

The population of Assyrians in Iraq is about one hundred thousand. All Assyrians are Christians and can be taken partly European and are predominantly European in appearance, dress and have European type education.

During the last five months hundreds of Assyrian families from Iraq have applied for immigration to Australia, but so far a few families have been accepted, some rejected and the majority are anxiously awaiting your kind decision. More families will be applying in the next two months.

I have been asked by them to write to your goodself and enquire the possibility of a mass immigration, if this is not possible at this stage then I request you to please give a favourable consideration to the present applications whom will be travelling to Australia on their personal account. I have been informed that there are about 2,600 families willing to come to Australia.

Of the above: 60% can read and write English language; 30% have served the British R.A.F. (as Assyrian Levies) in Habbaniyah, Iraq; 45% have served Iraqi Army; 80% can speak or read and write at least two languages. 80% are semi-skilled.

I am sure they will not be a burden on Australian government.

No doubt this letter can not give you a full picture of the Assyrians but I will be very glad to answer any questions put to me in this respect also, if necessary, I am ready to call at your office.

I hope you will give this matter your earnest consideration.

Thanking you in anticipation.

I am,  
Your obedient Servant,

YOUAW TOMA KANNA.

*Y. Kanna*

## Appendix.2 Document.2

### ASSYRIAN MIGRATION FROM IRAQ

Following your memorandum of 14th July, 1964, Mr. Kanna has had two discussions with this Department. Generally speaking, the information contained in his letter of 29th June, 1964 was repeated, but Mr. Kanna added a few extra comments.

He repeated his estimate of the number of families as being 2,600, involving approximately 14,000 persons. He suggested the the majority would be in a position to pay their passage costs but was unaware as to whether there might be any restrictions placed on the removal of capital from Iraq.

There is no established Assyrian community, as such, in the Sydney area as applies with other national groups, e.g., Maltese, Armenian, Lebanese, etc., consequently there would be no ready source of private accommodation available which would enable accommodation guarantees to be completed for the families.

Mr. Kanna suggested that the majority of the Assyrians would be able to speak very good English, and his own English is excellent. The reason for this is that the Assyrian population in Iraq go to private schools rather than public schools and generally speaking, have a higher standard of education than the average population.

This has also meant that the better type positions, such as in banks, have been held by Assyrians. This again has lead to a degree of unsettlement because a current programme of nationalization of banks will mean the progressive sacking of Assyrians and their replacement by the native population.

Now that the Beirut office has opened, it may be that you are ready to ~~will~~ consider a survey of this migration area. The above information may prove useful.

  
(J. CLIFFE)

C.H.O. - Sydney  
23.10.64

THE SECRETARY.

Y.T. KANNA.  
Pers. file  
NB4/35707

## Appendix 3 Document.3

Assistant Secretary,  
OPERATIONS BRANCH.

### Assyrian Migration from Iraq.

Iraq has a total population (1961) of 6,637,222. Over 90% are Muslims but there are Christian communities in all the principal towns. They fall into three groups - (a) the free Churches, including the Nestorian, Gregorian and Jacobite, (b) the churches known as Uniate, since they are in union with the Roman Catholic Church, including the Armenian Uniates, Jacobite Uniates, and Chaldeans; (c) mixed bodies of Protestant converts, New Chaldeans, and Orthodox Armenians. The Christians, numbering 149,656 are mainly Assyrians and tend to be concentrated around Mosul, the second largest city of Iraq.

2. Turkish until the end of World War I, Iraq became a British Mandate with Emir Feisal being crowned as King in 1921. It became independent in 1932. A coup d'etat by the army in 1958 resulted in the assassination of the king and the establishment of a Republic under General Kassem. In February 1963 the Pan-Arab element in the armed forces staged a coup d'etat in which General Kassem was assassinated and a new government set up under Colonel Aref with General Bakr as Prime Minister. The Government was dominated by extremist members of the Baath Party who advocated radical social reforms, maintained that the establishment of a Socialist regime in Iraq must precede Arab unity, and who were bitterly hostile to the United Arab Republic.

3. In November, 1963 as a result of a military coup (supported by President Aref and led by his brother, Brigadier Abdul Rahman Aref) the extremists were overthrown, and a new government led by General Yahya and composed of officers, moderate Baathists, and non-party experts was formed. The present government favours closer relations with both Syria and the U.A.R., even to the extent of federal union, it is neutralist in international affairs, is prepared to accept economic aid from both East and West if offered, but it is, at this stage, not prepared to allow the existence of other political parties in Iraq.

4. Iraq's wealth is based on oil which is mostly exploited by foreign companies and in 1962 Iraq received more than £2.95 million in oil revenues. The few industries are mainly connected with oil, and other mineral resources are scarcely exploited. In 1961 16,702 persons were employed in the oil industry, other employment being as follows -

Agriculture	1,590,000.
Industry	92,719.
Railways	16,447.
Port of Basra	16,633.
Construction	25,569.

5. Primary education is free and compulsory, but attendance has not yet been enforced everywhere. Primary school age is 6-12. Intermediate and secondary education was made free from 1946. The medium of instruction is Arabic. In 1960 there were 378,525 boys and 123,781 girls attending primary schools maintained by the Government and 11,388 boys and 6,127 girls attending foreign and private primary schools. Secondary school attendance was 77,171 boys and 18,412 girls. Vocational and technical schools had an attendance of 2,339 while 8,032 attended teachers' training schools. A university was established at Baghdad in October 1958.

### Appendix 3. Document 3. page.2

6. In 1947, 323,464 men and 84,112 women over five years of age were literate; 3,319,469 were illiterate. Great efforts are being made to reduce illiteracy.

7. The Assyrians are in general better educated than the rest of the Iraqis and many have studied abroad. It is from the Assyrians that most of the professions in Iraq are staffed. It is probably correct that having regard to the British Mandate period and the long use of Habbaniyah as a Royal Air Force base a number of the Iraqi Assyrians have a knowledge of English.

8. While there is no evidence to suggest that there is any persecution of the Assyrians or that such persecution is likely, they do comprise a Christian minority in a predominantly Muslim country. With the positive efforts now being made to educate the Arab Iraqis and to develop the country economically, the Assyrians probably consider that now is the time to leave before they are displaced from their rather favoured position.

9. "Mass Immigration" (with its implication of organised large scale assisted movement) is not considered to be a serious possibility, nor at this stage do I consider that we need consider G.A.P.S. although this might become necessary. There has been no suggestion that if approved for entry the general run of Assyrian applicants in Iraq could not meet their own fare costs - and the main question at the moment is the question of processing applications for entry.

10. We have been receiving Form M.47 applications forwarded by the British Embassy at Baghdad, but of recent times have been holding these pending the establishment of the Migration Office at Beirut, it being the intention that this Office should include Iraq in its operational area. We now have some 95 on hand.

11. A check with the Administrative Branch this morning revealed that while in May the Minister for External Affairs was asked to study the proposal to establish a Migration Office at Beirut and to take the necessary action we have received no advice of any such positive action having been taken. At best, therefore, it appears that it will be another two or three months at least, before the Beirut Office is established, and it could well be much later than that before any visit can be made to Iraq.

12. In these circumstances it is suggested that while we could hold up Form M.47 applications received over the next month or so to provide a workload for Beirut when it opens we should examine and determine the 95 applications now on hand. The application load of course, would really warrant sending a selection team in from Cairo but this would probably require an approach to the Iraqi Government and a time delay which, in present circumstances might not be desirable.

13. I think that there is a migration potential in the Assyrian Iraqis which might warrant exploitation - but the field examination considered desirable in this regard could well be left until after Beirut has commenced.

14. For your consideration.

  
H. G. Brooks.  
Chief Migration Officer (Foreign).

7th July, 1964.

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the Office  
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established.

## Appendix 4 Document 4 (a)

SYDNEY

23rd October, 1965

Commonwealth Director of Migration  
The Commonwealth Centre  
Chieffley Square  
SYDNEY

Dear Sir,

I would respectfully like to bring to your notice the problem of 'Accommodation Guarantee' that has discouraged and reduced the hope of a great number of Assyrian families who are keenly interested in migrating to Australia from Iraq.

At present there are a number of persons whose applications have already been accepted, but who are awaiting their visas which are being held up due to their inability to obtain the 'Accommodation Guarantee'.

During my nearly two years stay in this country, I have come to understand that housing is not really such acute a problem as some may think it to be. In fact, I know that there are some 13 Assyrian families and at least 12 bachelors, who have arrived in this country from Iraq, U.S.A., and Germany, all of whom were able to rent a house or flat according to their wishes within a day or two of their arrival here.

To provide an 'Accommodation Guarantee' in accordance with the Immigration Department's requirements, i.e.: an already occupied house by 2-3 persons and at the same time having two additional vacant bedrooms plus other facilities to accommodate a family of 4-6 persons, is absolutely hard to find.

Generally speaking, this has been possible in the case of at least 3 families, who have already established themselves in this country. However this arrangement has cost each family a minimum rent fee of £200-£250 for a period of 4-6 months, i.e.: from the date the guarantee was signed to the date of their arrival in Sydney. It is of course quite natural that no one at this time would leave part of his house or flat vacant for a number of months free of charge.

Appendix 4 Document 4(b) This document is also used in Appendix.5

N64/75159

10th May, 1966

Dear Mr. Kanna,

I refer to your query in connection with the  
"Guarantees of Accommodation" and "Restrictions on Air Travel".

Where a family is to come to this country, a  
guarantee of accommodation for them on their arrival here is  
one of our requirements which may not be dispensed with. The  
restrictions imposed on air travel to Australia from Middle  
Eastern countries is a quarantine regulation administered by  
the Department of Health. This Department has no jurisdiction  
in the matter.

Yours sincerely,

(G. A. COLE)  
A/Commonwealth Director of Migration

Mr. Y.T. Kanna  
Box 120 G.P.O.,  
SYDNEY N.S.W.

## Appendix 5 Document 5

Box 120 G.P.O.  
SYDNEY

23rd October, 1965

Commonwealth Director of Migration  
The Commonwealth Centre  
Chiefley Square  
SYDNEY

Dear Sir,

A number of Assyrians have been accepted for entry into Australia from Iraq. However, I have been informed that they have been notified by the British Consul in Baghdad that visas will only be issued to those who make their bookings to travel by sea.

It would seem that the impracticability of such a method, which the British Consul states has emanated from Australia, has been overlooked. The fact is that Iraq itself has not a single port to accommodate Passenger Ships, only those handling cargo and crude oil products. The nearest port to Iraq where persons may travel to and from overseas is in Lebanon; a distance of two days travel by car. This entails the necessity of incurring additional heavy transport and hotel expenses from Iraq to Syria and then to Lebanon.

It must be appreciated that, whilst the Australian Government makes no contribution whatsoever towards their passage, such extra costs might well be saved to meet their immediate requirements in Australia if the authorities concerned could reconsider their decision in the light of the heavy expenses incurred by the migrants from Iraq, and give their approval for them to travel by air.

I think it worthwhile to mention that such epidemic known as the mouth and foot disease, which has necessitated the restriction for the migrants to travel by sea, has never been heard of during our life time in the whole of Iraq. It is interesting to note that all persons accepted for entry and even those making applications, live in the city areas where proper amenities and healthy conditions prevail.

## Appendix 5 Document 5 page.2

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This matter has also great bearing on the case of two persons who have arrived in Sydney by Air from Iraq within the last few months. Their wives and children had to be left behind as a result of the most unfair and impractical accommodation regulations now in force. The gentlemen in question (References: N65/65265 and N65/36323) have been refused permission to bring their families to this country by air and the Immigration Authorities in Sydney have insisted that they arrange bookings for them to travel by sea as instructed by the British Consul in Baghdad.

I am quite confident that those concerned will agree when I say that we are expecting miracles from a woman and her two or four children to travel unaided through three different countries, as well as a long sea voyage and then finally to arrive in Sydney in one piece.

In conclusion, I would sincerely request that this matter may have your sympathetic consideration in the light of its implications and that you may see fit to give your approval for these persons and their families to travel to this country by air.

Thank you for an early reply.

Yours faithfully,

  
Y.T. KANNA

## Appendix.6 Document.6

The Commonwealth Director of Migration  
The Commonwealth Centre  
Chifley Square  
SYDNEY, N.S.W. 2000

5th July, 1969

Dear Sir,

REF. N64/75159

I am aware that recently Canberra and Sydney Offices have done a great deal in processing the applications of many Assyrians and sending their visas to The British Consul in Baghdad, Iraq.

The majority of the visas held by the British Embassy, Baghdad cannot be processed due to the fact that the Iraqi Authorities are very, very reluctant to stamp the word "Australia" in the column 'Countries to be Visited' on their passports; consequently, the British Consul is unable to issue a visa for travel to this country.

As this being the obstical in Iraq, then some 16 families asked the British Consul to transfer their visas to the Australian Consul in Beirut, Lebanon, where they will try and persuade the Iraqi Consul in Beirut to stamp the word "Australia" in their passports but this assumption has proved fruitless.

I have received word from Beirut that all these families are in Beirut Hotels and are incurring a lot unnecessary expenses. In fact they are not willing to return to Baghdad for the only reason that once they return their passports will expire (nowadays the passports in Iraq are valid for one trip only), therefore, once their passports are stamped 'Expired' then it will take them time and time and a lot of money to renew it.

I don't know what is the best way in helping these people - suppose the word "Australia" will never be stamped !!! Is there any other way which you think might help and get these desperate people here without more trouble, as you know they have been in turmoil for the last 3 years.

I hope you will look into this case with compassion.

Sorry for giving you so much trouble.

Yours faithfully,

*Y. Hanna*

*Mr. Githan  
He has now  
a copy to  
the C/O  
to C/O  
consideration  
S.A.P. 8/7/69*

