

Near East Relief

By [Tylor Brand](#)

Near East Relief was formed in 1915 to address the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of the Armenian genocide. By the end of the war, the organization had transformed into a vast aid campaign that focused on orphans and the social rehabilitation of the region.

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The Committee

Formed in 1915 as a result of Ambassador [Henry Morgenthau's \(1856-1946\)](#) request for aid for the [Armenians who had been massacred](#) and forcibly deported from Anatolia, the Committee on Armenian Atrocities sought to harness its political clout and financial might to mitigate the suffering of Christians in the region. The group was eventually merged with two other campaigns, the Syrian-Palestine Relief Fund and the Persian War Relief, when the Rockefeller Foundation reorganized the effort. Over the course of the war, the group changed its name to the American Committee on Armenian Relief, the American Committee on Armenian and Syrian Relief and finally to Near East Relief, as the scale of its purview widened. Eventually, the aid was directed to those suffering the effects of the crisis, regardless of ethnicity or religion – including Kurds, Armenians, Greeks, Syrians, Iranians and Turks, among others.

The group was spearheaded by members of America's wealthy Presbyterian industrial elite, including the Rockefeller Foundation and [Cleveland Dodge \(1860-1926\)](#) of Phelps Dodge Corporation, whose close personal relationship with President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#) gave the group influence in policy in the Ottoman lands and a prominent voice for their cause.

Funding During the War

By November 1915, the group had raised a total of \$95,000 for the growing crisis in the region, much of which was distributed to Ambassador Morgenthau to aid the Armenians, with an additional \$6,000 directed towards relief work in Iran. Much of this aid was directed in small amounts to individual parishes and institutions for distribution or use in relief work. The Presbyterian Board in New York, for example, had received \$100,000 for distribution to the American Mission in Beirut.

As the regional crisis worsened, President Wilson requested donations for the American Committee of Armenian and Syrian Relief (ACASR) and the [Red Cross](#), and by September 1917, the foundation had distributed \$4 million, \$1.7 of which went to

Istanbul, \$1 million to Tbilisi, \$700,000 to Tabriz, \$642,000 to Beirut, and smaller amounts to Jerusalem, Baghdad, Cairo, and Teheran. By January 1918, these figures had ballooned to \$2.4 million to Istanbul, \$1.8 to Tbilisi, \$1 million to Tabriz, \$915,000 to Beirut as well as aid to Greeks in western Anatolia and Greece itself.

By 1922, over \$60 million had been distributed, and although the program began to scale down in 1923, when it came to an end in 1930, over \$91 million had been collected for the Near Eastern region, as well as \$25 million in food and material donations - \$12,527,957.39 of which was spent in Syria.^[1]

Programs

The U.S.S. Caesar

In late 1916, the ACASR organized a shipment of food, medicine, money and clothing worth \$250,000 to counteract the growing famine in Mount Lebanon prior to the onset of winter. After some negotiation, the influential group used the Americans to loosen the Allied blockade and gain permission for the ship's delivery from the German and Ottoman officials.

The ship was scheduled to arrive in Beirut in late December 1916 (hence its nickname, "The Christmas Ship"), but when [Jamal Pasha \(1872-1922\)](#) demanded permission to unload in Haifa and to ensure the distribution of the aid himself, the committee refused to comply. The cargo was eventually sold and the cash used for aid in Greece.

The Orphanages and Shelters

In 1918, the aid programs were redirected to solely focus on women and children. The displaced Armenian populations were of special concern since it would be more difficult to disperse them safely – unlike local orphans, they could not return to their home communities to be reunited with relatives. In all, the Near East Relief (NER) programs cared for over 130,000 orphans of various origins in shelters located in Mardin, Urfa, Diyar Bakir, Mara'ash, 'Aintab, Halab, His, Zahle, Tripoli, Dayr al-Qamar, Brumanna, Shimlan, 'Ain 'Ainub, Shweifaf, Ghazir, Sidon, Antelias, Jbeil and Jerusalem.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, many of the shelters that had been run by the Ottomans or other local groups were incorporated by NER, and others were redistributed to Armenian organizations. The large Armenian orphanage in Antelias to the north of Beirut was turned over to the Armenians, and was later converted to the Cilicia Catholicos of the Armenian Church.

In Syria, such programs were channeled through [Bayard Dodge \(1888-1972\)](#) of the [Syrian Protestant College](#) (after 1920, the American University of Beirut), who had coordinated shelters and soup kitchens over the course of the war in Mount Lebanon. The programs faced problems of cost and implementation. The inflation of the wartime period remained a major problem – the cost of a ratl of flour (which equated to roughly 2.5 kilograms) during the spring of 1918 was between 250 and 300 piasters, up from two to four piasters prior to the war. To feed a person for a week at this rate cost an astounding seven to nine lira (700-900 piasters).

After the war, the Syrian NER projects housed 45,000 orphans, many of who were distributed to local communities, organizations or resettled with family. The program sought to rehabilitate and prepare the orphans for life outside of the institutions, teaching trades and agriculture to many and channeling some of the brighter students into secondary education. By 1922, NER shelters housed 6,267 orphans, ranging in age from three to seventeen. At a cost of \$13 per person per month, the monthly cost of the shelters was \$81,471.

In 1922, the populations were broken down as follows:

Armenians/Mardinites	Girls	Boys	Total
'Aintab	32	18	50
Antelias	229	2	231
Ghazir	50	27	78
Jbeil	0	606	606
Mar'ash	435	766	1201
Mardin	348	152	500
Urfa	180	350	530

Sidon	0	3	3
Aleppo	674	461	1135
Totals	1948	2386	4334

Table 1: Number of Armenians and Mardinites Served by Near East Relief Orphanages in 1922^[2]

Syrians	Girls	Boys	Total
Ghazir	280	221	501
Homs	140	211	351
Sidon	237	371	608
Zahle	65	35	100
Jerusalem	100	273	373
Total	822	1111	1933

Table 2: Number of Syrians Served by Near East Relief Orphanages in 1922^[3]

Near East Relief operations continued until 1930, diminishing in scope as orphans aged out of the shelters and the organization began returning children to their own families, communities and charitable organizations.

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Notes

- ↑ Barton, James: *Story of Near East Relief (1915-1930). An Interpretation*, New York 1930, p. 429.
- ↑ Dodge, Bayard: Lajnat 'aghathat al-sharq al-adna,[The Committee of Near East Relief] in *al-Kulliyah* 5 (1922), pp. 170-171.
- ↑ Dodge, Bayard: Lajnat 'aghathat al-sharq al-adna,[The Committee of Near East Relief] in *al-Kulliyah* 5 (1922), pp. 170-171.

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