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(RE)CONSTRUCTING ARMENIA IN LEBANON AND SYRIA

ETHNO-CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND THE STATE IN THE AFTERMATH OF A REFUGEE CRISIS

NICOLA MIGLIORINO

(Re)constructing Armenia in Lebanon and Syria

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Ethno-cultural Diversity and the State in the Aftermath of a Refugee Crisis

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To Gianni, Gianna, Ludovica and Anna

Note on Transliteration

For Arabic, I have adopted a simplified version of the transliteration guidelines used in the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. In particular, all diacritical marks (dots and macrons) have been omitted. Exceptions are made, for personal names or names of places with accepted English spellings (for example Nasser instead of Nasir). Some inconsistencies are inevitable.

For Armenian, I have adopted a transliteration system used for Western Armenian in R.G. Hovannisian (ed.). 1997. *The Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times,* Basingstoke and London: MacMillan. I have – for example – used the spelling *Dashnak* instead of *Tashnag*. As in the case of Arabic, some exceptions have been made for names of persons and places when a widely accepted spelling is available. Some inconsistencies are, here too, inevitable.

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Finally, I wish to thank my wife, Anna, my parents, Gianni and Gianna, and my sister, Ludovica, for their love and continuous encouragement and support. It is to them that this work is dedicated.

Nicola Migliorino
Lympstone (UK), and Ifrane (Morocco), July 2007

Introduction

This book is about the experience of the Armenian people as a culturally diverse community settled in Lebanon and Syria. The ideas behind it have taken shape over a long period of time, as I repeatedly came across Armenians and Armenian culture during travels and a number of stays in Lebanon and Syria. Of those repeated encounters I recall two initial observations. The first was that the Armenians appeared to me to be remarkably 'different' people compared to the majority: Christians of a discrete faith and non-Arab in a prevailingly Arab and Islamic world, they could speak their non-Semitic language, write using their own alphabet, and run a number of communal institutions, including schools, political parties, cultural clubs, welfare and recreational organisations, and so on. The second was that they did not appear as a fully excluded or marginalized community. Although a significant part of the life of many Armenians in Lebanon and Syria seemed to revolve around communal institutions, spaces and affairs, Armenians did not look isolated from the rest of the society and from its wider set of institutions. Armenians were present in many sectors of the society, economy and – at least in Lebanon – even government: I came across businessmen, professionals, members of parliament, ministers, the head of a national administration of statistics, and members of the national Lebanese and Syrian cultural scene.

There was, also, a third observation: the Armenian community was much more visible in Lebanon than in Syria, despite the fact that Armenians represented a similar sized minority in each. The number and variety of Armenian establishments in Lebanon was indeed impressive, and included a university, several daily and monthly publications, musical production, two national football teams, just to mention a few. Spaces and occasions in which Armenian life would become visible were numerous in Syria too, but the profile of the Armenian presence was remarkably lower.

I have always enjoyed my encounters with Armenian culture in the Arab East and have constantly held that the presence of such a diverse community added interest and value to the experience of living in Lebanon and Syria and, in general, to the two countries as human communities. At the same time, I have for long been aware that culturally diverse communities throughout the world are often facing a dramatic choice between assimilation into dominant cultures or sheer exclusion.

That is, the price that culturally diverse communities pay in order to live in a society, enjoy social and economic success (or sometimes in order to simply survive) is often that of having to give up their own culture – their language, traditions, religious practices, etc. – or else, being excluded and rejected. Does the case of the Armenians in Lebanon and Syria tell us a different story, of how a community of 'different' people can successfully 'find its place' in the contemporary Middle East without being either assimilated or excluded? A positive *modus vivendi*? And, if this is the case, how could Armenian cultural diversity manage to survive and develop in the context of contemporary Lebanon and Syria? Also, can we now assume that Armenian cultural resilience in these two countries is sustainable and that the presence of Armenian cultural diversity will continue to be a feature of Lebanese and Syrian societies?

This book attempts to answer these questions by studying the exceptional cultural diversity of the Armenians of Lebanon and Syria from three main perspectives. The first, inevitably, focuses on the circumstances in which the bulk of the contemporary community was formed during the twentieth century. Certainly, the presence of Armenians in Lebanon and Syria is considerably older: the Armenians, whose ancient homeland is in large part located within the borders of contemporary Turkey, were for centuries a component of the human geography of Aleppo and of many other centres of the Arab East, where they were often engaged in trade and crafts. However, there is no doubt that most Armenians of Lebanon and Syria can trace back their family history to the mass population displacements that began during the Genocide of 1915–16. By the end of the First World War, and during the turbulent years that followed it, large numbers of survivors found themselves resettled as refugees in the new countries formed in the post-Ottoman regional order. Lebanon and Syria took arguably the largest part: by the mid-1920s Beirut, Aleppo and its environs, the valley of the Euphrates, the Jazeera, but also Hama, Homs, Damascus, and even the far Dera'a, all hosted an Armenian refugee population. From this first perspective this book tells a refugee story, one of the many from a region where the Palestinian case remains by far the most well-known and the most studied in the scholarly literature. Indeed, the Armenian case could be seen to add an extra dimension to refugee studies in the region.

But this book also explores how the Armenian refugee community has struggled to find, beyond the initial phase of emergency, its 'permanent' space as a distinct cultural community in the Arab East. From a second perspective, therefore, this work observes the path of the Armenian community in search of a model of cultural integration within Lebanon and Syria. This perspective calls for an enquiry into a range of different dimensions and different meanings of the presence of the Armenians in the Levant. On the one side, it involves looking at what Khachig Tölölyan

has recently described as a historical transition, within Armenian communities worldwide, from the reproduction and cultivation of a post-Genocide, post-eviction Armenian 'nationalism in exile' to a condition of 'diasporic transnationalism'.[1] In other words, it entails a study of the Armenian communities of Lebanon and Syria as diasporas based in the contemporary Middle East. On the other side, it requires an analysis of the relations between two Middle Eastern states and the cultural diversity present within their societies: the study of the type of approach that Lebanon and Syria have adopted towards cultural diversity, of how that approach has evolved over the years as an aspect of the political history of the two countries, and of what impact that approach had on the Armenian communal strategies and on the Lebanese and Syrian social attitudes towards diversity.

Neither dimension has received adequate attention in contemporary literature on the Middle East, which only makes the task of this book harder. The question of ethno-cultural diversity in the region has been traditionally analysed with the tools of ethno-politics and ethnic conflict theory, and mostly from the perspective of the state, the political system, or the regime: minority groups, ethnic or sub-ethnic communities, and primordial solidarities tend to be studied either as *threats* to the territorial integrity of states and to the stability or legitimacy regimes, or as *opportunities*, as tools that can be used to mobilize and control key sectors of the population, to win and maintain power. The traditional ethno-political approach, however useful, disregards important dimensions of the presence of culturally diverse communities in Lebanon, Syria and in the wider region. On the one hand, it tends to say little on those 'discreet minorities' which are not engaged in the 'struggle for power' and are, thus, neither a threat, nor a primary strategic resource for regimes. On the other, it tends to neglect the meaning of minority cultures when considered *per se*, as alternative ways of 'being Lebanese' or 'being Syrian' and living in these countries. It fails to capture the variety and richness of forms in which diverse ethno-cultural groups run their life and pursue their alternative cultural strategies and projects. In doing so, it also misses the fine details of how diverse groups organize their relations with the state, the society at large, and the world of their transnational connections.

This of course is not to say that the ethno-political approach has lost its usefulness, or that it is not relevant to the experience of the Armenians of Lebanon and Syria. In fact, that approach constitutes the third perspective which this book intends to adopt. Hopefully this third perspective will also contribute to a deeper understanding of Lebanon and Syria by shedding light on a minority which has so far received little scholarly attention.

The Experience of the Armenian Communities in Lebanon and Syria

The chief trait of the experience of the Armenians in the Arab East is that, notwithstanding internal divisions and differences, the community has constantly and tenaciously pursued a strategy aimed at the preservation of its distinct cultural identity. Through the observation of the main phases of the Armenian experience in the Levant since the 1920s, this book will argue that, while in Lebanon the Armenian community has been able to take full advantage of the consociational structure of the state and to follow that strategy on a scale and to an extent that can hardly be matched by other Armenian diasporas in the region, in Syria the emergence of centralising, authoritarian regimes in the 1950s and 1960s has severely damaged the communal autonomy and cultural diversity of the Armenians. The close transnational links between Lebanese and Syrian Armenian diasporas have generally made them well aware of these different outcomes, and Armenians frequently praise the Lebanese power-sharing, consociational political model. Their communal leaders, including the clergy and the political representatives, have often expressed their appreciation and support for a system where the state has left spaces to the community to pursue its diverse communal and cultural agenda.[2] The limited academic literature on the Armenian experience in Lebanon has also, with exceptions, expressed positive judgements: Nikola B. Schahgaldian – writing in 1979, during the first phases of the Lebanese war – concluded that the history of the Armenian community in Lebanon since 1920 was a case of successful integration.[3]

This book will critically suggest that the differences between the outcomes of the Armenian experiences in Lebanon and Syria should not be overstated. Since President Hafiz Al-Asad seized power in 1970, the Syrian regime has developed a complex and ambiguous model of relations between the state and ethno-cultural groups. While officially denying their relevance, the regime has continued to use ethnic and sub-ethnic allegiances as a strategic political resource. This context has created for the Armenians (as for other social groups) some protected spaces where the community could continue to preserve – on a comparatively smaller scale – its diversity. Rather than disappearing and being assimilated into a state-constructed national Syrian identity, Armenian diversity has retreated to those spaces, reinforcing its self-sufficiency and solidarity. In Lebanon, on the other hand, the consociational arrangement that regulates public life has repeatedly and tragically shown its limitations. Looking from an Armenian perspective, it is impossible not to note that the demographic size of the community was perhaps halved by emigration during the 1975–90 war.

In showing the successes and difficulties of the Armenian communal and cultural strategies this book will suggest that, in both the Lebanese and Syrian cases, the continuing presence of Armenian cultural diversity appears in part as the incidental by-product of the precarious ethno-political arrangements that make up for the state's legitimacy gap. The periodical crises to which the Lebanese system has been subject, the uncertain political future of the Syrian regime, and the persisting economic difficulties of the Levant in the last decade combine to cast shadows over the sustainability of the presence of Armenian diversity in the Arab East.

Organisation of the Work

Chapter 1 provides an introductory overview on the origins of the Armenian people and on the establishment of the Armenian communities in Lebanon and Syria. In doing this, the chapter also briefly sketches the evolution of the relations between the Armenian communities and the Ottoman state from its formation to its crisis and dissolution. The following chapters, from 2 to 5, analyse the experience of the Armenians in Lebanon and Syria from the years of the Mandate to the present. For the sake of presentation, it has been useful to divide the subject into four historical phases: the Mandate (chapter 2); the post-independence phase until, roughly, the end of the 1960s (chapter 3); the two decades that include the Lebanese war (chapter 4); and the post-war years until the early 2000s (chapter 5). However arbitrary these partitions may be, as it often happens, they seem helpful in the task of emphasizing the main turning points in the experience of the Armenian communities.

For each of these phases, the analysis will be based on the observation of some selected dimensions relevant to the presence of the Armenians and to community-state relations. These will include, in particular: religion and the religious policy of the state; the Armenian participation in public (political and administrative) life; the production and diffusion of Armenian culture and the cultural policy of the state; Armenian education in the context of national education; Armenian associations and the state policy on civil society; and the economic and class dimensions of the Armenian presence. A short conclusion will follow.

Notes

1. Tölölyan's reflections refer to the broader, global Armenian condition, and not specifically to Lebanon and Syria. See K. Tölölyan. 2002. *Redefining Diasporas: Old Approaches, New Identities*, London: Armenian Institute.

2. See, for instance, H.H. Karekin II, Catholicos of Cilicia. 1989. *The Cross Made of the Cedars of Lebanon*, Antelias: Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia; also see the sermon given in Antelias, Lebanon, by H.H. Aram I, at his consecration and enthronement as the new Catholicos of Cilicia on July 1st, 1995, English translation reported in H.H. Aram I, Catholicos of Cilicia. 1997. *The Challenge to be a Church in a Changing World*, New York: The Armenian Prelacy, 11–15.
3. N.B. Schahgaldian. 1979. 'The Political Integration of an Immigrant Community into a Composite Society: the Armenians in Lebanon, 1920–1974', Ph.D. thesis, New York: Columbia University. No published English language comprehensive study of the Armenians of Lebanon and Syria exists. A few books which cover or include coverage of the Armenian experience in the Middle East are available in Arabic and in Armenian: see for example H. 'Azazian. 1993. *Nubdha Tarikhiya Mujaza 'an al-Jaliyat al-Armaniya fi al-Bilad al-Arabiya*, Latakia: publisher unknown; M. Rif'at al-Imam. 1995. *Al-Arman fi Misr: al-Qarn al-Tasi' 'Ashar*, Cairo: Nubar Printing House; M. Rif'at al-Imam. 1999. *Tarikh al-Jaliya al-Armaniya fi Misr*, Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Misriyah al-'Ammah lil-Kitab; M. al-Mudawwar. 1990. *Al-Arman abr al-Tarikh*, 2nd ed., Damascus; A.F. Raslan. 1997. *Arminiya: al-Ummah wa al-Dawlah*, Cairo. A. Alpoyachian. 1941–1961. *Patmut'iun Hay Gaghtakanut'ian: Hayeru Tsruume Ashkharhi Zanazan Masere* [History of Armenian Emigrations: the Dispersal of Armenians in Different Parts of the World], 3 Vols., Cairo: Nor Astgh; Academy of Sciences of the Armenian SSR. 1967–1984. *Hay Joghovrdi Patmut'iun* [History of the Armenian People], 8 Vols., Yerevan; A.G. Abrahamian. 1964–1967. *Hamarot Urvagits Hay Gaght'avayreri Patmut'ian* [Concise Outline of the History of the Armenian Expatriate Communities], 2 Vols., Yerevan: Hayastan.

1

The Origins of the Armenian Presence in Lebanon and Syria: A Brief Historical Account

Introduction

Why are there Armenian communities in Lebanon and Syria? Under what circumstances have they been formed? Any attempt to answer these questions should start from the fact that the Armenian people originated and developed in a geographical region overlapping the periphery of the contemporary political Middle East.[1] Large parts of what is commonly described as historical Armenia fall within the borders of contemporary Turkey and Iran. The history of the Armenian people is thus deeply intertwined with some of the most significant facts of the history of the region: these facts have at times taken the Armenians away from their homeland and have scattered them in a number of countries in the Middle East and beyond.

The Armenian Homeland

Who are the Armenians, and where are they originally from? A long-established geographical and historical tradition identifies the Armenian homeland in the mountainous plateau located between eastern Anatolia and the southern side of the Caucasus. The presence in those uplands of a people called Armenian is documented in writing since the sixth century BC, although the origin of the Armenian people is in all probability significantly more ancient. Since then, some form of Armenian presence in the lands included between the upper part of the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates to the south and west, around Lake Van, and